Allies

by kanadka

Summary

The Rangers' cover was blown on Zagros VII, but they're not done with the Drazi yet. Marcus is sent back to see what he can do to make amends and possibly a new Ranger outpost, while he's at it. Unfortunately, he's still healing from his bout with Neroon, and will need some assistance.

He's a little disappointed with the Entil'Zha's choice in bodyguard.

Notes

I am a little ashamed I'm writing Marcus/Neroon in the year of our lord 2019, but not ashamed enough to stop.

I can't promise any particular update schedule, but at the moment 50k of this is written and I have a concrete plan for the rest. Please also forgive me, as this isn't britpicked - I did my best with Marcus' voice but any advice and concrit would be greatly, greatly appreciated <3
Six days after the battle *to the death* against Neroon, Marcus was summoned back to Minbar by the new Entil'Zha.

Garibaldi walked him to the exit, where he'd be boarding a Worker Caste merchant transport. "I dunno," Garibaldi was saying, "this seems a little premature."

He only limped a *little*. "Doctor released me," said Marcus amiably. "I put my life in her hands."

Garibaldi frowned. "You probably shouldn't be doing that either."

"Delenn's asked me to do this," he replied. "If she were able to get anybody else, she likely would have. At the risk of sounding narcissistic, she must really need *me* for this specific task. Otherwise - well!" Marcus spread his hands, shrugging. "Couldn't she ask any other Ranger? And certainly one that's not still in convalescence!"

"You're lucky she's already off-world, or I'd be talking to her too," said Garibaldi. "The last thing I need is wounded people running around causing trouble."

"Oh, I don't cause trouble," said Marcus.

"Maybe not, but it keeps popping up wherever you are."

"Surely other troublesome things have happened, before I came to Babylon 5."

"So you're not the only one it's attracted to," added Garibaldi. They arrived at Customs, and Garibaldi submitted Marcus' identicard to log his exit, and then pocketed it again. Marcus could probably have it stitched into his Ranger robes into a secret pocket, but it was less incriminating to be a nobody and keep the card on Babylon 5. "Listen, keep us posted, alright?" Garibaldi said, and waved Marcus through.

"Give Susan my love!" Marcus threw back.

"I meant keep us posted *on the relevant stuff*," Garibaldi said.

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The journey to Minbar was an agonising few days, because Marcus wasn't on the Worker Caste vessel to lounge around, he'd paid his way with promised labour, though he was hardly in any fit state for it. Neroon couldn't've made his point on my face, *had* to go and break some ribs, thought Marcus bitterly, in excruciating pain after lifting a mere twenty kilos.

Delenn, as newly-minted Entil'Zha, had preceded him in her own flyer days ago, otherwise it would have been far cleverer to tag along with her. Whatever seventy rituals there doubtless were to greet the troops must have concluded by now, and as her missive said, she was waiting for him in the Ranger base at Tuzanor, for his further instructions.

Dr Hobbs hadn't been *keen* on clearing him for service, but they'd come a long way since the dark ages of medicine. What might've taken twelve weeks some two hundred years ago now took twelve
days. She'd done what she could for the ribs, and they were mended and stitched together enough for whatever he was doing. The rest was painkillers and time, and short of falling off a building (and Delenn had promised the doctor there'd be none of that in his mission), he'd be perfectly fine. It just didn't feel fine.

Not for the first time Marcus reminded himself, as he had been doing for others: if Delenn could have gotten someone else, she would have. His mind, unoccupied with anything more interesting, ran through the possible scenarios and applications. It couldn't be something to do with his information gathering skills. Any Ranger could handle that. It couldn't be something to do with mining, because there were at least twelve other former Worker Caste miners who had joined the Rangers with Marcus, and he knew at least one of them had graduated. Probably Tirsenn, she was always much better at meditation than any of them. It must, then, be something in the places he had visited; the contacts he'd made in his earlier life as the son of the CEO of a mining company.

The problem was, that didn't narrow it down: Marcus had been raised on a large handful of mining colonies. After he'd taken the reins of the company, they'd done business with a further number of worlds and peoples. Quantum-40 powered the jumpgates; if you wanted to travel, you needed it, and the family company had never been terribly discriminate in the sales division. Which out of at least five hundred customers could it be?

When he arrived, marching brightly down the gangplank of the Worker Caste ship into the Customs operation at Tuzanor Port, three Warrior Caste Minbari were there to greet him. To be fair, they were probably greeting everybody who wasn't Minbari, but this time, that meant only Marcus. "Human," growled one. "Your Earth Alliance Identicard."

"The robes," explained Marcus. "Rather defeats the purpose of an identicard, don't you find?"

The Minbari who'd spoken to him shook his head, frowning. "No identity, no entrance," he said, in heavily-accented English.

"<He is Anla'shok>," said a voice behind him, in Standard Fik. The Captain of the Worker Caste vessel had returned. "<That is identity enough. You will permit him to pass. He has a meeting with the Entil'Zha. He will attend it.>"

All three of the Warrior Caste guards scowled, but stepped aside. As they passed the guards, the Captain added, "The Entil'Zha regrets to inform you that she cannot meet with you on the Ranger base. She called ahead to the ship and asked me to convey the message to you to meet instead at the temple of Lith Shorell."

"<He cannot leave Tuzanor without identification>," called one of the Warrior Caste Minbari. "<Anla'shok or no.>"

"<He will not do so>," said the Captain.

The Warrior Caste Minbari snarled his reply. "<Lith Shorell is some distance outside the formal city limits!>"

"<Hardly an hour's walk, if even that>," snapped the Captain. "<If you have any further commentary, you may address the Entil'Zha.>" None of the warriors seemed excited at the prospect. "<Then return to your duties>," he said, with no little superiority.

"Thank you," said Marcus. "But I'm familiar enough with the city that I know my way to the temple."
"Trust me about your accompaniment," replied the Captain tightly. "It is as much for your benefit as it is mine." The Captain made no special move to look back, but as they walked through the streets and passed warriors on their business - clearly identifiable through their own uniforms - he walked more stiffly.

"I'm certain they wouldn't attack you," said Marcus.

The Captain made no reply.

The temple of Lith Shorell stood on one of the lower mountains near Tuzanor. It was a newer monastery, only four centuries old, and the path to it wound up and down through the hills - some slope, some stairs. It had to be a few hundred feet up in elevation.

"I leave you here," said the Captain. "I have duties elsewhere, and no one with honour will bother you on the path to a temple."

"And you?" asked Marcus.

The Captain inclined his head. "I greet you in the hopes our paths will cross again," he said, and took the first left back through the houses at the edge of Tuzanor.

Marcus was left to ascend the hill (really, small mountain) to the monastery alone. This was both a bad thing, because he had nobody to steady his steps, and a good thing, because nobody could see how poorly his body was managing this. After a hundred paces he was sweating and his chest ached; after a hundred more he couldn't draw breath as easily, and deep breaths hurt. He still had kilometres to go.

The path branched out around kilometre four to a series of steps, cut away from the rock to form staircases. These were well-worn and slippery and not in the best condition. A climb that would ordinarily have taken him a half hour took him nearly two, and by the time he reached the threshold of the entrance chamber of the temple, he was in rough shape, and the sun was setting.

Delenn stood there alone, her head bowed in prayer, bathed in the soft glow of the skylight in the temple's ceiling. As Marcus staggered in, she turned, and the vestments of her long robe twisted gracefully around her. "Marcus," she said, smiling brightly.

Marcus wheezed so hard he doubled over with the pain.

"Gather your breath," she said. She walked towards him, away from a wide dais on which was mounted an altar threaded through with gnarled, twisted roots, where a tree grew. The roots of the tree were five times as large as the tree itself, which looked like a miniature bonsai version of a pine and was carefully groomed into the shape of - what else - a triangle. There was nothing else in the room. It reminded Marcus of an iceberg, how the surface was a fraction of the whole. Probably, there was some deep meaning to be gleaned. Marcus staggered over to a nearby pillar (structural, but ornately carved, and which dug into all of his bruises) where he collapsed, hugging it to keep upright, as he waited for his pulse to stop racing.

"I regret we could not meet in the Ranger base," Delenn said. "What I have to discuss should be kept in strictest confidence."

"And you can't - trust - the Rangers - I take it?" Marcus managed.

"The problem is not that I cannot trust the Rangers," replied Delenn. "But that the Rangers are of varying Castes, and this prospective task might test their alliances. There are better times for such a test. Such as when I have held my position for some time. Now is too soon."
"The Worker - Caste -" gasped Marcus, "would never - contest your leadership."

"I do not speak about the formerly Worker Caste Anla'shok," Delenn replied.

There had been some thirty Rangers remaining when Commander - then Ambassador - Sinclair was invited to take charge of the group. Half that left when he became Ranger One. There couldn't be more than fifteen formerly Warrior Caste Rangers. And that figure included, surely, the Sechs - like Sech Durhan, who was Warrior Caste (but who never acted like it!). Meanwhile, hundreds of Religious Caste and Worker Caste had joined the ranks, and to Marcus' knowledge many of those had already completed training. "All of this, for fifteen Rangers?"

"Trust me," said Delenn, and that put an end to the questions, because it was Marcus' job to trust her, and trust her he did.

"So," said Marcus, once he could breathe normally again. He straightened off the pillar and brushed his robes free, then squared his shoulders. "What's the job?"

"We had once a base in the Drazi Freehold," Delenn explained.

"Zagros VII," Marcus replied, nodding. "It didn't go very well."

"I would have another base in the Drazi Freehold," she said. "The Drazi specifically could be excellent allies. A Ranger base, or something like it, would help to cement that."

"You think they'd go for it so soon after our last one was destroyed?" he asked. "They lost good people."

"I only seek to plant a seed of an idea," Delenn said. "Its growing and watering would be done by the Drazi themselves. They are a valuable ally. But more to the point -" she sighed. "They need to know we have not abandoned them."

"Surely the Drazi know that already," said Marcus. They were a resilient folk. "Didn't think scales like that could be penetrated by hurt feelings."

"It is currently Ambassador Vizak who is stationed on Babylon 5," she replied. "And he is ... unconvinced. Though the war with the Shadows has moved into the open, he does not agree with some of the risks that we have asked his people to take."

"They feel they've already had their share of danger?" That they could now turn around and say, oh, we gave at the office and close the door?

"The Drazi, like many in the League, are withholding their support," said Delenn. "They have seen the Shadows in action and yet the Drazi in the Freehold resist in their cooperation. Vizak is a difficult man, that is certain. Only through political pressure have we been able to encourage his bringing any news back to the Freehold, both of the Shadows and of the danger of the coming war. But I wonder whether he has his own agenda, for he has not been successful in procuring ships. He says instead that the fight has not yet reached the Freehold. I question the truth of that."

Delenn did not hold a strong belief in Vizak's treachery - she seemed to consider it only as a last-case; technically feasible but practically dubious. "It is possible he does not deceive us," she added, "and that all his warnings for home have simply fallen on deaf ears. It is possible that someone in the Freehold is stalling his efforts. Back home, there are no Minbari or Humans to make sure they follow through with what they promise on Babylon 5. And back home, they may yet be far enough from the action that other frictions have taken precedence." She pursed her lips, pressing them close together. "I have told Ambassador Vizak I recognise the signs of that, myself, among our own people."
The warriors who refused to fight. But the Warrior Caste didn't work like Drazi groups did. There would be no green-versus-purple civil war, surely. "So what do you need me for?" asked Marcus.

"You speak their tongue serviceably," said Delenn. "And you have contacts on the planet. You know people who know people. Where ordinary diplomacy has failed, you in particular might be able to secure such a base. If we could provide for one. If we did, it would go a long way to bringing their people into the fold of the Army of Light, for good. We cannot let the Drazi fall victim to the sundering by the Shadows."

You have doubts about the integrity of the Drazi, thought Marcus. "Very well," he said instead. "Surely you needn't drag me all the way here from Babylon 5 to tell me this."

Delenn smiled. "No," she said. "I also need you to document any possible Shadow activity in the Freehold, and especially on their homeworld."

"You do have doubts about their integrity," he murmured.

"I did not say that," said Delenn. "The Shadows have their ways of infiltration that can circumvent the strongest of ties. But, more importantly, you have already seen a Shadow planet killer. You have already seen a handful of other Shadow vessels. Your partner has not."

Marcus blinked. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, my - partner?" he asked.

Delenn looked to her right, past the boundary of the skylight. "You can come out now," she called. Out from the shadows stepped Neroon of the Star Riders.

Chapter End Notes

So in 'To Dream in the City of Sorrows', Marcus reappears on Minbar legit 6 days after the denn'shah. I've given him a little bit longer only to account for travel time. For the record I'm with Garibaldi, I also think this is nuts - Marcus is clearly unfit for service, so I figure either a) medicine got better in the 200 years and the ordinary max-12-week period has become like, a few days, or b) he didn't break them so badly to have required complete bed rest. Neroon dislikes and straight up doesn't respect humans, so he doesn't seem like the type to pull his punches, so let's go with a). To Dream in the City of Sorrows and those comics where he prosecutes Sinclair are also fantastic character study for Neroon - they make his respect to Sinclair in Legacies look almost deceptive, like lip service to Delenn. By the time season 1 ends, he's completely back to his old disrespectful ways where humans are concerned. I figure we can expect the same here: Marcus made him laugh but that doesn't make them friends. And Marcus of course has reason aplenty not to be Neroon's biggest fan, at least in the beginning.

Another note that the Babylon 5 wiki (ordinarily pretty good with dates) puts the events of Grey 17 is Missing as Nov 30, 2260, and the (2260) events of War Without End parts 1 and 2 as August 12, 2260. There are in-episode textual clues that establish the events of War Without End to be August 12. We have until December 7 (this date is specified in And the Rock Cried Out, No Hiding Place) to place Walkabout and Grey 17 is Missing, but there's nothing to tie Walkabout and Grey 17 is Missing to any precise time between August 12 and December 7, just that Walkabout happens before Grey 17 is Missing (because Hobbs tends to Marcus, not Franklin). One slight clue: in And the
Rock...: someone says that no one has seen Stephen Franklin in over 7 days, which could be taken to imply Walkabout happens 7 days prior to Dec 7. But I don't think the Rangers would've gone between August 12 and November 30 without a leader in this incredibly important Shadow threat time - the Shadows have by this point begun open attacks, and the Rangers are very badly needed. I therefore can't see them operating longer than a month without a leader, if even that. I've therefore pegged the Entil'Zha ceremony as taking place start of September - maybe as late as mid-September - which means we have at least until Dec 7 for a fun casefic mission for Marcus. The 'nobody has seen Franklin' line I'm putting down to an in-the-wild sighting instead of a reference to Walkabout.

wow! that's a lot of blather! sorry about that :D by the way I love kudos and comments and people subscribing and everything I'll take anything you throw at me.
Marcus wouldn't lie, there was an urge to grip his pike, to have it at least in his hands. A comforting weight, that was all. Neroon's face was impassive and he didn't look like he was itching for a rematch - he didn't move like he was, and Marcus remembered that he was fast - but they hadn't made much conversation after Marcus woke up in Medlab to find Neroon looming over him, looking like he wanted to finish the job. If they'd spoken about anything in particular, he didn't well remember it. Head wounds, and all that. There was laughter; that was all.

In the end, Marcus didn't go for his pike, but he probably twitched, because Neroon raked his eyes over him, like he was cataloguing every last muscle movement, and sneered, like he found them all lacking. Marcus felt about two inches tall and suddenly, irrationally, angry. He straightened - though his ribs spasmed - and kept a feeble hold on his temper. "Amazing you lasted this long in a Religious temple without spontaneously combusting," he said instead.

"My orders," said Neroon, in that low dangerous voice of his, "were to observe."

"I don't like this," said Marcus, to Delenn. "I don't like any of this."

"You have nothing to fear from him," Delenn replied, with a cool glare to Neroon, "he will accompany you only because you are still healing." Neroon rolled his eyes. "Which is his doing," Delenn added.

"Not used to paying for your transgressions against Humanity, I take it," Marcus said.

Neroon blinked slowly, like a cat. "You're not worth the breath," he said, and lifted his chin away.

"Marcus is the sole member of the Anla'shok who speaks enough of the Drazi tongue," Delenn said. "This is why it has to be him. And you will accompany him. Because of you, he cannot go on his own."

"I would disagree," said Neroon.

"You are free to do so," said Delenn, "it is nevertheless the truth." Neroon scowled.

"And only this Human Anla'shok speaks enough Drazi?" asked Neroon. He chuckled, darkly. "This all seems awfully convenient."

"I spent over a year on the Drazi homeworld in my youth," said Marcus. "It was very handy to have someone in the mining colony speak the local language. It's not a conspiracy, merely coincidence." Neroon narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

"This plan has been in the works for too long now," said Delenn. "It was scheduled for next week, and so it is happening next week. The problem is that Neroon may not go as he is. Dressed like a Warrior. In a Minbari Warrior's uniform."

" Doesn't go with your eyes, does it?" snapped Marcus. "Not the right season?"

"Do you think military Minbari presence on the Drazi homeworld will not be noted?" retorted Neroon. "You are the Drazi expert here. Ostensibly."
"Bold of you to assume you'd be so noticeable," said Marcus. "Aren't we self-centred!"

"If even one Drazi makes the connection, the Shai Alyt will have to get involved," said Neroon. "None of us want that." He turned to Delenn. "If you are so adamant about this mission then why not simply send another Anla'shok?" he asked.

"I wanted someone good with a weapon," said Delenn.

Neroon curled his lip. "Are the Anla'shok not trained," he ground out, knowing full well they were with first-hand experience.

"Not like you are," said Delenn. "Marcus was intended to go. And you are responsible for his convalescence. In a way, you owe him."

"The denn'shah," began Neroon hotly.

Marcus interrupted. "I brought it on myself, I understand that," he said.

"Interrupt me again, Human," dared Neroon.

"Just trying to help," said Marcus, lifting his hands in peace.

"I do not require your help," said Neroon. He bared his teeth, like an animal.

"You also owe me," said Delenn, speaking over them both. "Now. I understand that the Warrior Caste has its ... traditions and ways." If pure doubt could be distilled into a single facial expression, Neroon was wearing it. "Regardless, I needed him in particular to go for his connections. You injured him - that hinders my plans. So you are responsible for my limitations. I grant that you left him alive, which was unexpected, and so we may proceed as planned. He will, however, need someone who is familiar enough with his injuries, and capable of protecting him should he need it. And thus there is a service that you can provide for me, as Entil'Zha. Unless you continue to have a problem with that last part."

Neroon said nothing.

Unfortunately, that was good reason to take him along. "I hardly think I need a bodyguard," said Marcus, trying to posture.

"You wheezed loudly on the last steps up the temple," said Delenn flatly.

Neroon snorted. "Something funny?" asked Marcus.

"It was a single flight of stairs," said Neroon.

"Someone broke two of my ribs!" Marcus retorted. "Sorry - make that three!" he added, mocking. "'Sorry', you said!"

"I do indeed regret the sensitivity of your tender Human lungs but fail nevertheless to see how your meager Human constitution is my fault," said Neroon.

"Your attention, please," said Delenn. Marcus shut up and surprisingly, so did Neroon. "You therefore have three options: you may go as Anla'shok using Anla'shok robes, or as Worker Caste, or as Religious Caste."

None of these seemed to please Neroon, but that disgusted expression was something he'd been wearing since he stepped out from the shadows. Who was to say what it was in reference to? "To
pose as Religious Caste," added Delenn, "would require certain skills, such as compassion and diplomacy. These may be difficult for you. And I do not recommend Anla'shok robes since Marcus will also be in them. You will be too obviously Anla'shok, on an Anla'shok mission. That draws attention."

"Warriors take the black as part of their vows," said Neroon angrily. "Not that you know much of this, or indeed care. We are not meant to wear colours besides accents. To do otherwise infringes upon my honour."

Marcus shook his head. "Your honour aside, black's too noticeable in the Drazi Freehold," he explained. "They don't wear a lot of black. It's mostly grey and sand colours. Worker Caste robes would fit in a lot better." Neroon glared. "If you're even bothering to consult for my opinion, which you should, as resident Drazi expert!" Marcus snapped.

"Worker Caste will be difficult to sell. To my knowledge," said Delenn, "you do not exactly have a trade skill."

"All of this is delightful discourse," snapped Neroon, "but irrelevant, because my Warrior vows - which I made over half my life ago, and which I intend to keep - will not have me dressed in anything else but black."

"Easy tradeoff. Wear black beneath Worker robes," offered Marcus. Neroon grimaced. "Oh, come on! They're not that bad."

"You make light of our traditions, while knowing nothing of them," Neroon hissed. "There is also the matter that this reeks of espionage - Human espionage - the very reason we did not want Humans in the Anla'shok in the first place. They permeate everything with their honourless deceptions - even our own paramilitary societies!"

"This is a plan of my own devising," said Delenn.

"It could not be," said Neroon, "if, as you say, it has been planned for months. You became Entil'Zha a week ago."

Delenn took three slow steps towards Neroon. "Do you accuse me of lying?" she asked softly. "Do I, too, permeate your sacred paramilitary societies with honourless deception?"

Neroon's jaw tightened. He wouldn't look at her. "I simply make remarks on what I have seen," he said. "The Anla'shok did not behave this way five hundred cycles ago."

"The ancient enemy wasn't active five hundred cycles ago," said Delenn.

"That is not, and has never been, reason to throw away one's honour, in the face of a bigger, deadlier, and more advanced foe," argued Neroon. "In war, there are lines you don't cross. That is a basic tenet of any skilled Minbari - Warrior or Anla'shok - and if you seek to truly be Entil'Zha in act and name, you would heed it."

"I am Entil'Zha," said Delenn.

"I know," said Neroon, and he stepped closer to stare down his nose at her. Delenn squared her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. "I was there. I was first to name you Entil'Zha."

Neither Delenn nor Neroon said anything about the pointed way he continually stressed the word name, as though she held the title but not the position. Delenn could probably take him, Marcus thought, if not physically then at least ideologically. But she shouldn't have to.
"Look, it's just an intelligence gathering operation," began Marcus gently. "We're not proposing biological warfare. All it is, is a little game of dress-up! And Worker Caste robes would have no shortage of pockets for you to hide whatever weapons you wanted. Surely that's got to appeal to your Warrior sensibilities."

Neroon glared. "No one asked for your input," he said.

"At least I'm trying," said Marcus. He leaned back on the pillar, feigning casualness. "More than I could say for you."

"You are certainly trying," said Neroon. "You are trying my patience. I am going for a walk. Entil'Zha Delenn, I shall give you my decision in an hour. He offends me."

"Your decision is fixed," said Delenn. "You are accompanying him. That is not open for debate. We have already agreed, Neroon!"

"I meant about the robes," Neroon snarled. He whirled on his heel and marched away into the darkness. A few paces later, Marcus heard the opening of a door, and a few seconds after that, its closure.

"Well," said Marcus. "That went swimmingly."

Delenn watched him leave. She then shut her eyes, swallowed heavily, and took a deep breath in, holding it for a beat before exhaling slowly. "It is not the first time he exercises my nerves," she explained, "it will not be the last time he exercises yours."

Marcus lifted himself off the pillar and drew nearer. When he was close enough to not be easily overheard, he asked, "Do I really have to do this? Take a Warrior along, very well. But why him?"

Delenn folded her arms. "The real reason you are doing this is difficult to explain. Now that Neroon has left, I can do so. There are some political machinations at stake, on Minbar. In exchange for his assistance on this mission, I will grant him my assistance in his. But these are Minbari considerations, and you do not need to worry about them. Know simply that he will do what I ask and carry out my instructions to the letter, because what I will provide for him is something he sorely requires. As for the mission... I need for him to see with his own eyes what is happening. The shape of things to come. That is crucial."

"And by that, you mean -"

"The real extent of the status of the ancient enemy," Delenn explained, "and their forces. The hope is that you run into a Shadow vessel - maybe many. And in so doing, convince Neroon that this threat is real and present."

"Your Grey Council already voted against assistance," Marcus said. "I'm sure that was his Caste's doing."

"Neroon is no longer part of the Grey Council," said Delenn. "There is no Grey Council for him to be a part of. I do not want his assistance as Satai. What I want is to convince him that the threat is real and present, that we may spark at least the Star Riders into activity. If the Star Riders join, at least one other clan may. We need Minbari support - we need Warrior Caste support."

Marcus thought a moment. "You're doing this because you have an obstacle to get around," he realised. "You're supposed to go through their War Leader, aren't you?"

Delenn grimaced. "Exactly so," she said. "It is the Shai Alyt who has refused aid. That means the
Warrior Caste as a whole refuses its aid."

"But you think that if Neroon sees what we're up against, he'll have no choice but to join the fray?"

"Neroon is clever enough that he may see through the parallels in the situations between the Drazi and the Minbari. And he has always focused on honour," said Delenn. "That is one of the few things I can rely on, about him. Regardless of what the Shai Alyt has said - how the Shai Alyt has argued - if Neroon sees Worker and Priest having to fight an enemy as dangerous as we claim, the way we have had to fight without Warrior support, then he may be inspired to action."

"I'm hearing a lot of may in this," said Marcus. "I don't like may. December - now there's a month."

"I don't know how to predict Neroon," Delenn admitted. "We are not friends. Political rivals at best. He has ... much ambition."

This surprised Marcus. "Minbari aren't supposed to have ambition," he said, frowning. "They're supposed to serve. Warrior Caste especially."

"Yes," said Delenn bitingly, "they are supposed to. Neroon has in my experience rarely done what he was supposed to. He is - unusual. Any other Minbari that I did not know, I could perhaps predict. I am less able to predict his actions. Therefore, any information you can glean on that front will, too, be useful."

"Hah! As though he'd let his guard down long enough," said Marcus.

"I suspect his distaste for Humans is mostly performative. It was the same with -" she sighed, wistful. "With Sinclair," she said at last.

"I didn't know they'd really met." As Ranger trainee, Marcus had attended the ceremony where Sinclair was promoted from Ranger One to Entil'Zha - and Neroon had been there, a grim, grey-robed figure beside the Religious Caste Satai Rathenn - but if Sinclair and Neroon had any familiarity with each other, they'd hidden it well.

"Before you, Sinclair was the Human with whom Neroon had had the most contact, after the war," she explained. "It took time. But by the end, Neroon respected him."

Little wonder that Neroon found Marcus lacking. Who could measure up to Valen himself? "So," said Marcus. "I'm your spy, is that it?"

"You shall be my eyes and ears," said Delenn. "And between those ears, and behind those eyes, there is a keen and logical mind, capable of much insight. It is that insight which I would seek. He has tells, and you are clever. What I said of the Drazi applies to Neroon, too. He could be an ally, if we could steer him to our cause."

"Don't think he'll like being manipulated," said Marcus.

"He does it all the time to others," said Delenn, dismissive. "He can sample his own flarn. But you must take caution."

"I didn't spend three months on Minbar not to hold my own against one single warrior," said Marcus.

"Careful," she warned. "He is quicker than most."

"Is he my ally in this, or my adversary?" he asked.
"Yes," replied Delenn.

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Fantastic," he said.

The walk down was nicer than the walk up, but it was still a long trek back to Tuzanor, and especially to the Ranger Base, which was on the other side of the city (and up yet another hill). With every step Marcus felt his ribs protesting, and if Neroon had been walking beside them, it would have been difficult to contain his anguish. Luckily, Neroon elected to leave by means of his flyer, so Marcus could complain at length. "He could have at least offered to drop us off," said Marcus.

"There are reasons he cannot be seen with us," said Delenn. As they walked through the city streets, they passed warriors on their business. Unlike the Captain, Delenn made no special note of the warriors, any more than she did when she passed workers or religious Minbari that she did not know. But they all noticed her.

"They don't faze you?" Marcus asked.

"I will not be cowed in my own city," Delenn said. "They should fear me."

In the morning (after a disastrous night in the Ranger base on a tilted sleeping platform that definitely felt a lot more comfortable when he wasn't bruised head to toe) Marcus went alone to the central port at Tuzanor to find Neroon waiting outside his flyer, his arms folded across his chest. Marcus knew he wasn't late. Neroon was simply impatient. "We'll be taking this," he announced. "Get in."

Yes sir, Marcus thought. He straightened and put on a smile for spite's sake. "And the ID?" he asked.

"I shall retrofit the flyer with a Worker Caste identification during our voyage," Neroon explained.

So Neroon must have selected Worker Caste robes, though he didn't wear them yet. Likely didn't dare, not on Minbar. "And what's your trade skill, then?"

"Cooking," said Neroon. "It will explain my proficiency with knifework. If tested, my cooking is passable, moreso than for most Warriors. Should they find it unpalatable, then that is simply because it is for Minbari tastes. There will be no Minbari there to verify this." He took out a device from his inner surcoat pocket and pressed a button, and the flyer door opened. A set of steps slid out at the bottom. They didn't make the vessel any more welcoming; Marcus had already seen his share in the war. "After you," said Neroon, in an ambiguous way that left Marcus convinced he was only pretending at nobility.

"Isn't that nice," said Marcus cheerily, as he marched aboard. "I've always wanted my own personal chef. I'll have the duck a l'orange."

"I'm not cooking for you," Neroon sneered. He followed Marcus aboard and closed the door behind them, then secured a series of bolts to engage the airlock, which felt more ominous than it should. "Drazi cuisine is celebrated, and while we cannot ingest their meats, their spices are renowned. You are therefore my local guide, and I am an opportunistic worker who seeks to learn the ways of other cultures."

"Well," Marcus said, "we'll have to work on your legend. You wanting to learn about other cultures isn't something you're terribly good at, is it?"

Neroon glared.

Marcus was only human, after all, he couldn't resist a few digs. And Neroon kept tossing them out...
like they were candy. What was it Delenn said? He'd do well to sample his own flarn.

"At least one duck," said Marcus. "For the sake of keeping up appearances. I insist!"

Marcus was dismayed but not entirely surprised they were taking a Minbari flyer, though he was a little surprised it was Neroon's own. Relatively spacious - practical - entirely impersonal. A second seat had clearly been added, as it stuck out like a sore thumb. Not a single decoration on the controls dashboard, not one little sticker, not even a pine-shaped air freshener or whatever the Minbari equivalent for that was. Delenn had been the one to inform him that they would not be in a White Star. "If we come across too many Shadow vessels," Marcus had argued, "we won't be able to outrun them in solely Minbari technology."

"Good," Delenn had said, "I want him to fear."

"I'm sure the Warrior Caste put him through mora'dum at the tender age of five," he replied.

"You may ask him yourself," Delenn said. "I know much of the Warrior Caste's ways but less of Star Riders'. They tend to be secretive. They do it on purpose. They do not like that the Religious Caste are secretive. Fear may be motivating for him."

So as Neroon expertly started up the flyer and began the climb against Minbar's gravity, Marcus watched out of the corner of his eyes from his passenger seat beside the driver and thought about fear.

Chapter End Notes

guess who is 100% gonna wind up cooking for Marcus!

Hi, I love kudos and comments and subscribers and people comin in to say hi and everything. :D
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

When they had finally emerged past the atmosphere, Marcus reclined, throwing his hands behind his head and propping his feet up on the dashboard, solely to watch which of Neroon's muscles twitched. Answer: most of them, especially the fingers, where he probably longed to push Marcus off. But he kept his hands to himself and fixed his grip on the throttle instead. Ah, the discipline of the Warrior Caste. "So!" Marcus began. "What's Delenn got on you, then?"

Neroon said nothing.

"I'm going to keep on talking, whether you like it or not," Marcus said.

"You are welcome to do so," murmured Neroon. "I assume it amuses your primitive mind to hear your own voice."

"Means you've nothing else to do except listen to me."

Neroon flipped on the radio. Classical Minbari music.

"Good try," said Marcus, "but a drone and single harp melody won't drown me out and as far as I'm aware, the Minbari don't compose heavy metal. Let's have a game of it. I'll wager it's the denn'shah."

"Denn'shah," said Neroon, pronouncing it exactly the same. "The h at the end is pronounced."

"Denn'shahhh," replied Marcus. "There, how's that."

"Pitiful. Must you prattle?"

Marcus shrugged. "We've got about a half hour until we hit the jumpgates, in terms of distance, and there's at least four ships ahead of us in the queue. Minbar's own fault they don't build a busier port."

"Minbar's own fault we ever bothered opening it to outsiders like you," Neroon muttered.

"Why'd you leave me alive, anyway?"

"I told you already."

"Head wound," Marcus said. "I hardly remember."

"That is not my fault," Neroon replied.

"Actually, it's quite literally your fault."

"If you were Minbari," Neroon explained, overenunciating the word like Marcus were a child, "you would retain your memories through a head injury. And likely you'd lose your ability to enunciate properly." He added further, under his breath, "Voraan ahok nu chek'ra tsvorilat, neyr tsvorilin tular noli'kseyat," and his accent in Fik was so deliberately strong that Marcus could only pick up the meaning of the words because he already knew the proverb: if words alone could make it so, we wouldn't need the grace of the universe.

Marcus wasn't willing to argue the point. He wasn't Minbari, and he had no desire to be, either.
Certainly not to make Neroon more comfortable. "First one in a thousand years," he said instead. "Now that's impressive. I imagine no one was quiet about it once they discovered what had happened. Oh, sure, those taking part in the Ranger ceremony could be sworn to secrecy, but you didn't take the concealed route to the ceremony, did you? You would've passed at least one Worker Caste Minbari on the way there with your bloody pike in your hand. In any case, you must have had to report what happened to your superior officers. Chain of command, and all that."

At this, Neroon's lips pursed.

"Ah, you don't like them?" guessed Marcus.

"It is not a question of liking," said Neroon, "it is a question of obeisance. If I tell you, will you be quiet?"

"I'll consider it," said Marcus. "Depends on if you tell me the truth."

"Are you implying I would lie," said Neroon.

"The whole truth, then," he said. "As opposed to part of it."

Neroon thought a moment, but at last said, "News of the denn'shah - victimless as it was - has spread beyond containment."

"Wildfire gossip, eh?" said Marcus. "Knew it."

"My mission was to intercede in the ceremony and convince Delenn and the Religious Caste to hand over control of the Anla'shok back to the Warrior Caste - where it has always belonged."

"Not always," said Marcus.

"Yes always," said Neroon. "I am not arguing with you about the history of my own people."

"Valen wasn't Warrior Caste," Marcus pointed out.

"Valen was not any Caste. Valen is in most things Minbari the exception, and not the rule. Regarding the denn'shah, the Religious Caste holds much sway over Minbari society. Delenn is admittedly no longer Satai, but as Entil'Zha she now commands more respect than she did as mere Ambassador. It is her word that would do much to washing away whatever stain there is on my honour from leaving such an altercation without ending it."

"You could have just ended it," said Marcus. "Be a lot easier."

Neroon did not reply to that. "Minbari society being primarily Religious Caste hegemony," he said instead, not without some bitterness, "Delenn has presented herself as a useful tool in improving my own standing, at the expense of my services rendered to her - and you - on this mission. That is the long and short of it."

"So you play games and work alliances to climb your way up, is that it," said Marcus. "How's that worked out for you?"

Neroon straightened. "Exceedingly well," he said.

"Then I don't see why you're so upset about having to be undercover. It's largely the same thing."

"Why would I expect a Human to understand," sneered Neroon. "The difference is that one is politics, and the other is backstabbery."
"Is that what you think we're embarking on? We'll go cloak and dagger our way around the Drazi Freehold, holding people at pike-point until we get what we want?"

"It is dishonest to masquerade as something you're not. Even if I dislike my enemies, they'll see me coming before I commit the blow. It's not a fair fight if they don't see the weapon they are up against. Anything less is dishonourable. And here I am posing as an innocent Worker cook, relying on their assumptions, so they cannot tell I'm your defender."

Marcus grinned. "If it succeeds and you get out alive, I can't say I've the same compunction," he joked.

"Yes," said Neroon tartly. "I'm well aware. Your people as a whole seem to lack such an understanding."

There was no need to guess at what Neroon was speaking of. But they'd both been in the Earth-Minbari war, and Marcus hadn't exactly enjoyed his time there, either. In fact, he'd despised every moment. He had been good at what he'd done, and doing it had kept him alive, and his skills from the war were probably what got him through Ranger training so smoothly. Intelligence gathering came easy to him.

But he elected not to say any of this. For one, it would only reinforce Neroon's belief that Humans in the Rangers were a disease; and for two, there was no point in starting a pissing contest about who did what during the war. So Marcus did the only thing remaining.

"Well," he said. "I'm going to take a nap. Wake me when we pass through the jumpgates."

Neroon gave him a curious glance, as though surprised. "Perhaps I didn't make a point of giving you my word, but it was implied," Marcus explained. "And you held up your end of the bargain. There's today's revelation: Humans can play fair."

Neroon said nothing. Marcus turned over as best he could in his seat, given the safety restraints, and watched the space outside. The eerie Minbari harp melodies and the low drone hung between them, until his eyes drifted shut.

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By the time Marcus awoke, they had already passed the jumpgate and were floating in hyperspace, which was why he awoke in the first place: Neroon hadn't drawn the shades on the flyer, and the nausea combined with a nasty hyperspace-influenced dream kicked him awake. Not full on hyperspace travel syndrome, but coming up on it. They'd be two days there, after all.

"How long have we been like this?" he asked.

"We have passed through the overlap signal of four of fifty-three beacons," replied Neroon. "We will come within range of number five in a few minutes."

Marcus yawned. "Are you tired, at all? I could take over controls for a bit -"

"I'll use the autopilot," Neroon snapped. "You as far as touch the controls of my flyer and it will be the last thing you do."

"You've got to sleep sometime," he said. Then he reconsidered. "Well, actually, I know Minbari don't, but it'd be better for you to be well-rested when we arrive on Zhabar."

A beat of silence passed. Astoundingly, it was Neroon who broke it. "You said you spent a year
"there," he said. "How long ago was that?"

"Hmm ..." Marcus thought. "I was old enough to remember it, young enough that immersion in the language helped."

"A specific figure, Anla'shok," said Neroon dryly.

"You know, you can just call me Marcus," he said. "Everyone else does."

"And you can just answer the question."

Fine. "I would've been ten when we moved," said Marcus. "Dad took the entire operation and moved us from Mars, where we'd been for the past year. It's a nice place, Zhabar, I mean. It's nicer than Mars, especially because the atmosphere is breathable, but that's a low bar. How about you? Spent all your life on Minbar? I mean - of course you did, that's what Minbari do, but you do leave sometimes, don't you?"

Neroon said nothing.

"Oh, come on!" Marcus blurted, "I'm not asking for the secrets of the Grey Council here!"

"Technically, you are," said Neroon, "since I was once Satai, and during that period of my life, my whereabouts were a secret."

"You know I wasn't asking about that."

"I fail to see what relevance or bearing it has upon the discussion at hand."

"I'm making conversation. You're being obtuse. On purpose, too." Marcus gave a loud tut. "Look, if I have to fill this silence myself, I'll do it, but you'll like that even less." Did he really think Marcus didn't know the basics already? Did he really think Marcus hadn't had a file delivered to him about who would be watching his back, as would be the minimum requirement for a mission like this? He probably didn't like that Marcus knew anything about him at all, and preferred not to have the reminder. "I'll sing!" Marcus said at last. "You won't want that!"

The flyer beeped. Judging from the on-screen display, they'd passed within range of the fifth beacon, bearing forty degrees portside, and about two hours away. Neroon flicked a switch to stop the beeping and a second countdown began on the display.

"Can we not distract ourselves?" Marcus found himself pleading. "Look, I don't exactly have any cards. That's why the twenty questions in the first place. That's all it was."

Neroon again said nothing.

"Fine," said Marcus. "Ignore me, then. As you like. I suppose I have some work to do. Won't take me sixty hours to do it in, so I hope you're a little more willing to make conversation eventually."

He concentrated on trying to regain as much of his Drazi as he could, as a refresher of sorts. He didn't much need it; he was there only last year setting up a base on Zagros VII. It had been Marcus' connections from the old family mining company (which had folded after the attack on Arisia colony, and like the rest of Arisia was forever more dead) that had found them a place on Zagros VII. Zagros VII wasn't a particularly busy or important Drazi colony, which made it a little forgettable. That was key. Perfect for a Ranger base.

But the minute the listening post was set up, the Centauri had arranged a blockade. They must have
figured it out. What would the Centauri want to provoke the Drazi for, over one tiny insignificant little world? There wasn't anything there they were interested in, and the timing was too coincidental.

That meant there was a leak, somewhere. Couldn't be on the Minbari side. That left Human or Centauri, if the Drazi didn't sell out their own.

Marcus looked again at Neroon. Could it be on the Minbari side?

They wouldn't. No, surely they wouldn't.

He couldn't say he had a great amount of experience with the Warrior Caste. What little he had was mostly limited to his time in the war - and none of that was good memories. After the war, he hadn't seen much of them. No need to, he assumed. The Workers were the ones who picked up the Quantum-40 in his mining company days, and the Religious Caste had taken over training by the time he became a Ranger. Of the Warriors he knew little. What did the Warrior Caste even do when there wasn't a war to fight? How had Neroon spent the years between the end of the Earth-Minbari War and now?

There had been some thirty Warrior Caste Anla'shok in the organisation before Sinclair. The Anla'shok, in fact, had been solely of Warrior Caste origin before Sinclair. But half those left in protest when Sinclair took over as Ranger One. So did many of the training Sechs. (Most, but not all of them Warrior. Turval hadn't been the original Religious Caste Meditations teacher. The importance of racial purity wasn't a position exclusive to the Warrior Caste.)

Marcus never spoke with the ones who remained, who tended to keep to themselves. If any remained. As the months of training wore on, fewer and fewer of the original Anla'shok stuck around. Like the Sechs and the Warriors who preceded them, they could have left of their own accord. Or they could have been sent away on missions, if it wasn't too great a blow to their honour to be directed by a Human Ranger One. There was no way to know. Only one had ever stopped to give him the time of day - and it had been literally that. Late on his way to training, he'd stopped someone, asked the time, and found out later that the tall, brusque fellow he had asked was Troval of the Night Walkers, whom he never saw again.

As to his memories of the war...

The Warriors were fierce. They fought relentlessly. But they could be counted on not to pull stunts like the Humans did, and that was what had won Earthforce small advantages like the destruction of the Drala Fi. There were certain lines the Minbari Warriors were known not to cross. Neroon himself had said so. What few victories they had won, were won by tactics that the Minbari considered dirty, and the Humans considered fair game.

Surely they would think that selling information about Zagros VII to the Centauri was dishonourable. He'd ask Neroon the next time they spoke - for the moment, it wasn't worth breaking the silence and he didn't want Neroon to think it was an accusation. Which it was.

Flying around with Susan to Sigma-957 had been a lot more fun. Susan was about as tight-lipped as Neroon was, but at least she'd been amiable.

Well, she'd been polite.

Generally. Mostly.

Alright, she was female and attractive and that had helped wonders. Neroon was neither and came off as rude.
I shouldn't be so uncharitable, Marcus thought. Neroon wanted nothing more than to get this mission over and done with, his rudeness was likely expediency. It was a shame he wouldn't enjoy the trip. He wasn't wrong about the Drazi - excellent cuisine, all-around. But there was more to them than that. The knotty mess that was their politics was an intriguing puzzle to work out; every time Marcus came here, he learned something new about it. They had a distinct dissonant musical style - Marcus hadn't heard anything like it, and the Minbari certainly had never thought to invent it. And just the sight of the craggy mountains looming over the port city Zhoshesh Dorallo, with that fat orange Drazi sun hanging beyond them, was exceptional, at least to Marcus' eyes. Hopefully Minbari eyes saw the same wavelengths.

Neroon could learn something about them. Neroon was many things, but stupid wasn't one of them. How could he be so hostile to aliens without ever finding common ground? Without even trying? Couldn't at least one Warrior be worth saving?

He'll probably just think the Drazi are stupid, like everyone else, thought Marcus, he'll notice their poor English and their combat and their tradition and he'll think they're dim-witted, backwards people who do nothing but fight each other all day. Even though combat and tradition - two main tenets of Drazi society - could as easily describe the Warrior Caste, who didn't all speak English as well as Neroon.

That was one thing that had disappointed him, about Susan. She didn't seem to see it either. Now, granted, she'd been tasked to see the Drazi of Babylon 5 through the dissolution and reappointment of the Shadak, which involved green-sashed Drazi and purple-sashed Drazi, fighting each other to the death.

And granted that Marcus was yet again being more lenient and understanding with her lack of appreciation than Neroon's. Well! So he had a bias, what of it? She was a formidable woman; was it so wrong to think of her, and allow the image he conjured up to inspire him, to strengthen his resolve? If it worked for Lennier, it could work for Marcus. What was it he'd said? Something purer than love.

There were a lot of similarities, on a number of elements. If Neroon could be sensitive enough to teach himself about some part of Zhabar and enjoy it, Marcus would make the attempt to do the same for the Warrior Caste. Assuming Neroon would deign to speak of it.

Minbari Warriors must undergo military training camp, Marcus realised. Then, there was something in common with the Drazi society already: this year's children would have by now just arrived home for the first time since leaving for boarding school. Zhoshesh Dorallo would be a wild party, likely. Raucous, not a bit violent (like every race, so too did the Drazi consider pain an enemy; but unlike most races, the Drazi took that to mean that they should reacquaint themselves with it often), and overwhelming. Neroon would probably hate it. Marcus had too, but he was ten at the time and it was all quite confusing to him. He'd sell it off as a ritual. Couldn't most things you didn't understand about an alien culture be termed rituals? That's what Will had always said, and he wasn't half wrong. Will would probably be able to sell a Minbari Warrior on staying in the Drazi Freehold. Will got to see a lot more of the Drazi than even Marcus did - Will was a lot better travelled.

Well. Will hadn't had to submit to the Earthforce draft in the Earth-Minbari War. Will hadn't had to attend to their family's mining company.

Neither had you, whispered his nasty-voiced conscience. Will touched passion when it came his way - you didn't. Don't blame him for taking risks you felt you couldn't dare because of responsibilities you put on yourself from expectations you thought other people held.

It wasn't precisely so. Someone had had to ensure the business remained up and running. That Mum
and Dad's work hadn't been for nothing. That their deaths hadn't been for nothing. That their sacrifices and all that might mean something, in the end. Was that so wrong? And Will had gallivanted off across the galaxy chasing adventure like an Earthborn on summer hols, so who'd that leave holding the reins?

Marcus could spend all day thinking about whose fault was what and not get anywhere. At times like these, it wasn't important to dwell on, to sit there and pick away at an old scab just to watch it well up again. Honestly, he'd rather pick a fight with his new sour Warrior companion. One thing was certain: while Marcus' experiences would be enough to keep them safe among the Drazi, it would be nice to be able to tap into Will's experiences among the Minbari, to keep Marcus safe with Neroon. Will was better versed in Fik - a lot better - he'd had more time to learn and he took to it better than Marcus had. The advantages of youth, probably. Will had still been in his twenties when he began Ranger training; Marcus was thirty-nine. And he had been one of the first to join - maybe he trained with Troval of the Night Walkers, maybe he knew more about the Warrior Caste. Maybe he knew how to talk to them in a way that mollified them down from dour soldier to normal civilised person.

Maybe this, maybe that. It was all debateable, in any case, because Will was dead and Marcus was a Ranger in his stead, so that Will's sacrifice could mean something, too.

How in seven hells, wondered Marcus, would he ever manage to win Neroon to their side? He looked at Neroon slyly, out of the corner of his eye. Neroon's posture was straight - his chin up, his head held high, his crest like a crown - frozen in the driver's seat.

Neroon had made up his mind about Marcus the moment Marcus challenged him. He'd made up his mind about Humans over ten years ago and killing fifty thousand of them hadn't changed his opinion. What could Marcus alone do? Why did Delenn think that, out of the entire lost cause that was the Warrior Caste, this one was capable of changing his mind? She said herself she didn't know him. What could she have seen in him?

Moreover, what could Delenn have possibly been saying about caste allegiances? So few Warrior Caste had newly joined the Rangers, among the hundreds and thousands of Religious and Worker Caste applicants, after Sinclair had become Entil'Zha. And in any case, when one became a Ranger, there was no caste or clan allegiances, anymore. Only allegiances to the Rangers, and to the One, in Valen's name. What part of caste or clan allegiances could possibly trump Valen's name?

The Warrior Caste is acting out of line, thought Marcus, though how they'd gotten that way was anyone's guess. Not Marcus', who knew so little of them, or of Minbari politics generally. But it was the only way to explain why they thought, despite how few there were, that they could be bigger than their oaths as Rangers. Why a Worker Caste Captain would be uncomfortable around simple Warrior guards. Why any of them would think of intimidating Delenn. (And on that note, good sodding luck. Still, the fact that they dared it at all was telling.)

Delenn was right, he knew, about him being her eyes and ears and watching what he could of Neroon to gauge his reactions. If they could distract the Warrior Caste with the developing war against the Shadows, maybe they could stave off whatever trouble was brewing on Minbar.

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Neroon finally began to flounder past beacon 33. By this point it had been over forty hours in near silence, which Neroon had spent all of staring out at the red pulsating patterns of hyperspace. He hadn't eaten, he hadn't drunk, he hadn't even moved from his seat to relieve himself (but not eating or drinking made that a non-issue). Meanwhile Marcus had been through three rations meals and been pacing nearly every fourth hour at least to wake his legs up. As he returned from the restroom unit at the back of the flyer and sat down again, he noticed something. "You're twenty degrees off-course,"
said Marcus, breaking their silence gently.

Neroon's eyes blinked open, shocked, and he straightened like he'd been electrified. He checked the controls, then the long-range scanners. "It's fine," he said. He corrected their bearing and settled once again in his seat.

"Oh, for christ's - just put the autopilot on, and take a bloody nap," snapped Marcus. "I promise I won't touch anything. I won't even look at the controls. But I don't want to be adrift forever, lost in hyperspace, because you had to be better than a Human. You already won that bit, alright? I'll even admit it: you're a better flyer. Satisfied?"

Neroon glared. "That's hardly the point," he said.

"I don't care what the point is," said Marcus coolly. "You're no longer fit to fly. Now, granted, you've lasted longer than anyone I've ever known, and I've known some skilled fliers. They all put on autopilot around hour sixteen. Good job, you have stamina. I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. For the sake of Delenn, my mission, and - whatever honour-restoring you're here for - put on the autopilot."

Marcus' argument, as logical as it was, didn't convince Neroon immediately, and he sat there a full two minutes before he decided that perhaps the Human had a point. He reached over and dialed in a nine-digit access code too quickly for Marcus to see, then pressed three buttons. Klar'nohorna zi yevenech, said a voice: autopilot engaged.

"In any case," said Neroon, "there is a fail-safe. If the ship's computer recognises no signal within twenty seconds of a beacon tracking event, it automatically assumes control of the piloting functions."

Obviously, thought Marcus. All hyperspace-capable ships had such a function. What was he trying to achieve by telling Marcus this? Did he think Marcus didn't know? Did he think Marcus had never piloted a ship before? Neroon must have received a file at least as detailed about Marcus as the one Marcus received about Neroon, then he ought to know Marcus could more than capably fly -

"You were correct," said Neroon. "I should have engaged the autopilot myself hours ago."

Oh.

"Right," said Marcus. A beat of silence passed. "Well, you could've just said."

"I did just say," Neroon replied. He reclined his seat to a forty-five degree angle and faced the window, curling away from Marcus in his restraints, then tucked himself in using the thick black cloth that hung from his mantle.

--

Minbari did not talk in their sleep, they didn't even snore (no wonder they acted like such prats, they were perfect), so Marcus returned to the silence that had previously reigned. Before too long he found the words swimming in front of his eyes, and not only because they were in Drazi. The last beacon he remembered before falling asleep was number 35. Still another twenty to go.

He awoke what felt like twenty minutes later but was in reality four hours. Neroon was already awake and was back at the helm. He didn't look any more rested.

"I had this ridiculous dream," said Marcus, gravel-voiced. He yawned. "There was - well, you were there, and we had to destroy a sand compass."
Neroon frowned. "A compass - made of sand? Or a compass for sand?"

"Yes. We had to destroy it to stop some sort of evil wizard -"

"What is a wizard?"

"A man with creepy long robes and magic powers which he invariably uses for evil. Like a technomage. Anyway, we had concocted an entire scheme to carry the compass to the specific place where it was to be destroyed, because destroying it with water or erasing the design from the sand wasn't good enough, somehow. There were gears and levers and - well. Rube Goldberg would've been impressed. Do we have that in common, then? Dreams that don't make any sense?" Neroon remained aloof. "Oh, come off it, it's hyperspace, it's got to affect you too. No one voluntarily spends that long without sleeping unless there's something to avoid."

After some gestured hedging, Neroon spoke. "Mine was ... I was floating on the sea, in some sort of flotation device, except that the waves of the sea looked unreal, as though a simulation, or computer-generated; and then beside me came the Worker Caste member who operates the rotary blade that keeps the grasses by the roads short, except that he was exhausted and kept falling asleep, so I told him he oughtn't operate the blade in such a condition, but he seemed overly concerned about getting home, which is when I realised he had come in through my window and also he had hair. It was yellow."

This was the most positively Neroon had spoken to him possibly ever, and it was about the surreality of sleep. Well, it was a beginning. "Ah, yes," said Marcus. "We call that blonde."

"No. I have seen blonde hair. It was - the colour of the flotation device." Neroon shook his head. "Curious."

"Hyperspace travel always gives me the strangest dreams," said Marcus. "Sometimes I think about meditating to pass the time, but that's almost worse."

"Meditation during hyperspace is a good way to give oneself harrowing visions," agreed Neroon. "In fact, the Star Riders use it as the fifth mora'dum ritual."

Wouldn't he have been about thirteen at the time? "That sounds awful," said Marcus.

"It is enough to make one reticent to become skilled in meditation to begin with," Neroon replied. Upon reflection, he added, "That may have been the last time I meditated."

"So you don't make a Tuesday habit of it, then," observed Marcus. He grinned. "Me neither. I think there's cleverer ways to focus a mind if you really want it to remain deadly aware. Meditation's never worked for me like that."

"Yes," said Neroon, surprised, "I agree. It has a - dulling, soporific effect. A trance during a duel slows your reflexes."

See? So they could agree on something! "It's nice that our brains work similarly in this, at least. Gives us somewhere to see eye to eye, to come to some understanding."

"Yes," Neroon said. "If only you understood what we understand about honour."

And they'd been doing so well.

"I think three broken ribs shows that I do," said Marcus.
Neroon did not reply.

"And I think you know I'm right," he added.

"Oh, you go ahead and think that," muttered Neroon. Then he nodded at Marcus' book and asked, "What's that in Drazi?"


Neroon raised an eyebrow. "Your best guess? You don't know? I thought you said you spoke the Drazi tongue."

"I have a decent command of it," said Marcus. "The problem is their grammar is very strange. Haven't you ever wondered why they communicate so haltingly? They're not used to ours, we're not used to theirs. We both make the attempt and come to some common ground." He snorted. "You should try that, sometime."

"Fantastic," drawled Neroon. "So we'll sound like simpletons."

"No," said Marcus mulishly. "I'll sound like a simpleton, and you'll sound like an arse who's too good to bother learning a single word of another race's language unless he absolutely needs to. Little wonder you know English. I'm astounded you don't make us converse in Fik out of principle."

"Your Fik is objectively disastrous," said Neroon.

"See? There you go again," said Marcus, gesturing with his hand. "At least I'm trying."

"You certainly -"

"And don't give me that trying my patience thing," Marcus said, "you've already used that joke." Neroon shut up but smirked. "It wasn't even funny the first time," he added.

"What I was going to say," said Neroon, "before I was so rudely interrupted is that you certainly place great importance on trying. How about succeeding?"

"Have you ever even spoken to a Drazi?" asked Marcus. "Ever, in your life? You get points for trying, with them. Because a lot of people don't make an effort."

Neroon grew strangely quiet.

"I knew it," said Marcus. "You've never actually spoken to one."

"I have not had occasion," Neroon admitted. "You must remember that Warriors go where they are directed."

"You've been to Babylon 5 twice, that I know of," said Marcus. "You had to have at least jostled one in a crowd. You didn't even say excuse me, did you? That's lan suhrech, if you're curious." Marcus added a derisive laugh. "But of course, you aren't."

Then there was some silence. For a moment Marcus almost wondered if he had been too harsh. Why worry? Minbari skin was tough, and Neroon had to have received stronger words in his days. You didn't go through training with Sech Durhan without your weekly tongue-lashing. And someone taught sharpness to Neroon in the first place.

"There is much we don't know," said Neroon at last, a little softly. Marcus caught his eye and he
clarified, "About one another."

Nope, thought Marcus. Not dealing with Warrior Caste whataboutism today. He returned to his Drazi readings to make Neroon stew a little harder.

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Marcus had never felt so happy to see the void of space again when they exited the jumpgate nearest Zhabar in the Drazi Freehold. Three hours later they were approaching orbit, and an hour after that they had landed.

Parking was straightforward. The communications controls tower staff at Zhoshesh Dorallo were clearly surprised at the Minbari flyer, having expected to register another ship, but they had good English and understood readily the predicament that Marcus gave as excuse: that he had appointments on the planet and so did the Minbari he was travelling with, and that it had been simply expedient to travel together.

All their papers were otherwise in order. The Drazi reported back reading ID codes for Mikrine of the Starship Crafters. Neroon replied in the affirmative. Thanks for the warning, thought Marcus. He could've used the information about Neroon's bloody legend half a day ago.

Only when they finally got to their destination and became stationary in the docking bay did Neroon finally stand to retrieve his bag and rummage through it. He unlaced his gauntlets, then removed his gloves. Some part of this seemed unnaturally intimate to Marcus, to see a Warrior's bare hands, and he nearly turned away but held his ground out of daring and spite.

Neroon then unclipped the padding vestments and mantle from his shoulders and the plate from his chest. This revealed a cross-over belted tunic, black and lined in green, overtop simple loose black pants, tucked into knee-high black boots, all of which he exposed to Marcus' view for only a scant few seconds before he shrugged into an ankle-length robe the colour of gold-speckled sand with a subtle pattern on it, not unlike houndstooth. Overtop this he put a long surcoat in a warm brownish-red, bedecked with golden buttons, with the familiar stiff shoulders. It looked like something Lennier would wear, though Neroon fished out the hood from the robe to lie overtop the surcoat. After a moment's thought he drew the hood over his massive bonecrest.

It looked simultaneously ridiculous and lovely. But Marcus couldn't say that, because as handsome as the robes were, Neroon was clearly uncomfortable in them. Throughout all of this the denn'bok had remained holstered to his thigh, and underneath so many layers could not be seen: a hidden weapon. Marcus tried to see what dishonour there was in it, but failed. It was clever. It was a good idea. It was working really well.

"So," said Marcus, trying for levity, "Mikrine, is it?"

"Mikrine was my father's name," said Neroon simply, but heavily. "These are his robes. He was the cook, not I." He grimaced and huddled inside the hood. "Today, I am a liar."

This surprised Marcus. Nothing in Neroon's file had made mention of a Worker Caste father. In fact, it had been pretty adamantly stated that both his parents (unnamed, to Marcus' knowledge) had been Warrior Caste. Trying for comforting, Marcus put a hand on his shoulder - Neroon shrugged it off almost as fast. "The way I see it," said Marcus gently, "you more than anyone have the right to his name, and his occupation."

"Hm," said Neroon.
"On Earth," said Marcus, "people used to name themselves by their fathers and associate with their fathers' occupations all the time. It was extremely common. To call yourself your father's son with your father's trade was no less than the full honest truth. Some still do - in my friend's case, she uses it as her middle name!" It felt awkward to call Susan a friend when she was so much more to him than that, but Neroon didn't - and wouldn't ever - know her, so 'friend' would have to do. "So on that note, you've bent it cleverly."

"We are not on your Earth," said Neroon.

"No," agreed Marcus, "we're not. I'm just trying to make you feel better about yourself. If you'd bother listening to anything I have to say!"

"You have nothing to say," said Neroon, "you have done precious little but gibber away the entire trip, though the profile Entil'Zha Delenn sent me suggested that you were halfway intelligent. You have enough honour to claim you'll die for her, and yet not enough to understand that wearing these robes makes a clear mockery of both my father's traditions and my own."

Marcus glowered. "Is that why you dislike me so much?"

It was mostly rhetorical, but Neroon answered all the same, snapping viciously, "I dislike you because you are a painting whose colour bleeds past the lines." It seemed his patience had elapsed with his having to wear non-Warrior colours. "You are messy. Improper. I dislike you because you cannot, will not be defined. This is not a compliment," he added, shaking his head emphatically.

"I think it is one," said Marcus, secretly pleased.

"You would think that," muttered Neroon. "Keep your Human hands to yourself."

The apartment that had been rented for him was perhaps thirty minutes walk, although they picked up the keys at the port itself. They walked to the kiosk in stone silence. The fellow there, in charge of keys, looked them over. "<There are two of you>," he noticed.

"<Yes>," said Marcus.

"<The apartment contains only one bedroom>," the Drazi keymaster said. "<And only one set of keys.>"

"<Yes>," Marcus said again.

The keymaster smiled. "<Then>," he said, "<you are mates?>"

Marcus inhaled so quickly he brought on a fit of coughing. "No! God, no!" he croaked in English, then again in Drazi, "<No, we - not! Not mates!>"

"<We Drazi are very tolerant>," said the keymaster kindly.

"<Never mates - he - I - no mate!>" Marcus was losing his Drazi with the stress of this.

"What's he saying?" demanded Neroon at his shoulder.

"Nothing, shut up," snapped Marcus, "why are you standing so close? Go wait over there." Neroon threw him a nasty look in return.

"<Because there is only one bed>," explained the keymaster. "<And - not a bed for him. It's horizontal. There was only one person on this booking, and it was a Human. This was what was
"<Yes>," said Marcus, trying to calm himself, "<yes - change of plans. Short notice. You understand? We pay>," he added, stressing this bit, "<we pay money - two people.>"

"<Of course, and we can be amenable>," said the keymaster. "<If there were other rooms available - alas there are none. We would like to say, however, that we have generally speaking very limited alien facilities for him. Really, only for you, Sir. Humans, we are used to. We are better prepared. But his kind - not at all. We just don't see many Minbari.>"


"<You mean to have a second bed in the apartment?>" The keymaster seemed sceptical, and Marcus' hopes sank. "<Unfortunately the rooms are quite small. We would put one on the balcony, if that one does not mind the dust.>"

He probably would. Good lord, this was so much more trouble than it was worth. "<We adapt>," said Marcus. "<No two bed. Only one bed.>" He grumbled, "<We adapt.>"

The keymaster smiled, encouragingly. "<It is not a long stay,>" he said, "<and if you extend it, there may be other rooms. At the moment there is a celebration in the city ->""


"<Precisely! A very merry occasion. In perhaps a week's time, there will likely be openings for two-room apartments.>"

What was it Neroon had said? If words alone could make it so, they wouldn't need the grace of the universe. Too bloody true.

The first thing Marcus did upon getting to the outside was look up at that beautiful orange glow of sky - it was dusk in Zhoshesh Dorallo by the time they had landed - and take a nice deep breath of real air. Not recycled and processed from a station, not generated from atmosphere tanks.

This failed, because his ribs were still in massive amounts of pain. The reason for pain soon joined him. "Is it always this hot?" Neroon complained.

You ruin everything, thought Marcus.

It was barely thirty degrees. Warm, certainly, but it was going to get a lot worse tomorrow afternoon. "You're the one who's wearing four layers," said Marcus. "Put the hood down."

"If I do that, they will be able to tell from the set of my eyes that I am not who I say I am," he retorted.

They began to make their way through the streets. More and more Drazi joined them as the evening meals concluded, and soon it became difficult to navigate. "How can the streets be so overcrowded," asked Neroon. Two more blocks, thought Marcus, then we can take some side-streets.

The side-streets were as narrow as the main streets. While they were less crowded by number, they were filled with small groups and gatherings around food stands and shops. It was ten times worse than the Zocalo. It was a slow process of diffusion that took fifteen minutes longer than it should have, which was fifteen minutes longer than Marcus would have liked, carrying his luggage despite his ribs (Neroon couldn't take responsibility for his actions by helping out with Marcus' bags - why, no, of course not, for Neroon was too busy complaining about the heat and the personal space..."
concerns that Drazi utterly lacked).

Once they got to the apartment and Marcus opened the door, Neroon grew very quiet. "Oh," he said at last. "I see what you were shouting at the keymaster about."

"Yes. And I'm taking it," said Marcus flatly. He threw his bag down next to the single bed, and gingerly stretched himself out. It was wonderfully comfortable, which was excellent, because sleeping in the flyer had been hell on his ribs. "God, this is heaven," he sighed.

"So no one called ahead and told the Drazi there would be two of us," said Neroon.

"The denn'shah was less than ten days ago," replied Marcus.

"Yes, well," admitted Neroon. "Your species never before seemed so hardy. I am surprised you yourself were able to rebound so quickly after such an engagement as ours."

Marcus would never get used to Neroon's specific choice of words. By this point he was pretty sure Neroon's linguistic skills were near native - English was after all far easier a language than Fik or Adronato. But the drawling way he spoke implied insults. Was everything a back-handed compliment?

"Where would they even put another bed?" asked Marcus. "There's hardly room for the first."

He propped himself up onto his elbows to take stock of the place. Neroon did much the same.

Like all Drazi apartments, the balcony was expansive, easily three times the floor space of the enclosed area, which was only really enough for the bed and a door to the small bathroom unit, which was off to the right of the bed, across the room from the door. All the furniture for a living room, dining room, and kitchen were on the balcony - including a modest cooking pit, and a waist-high refrigerator under a shelving unit, on top of which was a hot plate. Great, thought Marcus, Neroon can put his cooking to good use.

"This is the strangest shower unit I have ever seen," called Neroon from the bathroom. "How does one operate this?"

It was probably a steam-enabled shower-head for Drazi scales. "I refuse to get up from this bed," said Marcus.

"Fine, I am sure I'll figure it out," Neroon snapped. "You aren't hungry?"

I'm not the bull-headed idiot who didn't eat for two days, he thought. "I'll be fine," Marcus said instead. "Right now I need sleep. Cook or shower or whatever, just don't disturb me until tomorrow morning's appointments."

"Is there an alarm -"

"The heat is its own alarm," said Marcus. "We'll wake up naturally around half-eight. Goodnight."

There was blessed silence, which Marcus took as acceptance. He was midway through toeing off his shoes and kicking them to the floor before he heard Neroon's sarcastic reply, "I shall just meditate out here, then."

"Voon al khel eshra," muttered Marcus. He was asleep within minutes.

Chapter End Notes
Hope Neroon likes sleeping on the floor!

The chapters are going to get a little longer, so I hope you'll forgive me for only posting one this week. Also the extra Minbari bits are (mostly) my invention; I have a Fik grammar sketch which I should probably upload sometime!
Neroon had not lied about the lack of meditation he commonly did, because when Marcus woke the next morning, he found his new Star Rider partner fast asleep, curled up in a ball on the floor with all the spare pillows from the balcony furniture propped up to simulate a 45 degree angle. It would be endearing if it weren't so pathetic and also *Neroon*.

"Some bodyguard you are," said Marcus. "I know from first-hand experience that's not a valid Minbari meditation position." Sech Turval had been *most* unimpressed.

Neroon stirred. "It can't be morning already," he mumbled. "It was only cool enough to sleep three hours ago."

Marcus got out of bed on the side that didn't have Neroon on it and queried the computer, wall-mounted next to the front door, on the wall opposite the bathroom. He checked messages at the same time. "Eight twenty-three," he read. "And you've got an appointment in a little over thirty minutes with your new cooking instructor."

Neroon glared. "I do not think Delenn intended me to accompany you all the way to the Drazi Freehold to waste time."

"You're going, to keep up the legend. If I need you, I'll call Li Mrakto."

Not to mention, there were things that Marcus accomplished a lot more easily without a looming Minbari next to him. As a matter of fact, Marcus had no idea how he was supposed to get anything done while dragging Neroon along, especially if Neroon would do nothing but complain about the Drazi or about Marcus' honourless Human ways. He could be useful in a fight, but Marcus hadn't intended on getting into fights - he had wanted to keep a low profile. Moreover, all his old mining contacts from when Marcus ran the company knew what he thought of the Minbari back then - didn't like doing business with them, because they'd slaughtered his people and only stopped on a whim, so he overcharged them and for some reason the bony buggers paid without a word - so to meet up with his old friends with a Minbari in tow would be completely out of character. Those who didn't know he'd gone through Ranger training - which was all of them - would know something was up. He'd try his parents' contacts first.

"That is ridiculous," said Neroon.

"That's business. Now, rise and shine, make yourself presentable enough or hide away on the balcony, as I've got to call Delenn -"

"I have already contacted the Entil'Zha," Neroon said. He did sit up though, to tug his Warrior uniform tunic into place and stretch away the muscle stiffness of the night. Marcus watched him arch his back and extend his chest forward with no little envy.

"Really," said Marcus, surprised and no little concerned. "I was asleep so you needed someone else to argue with, is that it?"

"I would not bother her for something of so little consequence," said Neroon. Oh, but I'm fair game for that, thought Marcus dryly. "Simply to inform her that we had arrived safely. She said if you needed anything more, to contact her, but that otherwise she would expect the next update when you
feel you have completed your mission. As she specified no particular date, I take it you don't often observe deadlines."

"Well," said Marcus. "It's good to know that when your culinary skills fail, you can always fall back on your secretarial work." Neroon glowered, but Marcus pressed on. "The next time, how about you leave dealing with my superior officer to me?"

"For the duration of this mission, she is also *my* superior. Besides! You fell asleep without a word!" said Neroon. "And you sleep like the dead, except the dead do not snore."

"I can't *breathe* properly because *someone* broke my ribs!" Marcus gestured between them. "This, by the way? This hurts to talk like this!"

"And yet you optimise shrieking at me over your own pain," said Neroon without sympathy.

How Neroon could be so condescending after waking up on the floor on a rumpled bed of pillows with his uniform askew, Marcus could not figure out. He chose to ignore Neroon's last barb and made his way over to the computer to access the StellarCom application.

"Anla'shok! I already told you," began Neroon.

"I'm calling someone else," snapped Marcus, and put in the number for Josheem Lrkta, who might still reside in Zhoshesh Dorallo.

As luck would have it, he did. Josheem Lrkta appeared, looking exactly the same as he had when Marcus had first met him over twenty-five years ago. "Li Dro Lrkta," Marcus said, bowing, "good morning - it's been awhile, but perhaps you might remember me, I'm -"

"Marcus!" said Li Dro Lrkta, "Cole Mining! Yes?"


"Yes," said Marcus, ignoring Neroon, "my father's company. You were warehouse manager back then, if I recall."

"You - ten years old! So tiny skinny boy!" said Li Dro Lrkta. "But fighty! I approved." Neroon, Marcus could see, had returned to remain just out of view of the computer video feed. He was propped up on the threshold to the balcony, covering his mouth to hide his grin, but his shoulders shook with the laughter. I will *destroy* him, thought Marcus angrily.

"Yes," said Marcus. "Listen, would you happen to know someone who owns a large enough warehouse with a good-sized space?"

"I know a place," said Li Dro Lrkta, "is mine. But - is part underground. Good?"

"That's even better," said Marcus. "The company would be willing to rent such a space and pay you handsomely. Could we meet?"

"Before lunch," said Li Dro Lrkta. "West corner, quadrant nine and thirteen - you know? An hour from now?"

Marcus knew the place, it was a twelve-minute walk away. "That's perfect," he said. "We'll see you then."
"We?" said Li Dro Lrkta.

"We?" asked Neroon, brightening.

"Sorry. I mean to say, I'll see you then. Alone," Marcus clarified, and disconnected. "What?" he said, to Neroon. "Don't look at me like that - you've got to learn about spices."

Neroon rolled his eyes. "I suppose I ought not complain," he said archly. "This way I don't have to watch while you lie to your dear old friends about why you are really here, Anla'shok." And that was in a nutshell why Marcus was eager to get rid of his Minbari companion the moment he could.

"Thanks for the reminder," he retorted. "Don't call me Anla'shok around the Drazi."

"Tiny, skinny, fighty boy it is," said Neroon. "Your friend made an apt measure of you, and evidently nothing's changed."

"Be serious!" snapped Marcus, though Neroon's expression told Marcus he was. "I can't have people knowing this is Ranger business."

"On the off-chance you actually bother to bring me around in the city," he drawled.

Marcus waited around until Neroon was dressed (once again in four layers with his hood drawn - he wondered how long this would last, because Drazi liked low-heat meats, stewed for hours, and didn't believe in climate-controlled anything, and outside it was 38 degrees in the shade) and walked him to his appointment. Even at nine in the morning, the crowds were already bad enough that they knocked them together frequently. With every step, they brushed up against one another. Marcus barely held his tongue from snapping at Neroon. Neroon had no such compunction. "Can you not grant me perhaps a foot's distance," he grumbled. "Your infernal hair is in my face."

"Would you rather be pressed up against the Drazi?" asked Marcus. "Scales or hair, it's your choice."

"I am already pressed up against the Drazi on all other sides in this mob," Neroon said, grimacing.

Neroon's new instructor was a lot more chipper than he was, not that Neroon was setting the bar too high. "Starship Crafter!" she cooed in a thick accent, positively beaming. "Good, so good! I show you some spices - taste, if you want - and maybe you tell, about preservation? I read articles, Minbari journals, tricks to stop foodrot, on long-term ship."

Hot steam billowed from inside her ground-level dwelling. "Yes," said Neroon glumly. "I will - try."

"You're going to have to do a lot better than trying, Mikrine," said Marcus. "How about succeeding?"

The look Neroon threw him was positively filthy. Marcus gave him a nice big grin in return.

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An hour rolled around and then another half, as Marcus waited in the city, but whether Li Dro Lrkta had ever been late before was news to Marcus. All he remembered was a name and a big Drazi fellow with very shiny scales - Dad had taken care of everything else, back then. Probably, Dad hadn't minded a little tardiness, for according to the archival records, which Marcus still maintained, Li Dro Lrkta had been employed with them for the entire year they were on the Drazi mining colony Heptharg III.

"Marcus!" cried a voice. Li Dro Lrkta strode up to him from across the street. He took Marcus' hand
in an Earth-style handshake and then gripped his entire forearm in the Drazi version of the same. "So large now! You still work for Cole Mining? Is nice - family business!"

"Er, yeah, you know, about that," said Marcus, uncomfortably. Neroon's ethics about honour had weighed on him since the beginning of the trip, and his barbed remarks about lying to old friends were the straw to break the camel's back. "I have to be honest with you. It's - it's not for the mining company. The company's been defunct for a year and a bit now, after what happened on Arisia."

"Your colony, Arisia," said Li Dro Lrkta, sounding sympathetic.

"Quite right, I was Colony Chief," said Marcus. "Well - there was ... an attack, as I think you heard. And I've joined up with a group who wants to stop the beings who attacked the colony. Actually, I joined for a number of reasons -"

Li Dro Lrkta's eyes narrowed. "Which group?" he asked.

"You wouldn't know it, likely - it's this Minbari group," Marcus explained.

"Rangers," said Li Dro Lrkta.

"Why - yes," he replied. "You know of them?"

Li Dro Lrkta held up a finger. "Sorry," he said, and he looked it, "Rangers - changes things. I can't sell. Sorry."

That was a bit fast for Marcus' liking. "What about renting?" he asked.

Li Dro Lrkta shook his head. "No rent," he said. "Sorry."

Marcus peered at him. Shadow involvement, it felt like. But - surely not Lrkta? He wasn't the type. "Can I ask why?"

"Ask, yes," said Li Dro Lrkta, shrugging, "answer, maybe not."

"Someone's stalling you from above," Marcus said. "Is it your warehouse or theirs?"

"Mine," Li Dro Lrkta replied, "but - I promise support. Politician. They ask favour, no contact Minbari Rangers. Maybe Rangers come to Freehold. Yes - this I can't control. But I help Rangers - no good. I cannot."

"And you want to support this politician because his rival is worse?" Marcus guessed.

"I want this politician, seat on council," said Li Dro Lrkta. "Good politician! But more important: if not politician, then Lrkta only remaining labour party. Then Lrkta seat on council. I don't want. I really don't want! I am too busy, other projects. You know?"

"Can you tell me who the politician is?" asked Marcus.

But Li Dro Lrkta shook his head again. "I already say too much," he said.

Li Dro Lrkta didn't have any more information he was willing to give up (even if Marcus offered to buy him a drink), but he hinted that a drink was a good idea to buy further leads and pointed Marcus towards a tavern. When Marcus stepped inside he realised why: the patrons were taking early lunch, or late breakfast, or a mix of the two. Judging by the furniture, the decor, and the food being served, it was a far more upscale place than it had looked from the outside, and many of the patrons were in the Drazi equivalent of business suits. Of course, thought Marcus, for nearby there was the Justice
Centrum. They wouldn't go to any old pub.

He took a seat at the bar, next to a Drazi who was in the middle of reading an internal finance report. They looked up as Marcus sat down, and gave a pleasant but non-engaging smile.

"<Hello>," said Marcus.

"What's your business, then," replied the Drazi - higher-voiced than he was expecting, and in very good English.

He grinned. You had to love people who were straight to the point. "Information," he said, and offered, "Buy you a drink?" The Drazi leaned towards him with a much more handsome smile.

This was Janella Xortl, a relatively young temp worker currently serving as staff at the Justice Centrum while someone was away on parental leave due to the holiday. A lot of the other people in the tavern were in the same position, and Janella was very happy to be bought drinks in exchange for what she felt amounted to nothing more than water cooler gossip. Marcus too was happy to buy her drinks - she was decently attractive, by Drazi standards. Maybe by Human standards too, he realised, if he would be so open-minded - she had long dramatic eyelashes, and her scales were a glittery dark silver colour. She must have newly moulted.

Janella knew who the politician was: the current Finance Minister Gorrom of the local labour party. He was running for Labour First Minister and was in fact excited about the role, but someone was on his back. "He's had complicated affairs in the past," she said.

"Ah, the old 'your wife slept with the Gaim ambassador' trick? That's an old one," said Marcus.

"Oh no," replied Janella, "he has no problems sleeping with the Gaim - one of his brood is half-Yolu." And it impressed upon Marcus how much contact he'd had recently, with either Humans (who, Babylon 5 excepted, were quickly becoming anti-alien) and Minbari (who, Delenn excepted, were culturally anti-alien). He'd forgotten that the rest of the galaxy didn't always ascribe to those mores. I've been hanging around the Minbari too much, he thought.

"Then what are these affairs?" he asked.

Janella winced. "What precisely they are, I don't know, but - and this is strange - his former two aides went missing three months ago. Three weeks ago, they were found - or what's left of them was found - in the hills outside the city, up along the mountain."

"They were attacked?"

"We can't be sure. Forensic evidence has been minimal... it wasn't poison, it wasn't strangulation. We know that they died in pain because of the chemicals in the decomposition but we deduced that already because their scales were peeled off."

"Grisly," said Marcus. "So people suspect this Gorrom fellow?"

"He wasn't on good terms with one of the aides," said Janella, thinking back, "the purple one - but the other was green, and they were very close."

"Is green versus purple even of any consequence outside the appointment of the Shadak?" asked Marcus.

"Ordinarily, no," replied Janella. "But this time, the groups have remained hostile to one another. Green or purple, labour or centre, what sports teams you support." She waved her hand, dismissive,
which suggested to Marcus that it was gossip she found relevant but not a viewpoint she held. "People are staying close to their own and bickering with rivals."

"That must cause friction," said Marcus.

"Indeed," said Janella, "and it's one of the campaign promises of the Centre party - to quell frictions before they escalate. In some places they already have escalated. Phinti for example."

Phinti was a small town that lay on the other side of the mountain range, four days’ travel from Zhoshesh Dorallo itself. "What's changed?"

"I think it's because this year, the Drazi ran afoul of you Humans," said Janella. "There were incidents on that space station -"

"Babylon 5," supplied Marcus.

"That's the one. It's under Human jurisdiction. I'm not surprised they didn't like our ways. But to have put a stop to it was culturally invasive. You understand the position of the Drazi."

"Right," said Marcus. Susan had done the best she could. Privately, Marcus thought it was a brilliant solution - if the green Drazi were honour-bound to follow the green-sashed leader, and the purple Drazi had to follow the purple-sashed leader, take both sashes and wear them, and exert your changes as you liked. Susan had had no idea at the time that taking the sashes implicated herself in a position of power, but from what she'd told Marcus, she'd been able to defuse the situation with minimal casualties, and the Drazi on Babylon 5 had thought it a hoot. Why, they named a drink after her! There was no greater Drazi praise.

Figures, thought Marcus, his cheeks warming, they know someone special when they meet her. They'd likely follow her into battle and thank her for the opportunity. Marcus knew he would.

"Now," continued Janella, "for Gorrom to commit such an act himself is - technically possible. Gorrom isn't weak. No Drazi is! But I don't think he could have done it. He is not the type to lose his temper unprovoked, and one of the aides was a friend. Green does not fight green. Green certainly doesn't kill green. No, it's not that Gorrom had anything to do with it. It's simply bad timing in politics."

"Interesting," Marcus said. "Thank you for this. Tell me - if I wanted to find this Finance Minister Gorrom myself, where could I?"

"Oh, you would need an appointment," said Janella. "And he is booked solid for weeks."

"Well, perhaps I'll stop by and see if he might have five minutes," said Marcus.

Janella shook her head. "Perhaps you might consider buying me another drink," she said, and winked.

Marcus did, and after she'd downed it she said, "There. Now I have an appointment with him just after lunch, even though it's a holiday and I won't get paid for it. But look at me, I am simply too drunk. You should go instead! And I'll reschedule for after the holidays."

Marcus arrived at the Justice Centrum in time. He considered placing a call to Neroon's cooking instructor to borrow 'Mikrine' for a spot of business, but in the end remained alone. Gorrom would be alone in his office, and if he were an agent of the Shadows, what help could Neroon really be in this capacity? He would only be helpful if Marcus were attacked, and Marcus would only be attacked if they found out that he wasn't here for Cole Mining but for the Rangers. If Marcus didn't want to pick
a fight and risk escalating already difficult Drazi tensions, he'd have to lie, and Death-Before-Dishonour Neroon would want no hand in that.

If Gorrom couldn't have done it himself, then he wasn't a likely agent of the Shadows. But there wasn't much way to tell. It would fit the profile - *what do you want*, isn't that the question they always ask? And here's an ambitious politician.

Some part of Marcus remembered Delenn saying: *I don't know how to predict Neroon - we are not friends - political rivals at best - he has ... much ambition -*

Marcus filed that away for later.

Gorrom, when they met, was likely not the Shadow agent, but he was instantly suspicious of Marcus. "You are *not* Li Xortl," he said. "Get out of my office."

"It's alright," said Marcus, "I can protect you. I can help."

"I don't need your help!" said Gorrom. "I have enough help! Leave my office at once!"

"I didn't mean to insult you," said Marcus immediately. Gorrom was a rather large green Drazi, after all, and there wasn't a great amount of fighting room in his office, which held a large desk and several comfortable looking chairs, and was lined with bookcases. Marcus held up his hands and kept a safe distance, but one he could easily cross to get within striking distance of Gorrom, if he needed. "Of course, you can defend yourself. But you look nervous. What has you nervous has me nervous. I don't see Drazi nervous, ever. Something is wrong, here."

Gorrom narrowed his eyes to venomous slits. "Are you with the Minbari Rangers?" he asked.

This time Marcus wised up and lied. "I'm not Minbari," he said, "you can feel for yourself if you like, the hair's all natural. No bones here. No, see, I own a mining company, we're looking to expand. In fact I spent some time here as a boy in your mining colonies. But that was awhile ago. I'd need workers, so I've come to get a bit of the lay of the land as regards hiring practices and union laws."

Gorrom relaxed, and they proceeded to business, though when Marcus asked (feigning ignorance) who were the Rangers, and why he had such a problem with them, Gorrom's answer was telling. "I am only doing what I was told," he said. "I don't want to pick a fight with the Minbari, either, but I'm in a very precarious position at the moment."

"Your former aides," supplied Marcus.

Gorrom practically deflated. "Has *everyone* heard?"

"You did have something to do with that, didn't you?" Marcus realised.

"I wanted - only something very small," said Gorrom, beseeching. "I had ideas, and the leadership of the labour party was ... unwilling to see them through. You must understand, I had the best intentions!"

The road to hell is always paved with them, thought Marcus. "Go on," he said.

"Well... this fellow approached me sometime, about half a cycle ago. And he said he was willing to make it happen that the party leadership would falter, and there would be room for me. For a few of us, he said. He said all he wanted was some information about a base of Rangers."
Zagros VII, realised Marcus. "Who was this fellow? What did he look like?"

"He was Centauri," said Gorrom. "A lord Refa, he called himself. I do not deal with Centauri, now. Not at all! And I did not realise what he would do. At once, a blockade, and then an attack! On undisputed Drazi territory! But my two aides soon put it together - one blamed me for my doing, the other saw it differently. The one who blamed me said that good people - good Drazi - died on Zagros VII because of the information I passed to the Centauri. And if word of that got out, it would be very bad for my position. If I lose my position -"

"Li Dro Lrkta would have to fill it," said Marcus.

"And Lrkta does not want to. Lrkta would be - excuse my saying it - terrible for the job. Lrkta will not implement my ideas. Lrkta has no drive!"

"He's a bit too honest for politics," agreed Marcus. "So, the aides?"

"Another fellow came by. I did not know him. Not Centauri. I would not meet with the Centauri after that. Not at all! This one was Drazi. He called himself Ka Phor, and he said that his associates would remove my problem with my aides. Well! I thought, fantastic, please do so. And then they turned up dead. You must understand, I never so much as planted the idea, not once - for to think, over such a middling, small thing! But he seemed to think I was better off and that he had done me a great favour. And moreover, though I did not need its reminding, that if I should speak of it I would lose not only my position but much more. So you must understand, when people come to say they will help me - I am suspicious now."

Interesting. "If I wanted to find this Ka Phor, where might I do that?" asked Marcus.

Gorrom shook his head. "Do not try," he warned. "I expect he'll find you. You've already asked too many questions."

"Has he bugged your office, then?" Marcus said. He cast a look around - nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but with fancy technology - Shadow technology - it could be hard to tell.

Gorrom wouldn't confirm it. "If that's all," he said, showing Marcus the door, "your time as Li Xortl has elapsed."

Marcus took a long wandering walk, hoping that Ka Phor would come and find him, but either it took time for him to receive the message, or he was put off by the crowds (which the narrow streets of Zhoshesh Dorallo never lacked). Marcus even waited in the Drazi version of a café - a plethora of tables under an expansive overhang of twisted vines that provided some shelter during the hottest part of the day. A more open invitation couldn't have presented itself. But no Drazi approached him. Finally he gave up and went home to access the computer. Maybe it'd have better leads on this Ka Phor.

Neroon had not yet returned to the hotel, but that was to be expected given that there was only one set of keys, and it was in Marcus' possession. He took advantage of the peace and quiet - and privacy - to shower, and then do some research on the computer. There, he noticed something.

At quarter to ten last night, about an hour after they'd arrived at the hotel, a call had been placed to Minbar. "Query recipient," said Marcus, and the computer replied, Minbar. Tuzanor. Anla'shok Base Camp. That would've been the call to Delenn.

A second call had been placed nearly four hours later, at half one in the morning. "Query recipient," said Marcus again, and this time the computer replied, Recipient unknown. Sector unknown. Call
A third call had been placed earlier today around noon, when Marcus was waiting for Janella's appointment with Finance Minister Gorrom. Marcus queried the recipient again, but felt he already knew, and the computer confirmed what he suspected: another re-routing through Neroon's personal link device, registering its location in Zhoshesh Dorallo as with his instructor, to an unknown recipient, in an unknown location.

It was likely Neroon's superior officer, thought Marcus. What was he doing keeping constant tabs on Neroon? The Shai Alyt was not supposed to get involved in Drazi affairs. Or Ranger affairs, for that matter. But it sounded like Neroon was keeping him abreast of their plans. Unless Neroon was lying to him - but that was something Neroon wouldn't dare. This meant that the Shai Alyt of the Warrior Caste knew possibly everything about Marcus' movements and, through them, Delenn's plans not simply in the Drazi Freehold but on its homeworld. Funny thing for the caste that didn't want to get in the war to do. Funny thing for the caste that had such problems with Delenn as Entil'Zha to do.

Marcus could be wrong about this. Perhaps it was a partner or a lover.

Unfortunately - and Marcus verified this by checking again - Neroon's file had made mention of neither.

Neroon's file had also made no mention of a Worker Caste father, however. There it was plainly: Warrior Caste Mother, Warrior Caste Father, both Star Rider Clan. No siblings were mentioned.

How can he be so against lying if he does it all the time, Marcus wondered. The amount of mental gymnastics that would have justified these omissions - for what reason were they needed?

One thing was certain: at this rate, Marcus' own machinations would fall victim to Neroon's. They had to clear the air, or their plans would start running into each other. "Why can't we simply be on the same page," he muttered to himself, and instructed the computer to place a call to Neroon's instructor. The temptation to call him out on his trickery and call his link directly was strong, but until Marcus could figure out what exactly Neroon's game was, he'd do better to keep his cards close.

"Mikrine," said Marcus, with false brightness, when the connection established. "I'm done for the day, so whenever you are too, come back and meet me at the café outside the hotel."

"Good," came Neroon's exasperated voice. "It's about time. This day has been ridiculous, the heat is unbearable -"

"I'm sure. Listen, bring your homework, I'm starving. We've got loads to discuss." And he punched the disconnect hard without waiting for Neroon's answer, hoping his outrage registered on the other end.

The real reason he wanted to meet at the café outside the hotel - rather than buzz Neroon up, which he could also do - was because there was a public access terminal with a StellarCom connection that Marcus could use. Unlike Neroon, Marcus had a bit more experience in covering his tracks. He supposed that unlike Neroon, Marcus had a bit more experience being generally dodgy, and it was clear what Neroon thought of that. Marcus used it to place a few calls about a few business items. Then, while he waited, he bought a bottle of water for Neroon and a Jovian sunspot for himself (the hottest new drink, imported from Babylon 5 - though the Drazi ordinarily poured a shot of Bor'Kann on top and served it set ablaze).

Neroon arrived moments later, breathing heavily, with two takeaway boxes that he threw onto the
table in his frustration. "These crowds could exhaust the most patient priest," he snarled.

And you're a far cry from that, thought Marcus. He pointed to the water. "For you. If you're lucky, it's probably not too warm."

Neroon took the water and drank deeply. Only after coming up for air did he mutter a quick thanks, as though it pained him to do so. "You know," said Marcus. "I really don't understand what is so very terrible about the heat for you. You lot don't sweat, so you can't possibly be chafing."

"I do not even know what you mean by that," said Neroon.

"You don't want to. At any rate, it doesn't explain why you're having such a bad time."

Neroon rolled up his sleeves. Then, against his better judgement, he bent and rolled up the trousers beneath his long Worker Caste robes, too, as far as the knees. This was not the most Minbari skin Marcus had ever seen before - he'd seen more than one get changed at the Ranger base during training. Inesval for example had never been particularly shy, and had been willing to answer most of Marcus' questions about their differences, occasionally with demonstrations that only Marcus found awkward. But something about the fact that it was Neroon put him nearly off his drink. Neroon ignored his question and tipped the water into his hands, then applied it to his skin, spreading it liberally around. He sighed with some relief.

"Great," said Marcus, "now you've no water because you had to bathe in the middle of the street. I'll not buy you another."

"I am not bathing!" Neroon protested. He leaned down and smoothed the water on his calves - rather more muscular than Inesval's, though Marcus had expected that. "It helps with the blood circulation. You apply colder water to the skin, it evaporates, leaves the circulating blood cooler, lowers blood temperature." With a huff, Neroon returned the bottle the table and slammed it down hard enough to rattle Marcus' Jovian Sunspot.

Marcus watched this tantrum with a neutral gaze and came to a realisation. "Is - that's literally the process of why we sweat," he said. "We have that function built in to our bodies. Our terrible, useless, inferior Human bodies. Are you saying this is something we do better than you?"

Neroon's eyes were comically wide as he rolled down the sleeves of his robes, and he was definitely blushing - not just the blueish bits on the top of the fore-facing spike that extended down to his forehead which had gone cerulean, but also his normally bloodless cheeks, which looked more mottled than normal. "No," he snapped.

"Are you saying we're more evolved?" Marcus teased.

"I did not say that," Neroon said haltingly. "You can - keep your - perspiration - and your - moist flesh."

Would that Neroon never say moist flesh again in his life in the presence of Marcus. "I can't believe we tolerate heat better than you do," said Marcus. He laughed. "This is unbelievable."

"You do no such thing! This is simply -" Neroon realised he was drawing attention with his raised voice. He breathed in deep and fanned himself ineffectually with his hand, then tried again. "Minbari can handle heat, in small amounts, as the thickness of our skin acts as an insulation. But its insulatory properties are, evidently, not perfect. Minbar was frozen for much of our evolution. Since we so rarely leave Minbar, or the ships, Minbari don't need to be able to handle heat for extended periods of time."
Ah. "So what's all this, then?" asked Marcus, gesturing around. "Your idea of a vacation?"

"Absolutely not, this is a test of my patience," he spat.

"Which you're failing," supplied Marcus.

Neroon growled, and his glare spoke volumes, but he said nothing.

That was enough poking the polar bear for now. Marcus drained his drink and hopped off the bar stool. He clapped a hand on Neroon's shoulder in a friendly pat and Neroon winced, jerking his body out of Marcus' touch. "Come on, maybe it'll be cooler in the apartment," said Marcus, knowing that it wouldn't be, since heat rose, and they were on the eighth floor.

But at least in the safety of the apartment, past the threshold of the doors, Neroon could remove the Worker Caste wear, which he did immediately, shrugging out of the clothes. He had a little more trouble with the fastenings on the ankle-length robe. "This damned infernal seaming," he grunted, his fingers busy at his neck, and when he had finally liberated himself from them, he hauled them over his shoulders and pitched them into the corner where they fell in a heap. A second later he had undone the heavy buckle that kept his black Warrior Caste tunic closed and tore the material off his shoulders, breathing deeply at last. "Marginally better," he drawled, and then he began to pull at the neckline of his undershirt.

Shirtless Neroon was more than Marcus could manage. God, don't let him strip further, thought Marcus, his cheeks uncomfortably warm. He turned his attention to the takeaway boxes, on the dinner table on the balcony. "So what'd you bring me?" he asked.

"Larger one is a Morklen stew on grain, the other is a Runan deep-fry. It took all Li Mrakto's shrout oil."

"Oh, I know this dish," said Marcus. He found two sets of Drazi utensils in the kitchen drawers - a flat wedge in a semi-circular shape that pushed food onto a second, shallow, spoon-like tool - and tucked in. "That's not bad, actually," he decided. He thought for sure it'd taste like flarn, which in Marcus' opinion was somewhere between the texture of mushy peas and mashed soybeans.

"Yes, well, I told you I could cook," muttered Neroon. "Eat your fill of it, or not. I don't care. I am not hungry. If you need me, I shall be in the shower, trying to return to a normal operating temperature."

"I won't need you," said Marcus, his mouth full.

"Good," Neroon retorted.

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Neroon emerged (having dressed, thankfully, in his basic black fatigues) a full hour later, after which Marcus had eaten everything and was halfway through a print copy of that day's Dorallo Daily, which featured an in-depth political science report about an alarming populist threat galvanising both centre and labour voters. Neroon was not making any special effort to sneak around, but his footsteps came more softly than before. He took a seat across from Marcus at the dinner table on the balcony. Marcus did not look up.

"Sorry I ate all the food," lied Marcus, who was not sorry in the least.

"I said you could," replied Neroon. "My instructor made certain I taste-tested everything we made. Trust me, I do not want any more." Marcus didn't reply, and an awkward silence reigned.
Eventually, Neroon broke it. "Well, will you tell me what you discovered? I thought you said we had much to discuss."

"Thinking about it," said Marcus.

There was more silence. Neroon got up, drank two refills of the water bottle by the sink, and then returned. "I ... must apologise," he said hesitantly. "I have been poor company, of late."

Only of late? "Is this because you want me to take you around more?" asked Marcus. "You hate your cooking classes that much, you'll get out of them by trying politeness?" He snorted. "I should've tried the silent treatment days ago."

"The silent treatment does not exactly come naturally to you," retorted Neroon. He sighed. "It is not about that. I - do not like the deceit. I will admit it freely. But this is not Minbar, and I am useless to you if I have to play along. In the end, that is also a deceit." He threw up his hands, indignant. "Valen's crest, Li Mrakto thinks I'm a Starship Crafter. Of all things!"

"She doesn't," replied Marcus. "I filled her in on some of the details."

"You - what?"

"She did wonder what a Minbari was doing here. Your kind's famous for not getting out much. I had to tell her something. So I said you're some other mundane guild who's using a cover story to travel abroad and see the sights," said Marcus. He put down the journal. "A lot of Drazi take a gap year; I let her think that's what you're doing. She doesn't realise it's not exactly a Minbari thing. Still thinks your name is Mikrine, still thinks you're Worker Caste. Listen, I know you don't like these lies. So I've been trying to keep you from it - so that you're not the liar, I am - and I don't see -"

"Anla'shok Cole, I am trying to tell you, it is not about that." Neroon reflected. "It is not solely about that. And apparently you have been lying to me - which is simply delightful - but beside the point. I am useless to your defence if I must keep up this deception. Granted that this does not justify lying but it may momentarily explain it until I do penance. And until such time ..." he grimaced. "I should attempt to be flexible. This place is not Minbar and it operates in different ways. I do recognise this. If nothing else, know that Delenn will do nothing for me if you do not return in the same state of health you left."

"Preferably my health state will have improved, seeing as that's generally the purpose of healing," said Marcus. "Well. I'll think about it."

"Think a little faster," Neroon snapped, "I spent all day in a steamhut for your amusement." Then he relaxed, although with some effort. "Sorry," he said, "this heat is getting to me. And I have been irritable and impatient all day."

"Oh, only all day," said Marcus.

Neroon shot him a filthy look. "Perhaps two days," he added.

"Apology accepted," says Marcus. "Didn't even think you'd give me one. You surprise me sometimes."

"There's your revelation for the day," said Neroon, and he smiled like he'd made a joke. Perhaps to Minbari tastes, he had. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in the chair, though that straight posture remained. "Minbari can play fair."

"I knew Minbari could," said Marcus, "just not the Warrior Caste."
Neroon raised an eyebrow. "Are we all so different?" he asked.

Marcus rolled his eyes. "Now, that's a trick question," he said. "No matter what I say, you'll accuse me of being ignorant. If I say no, it's because I don't know enough about the culture of the Warrior Caste. If I say yes, it's because I understate the degree to which the Warrior Caste belongs in Minbari society. Really, Neroon, what do you want me to say? I don't doubt that I don't know anything about the Warrior Caste and its ways, but you are never forthcoming with details, even when I'm willing to learn."

There was a beat of silence.

"I had not put that much thought into my question," said Neroon. "It was - mostly rhetorical. You needn't be so on guard."

Marcus laughed, derisive and bitter. "Says the fellow who broke my ribs."

"Says the fellow who told you that if he intended you harm, you'd see it coming," he replied. "I will not use trickery with a weapon. If I haven't one, then don't flinch."

"You just don't realise your words are a weapon," said Marcus.

"Ah, now there, you are wrong." Neroon had lowered his voice, but there was something dark and playful in its chuckling tone. Mischievous. Nearly flirtatious, if Marcus didn't know better. "I'm well aware of what my words can do, Anla'shok Cole."

We could almost be friends like this, thought Marcus. He remembered what Lennier said: *we may look like you, but we are not you.* Marcus had to remember that... But the similarities were so deceptive. And in the end, it was a lot easier to identify a *we-ness* between them, to open up the circle of Human society to bring Minbari into the fold, as though they were just Humans with full-body alopecia and a fondness for strange headgear.

If only the Warrior Caste were willing to do the same. If only they realised that to include them was not an insult, that Humans didn't place them on their level to bring Minbari down, or to lift Humans up. Merely to welcome, and open their arms to one another.

Then again, if Neroon had wanted to keep him at arms length, he wouldn't have spoken like this. He wouldn't have bothered apologising. Surely?

And it was possible he'd find out more about Neroon's plans, if Neroon thought Marcus trusted him. Winning Neroon's trust - or friendship - would be difficult. Flying under the radar of Neroon's hubris and assumptions about Humans would be fantastically easy.

Marcus chanced it. "My day was a little more interesting than yours ..." he began, and launched into an explanation of everything he'd seen.

*Almost* everything.

Chapter End Notes

Finally we meet some of our Drazi friends! Well, Marcus does. Neroon is busy Suffering.
thanks so much to everyone for your thoughts and kudos and everything :D I didn't think anybody would be very interested so late after the heyday but I'm thrilled to see there are still many of us around <3
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

content warning: there's a fight scene and it gets a tidge bloody. We begin to earn that Canon-Typical Violence tag...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The following morning dawned too early. Marcus told Neroon (who slept yet again on the floor) that he'd be requiring his services at noon, and that he would be taking them both to meet with Ka Phor, who had contacted him.

This was a lie. Ka Phor had done nothing of the sort. But Marcus was intent on viewing whatever remained of the scene, if he couldn't view those bodies, and it'd keep Neroon happy to take him along. More importantly, he needed Neroon to feed that lie about their plans to whoever it was he was contacting. Maybe then he could deduce who it was Neroon was talking to.

It was too peculiar. Ka Phor absolutely had to have something to do with the murder of Gorrom's two aides. If he hadn't done it himself, then he must have arranged it; and he would probably keep watch on who came snooping about, especially now that the case was more or less closed. Judging from the papers, Drazi forensics had what they needed already, and the detectives were keeping busy with the political aspects of it. Marcus' suspicion was that going there themselves would fish out Ka Phor.

There was a slight problem with this plan. Before he left for Li Mrakto's cooking classes, Neroon had elected not to wear the Warrior Caste black underneath his Worker robes. Marcus was partly delighted - could it be that Neroon was finally learning something about compromise? or perhaps he had just reached his absolute limit with the heat - but a lack of Warrior Caste black meant a lack of the weapons that ordinarily came with the uniform. He had nothing else about his uniform on him besides the denn'bok - no crystal blades in his gloves, or the other crystal blade that he ordinarily strapped to his ankle (as Marcus had found out) or a Sha'ann pistol or anything of the like.

Marcus had his own denn'bok, and also an Earthforce issue PPG, but it held only a quarter charge. He chanced it and left the pistol, pocketing the crystal boot blade as his just in case. Not with the intent to use it himself - mostly to carry it for Neroon. Hope he'll forgive me for rifling through his robes, Marcus thought. He packed a small pocket kit for a few days with emergency rations. If they didn't find Ka Phor then, he'd string Neroon around on a wild goose chase, and get some answers about his secret calls.

The majority of the morning was spent on the computer, looking up whatever he could about Ka Phor. Much of it was very old and irrelevant, and it took the benefit of his security clearance from Babylon 5 before he was able to put together a clear picture.

Li Ka Phor: born not so very long ago and raised in Zhoshesh Dorallo, parents relocated to Cyrus III, extended family all over the Freehold - one cousin stationed on Babylon 5 permanently, Marcus noted. He checked affiliations first, since affiliations and groups were central to rivalries in Drazi society. They might shed some light on Ka Phor's motives - especially given what Marcus had heard from Janella Xortl and read in the Dorallo Daily. Centre party - purple ethnic group - religion: Thrazda, although according to sources not nominally a believer - supporter of a local Kratah team -
did recreational spear throwing - none of this was terribly important -

Until last year, was a member of the largest guild of stock traders affiliated with the Centre party in Zhoshesh Dorallo, which explained why he was the last of his family to remain there. A market analyst - clever enough according to his scores from his post-military vocational schools, and twelve years experience showed he was not terrible at his job. His picks were generally successful. But after three failures in a row for his employers, he was asked to prove himself in combat to retain his position. He lost this, but only just, for the adjudication had given him nearly passing marks. Still, he was let go and lost status in the guild for it. If he had fought his way back up the ladder, this would have been documented. But after that, there was nothing: no word of Ka Phor, no account of what he was doing now.

That was suspicious. More suspicious, his movements - if Ka Phor had left the Drazi homeworld at all, it was undocumented, which implied a level of subterfuge that Drazi were not normally known for. It was entirely possible he had not left, but it didn't fit the profile: someone who desperately wanted his standing in the guild restored would have attended the guild's latest meetings, which took place on Dormo Station, in stationary orbit in the asteroid belt in the Zhabar system. He should have applied to attend at least one, but records showed he didn't. Did Ka Phor simply not care?

Refa, thought Marcus, Gorrom had mentioned a Centauri named Refa, and he queried the computer for this too. About Lord Refa, there was a great deal more, but his movements were harder to track down. He had been near Zagros VII around the time of the blockade and attack, and - so it was - had come twice to Dormo Station, but had made no further entries into the Freehold territory. What would a Centauri be doing on Dormo Station, thought Marcus. He cross-referenced the dates. At the same time as the market analysis guild's meetings. Then, Ka Phor and Lord Refa could have met - if Ka Phor had attended the meetings of the guild he was kicked out of.

Marcus also researched as much as he could about the death of the two aides. The papers weren't very informative, so he cracked Drazi security. This was less technically challenging than it sounded; Drazi security was not the best, because - bless them - they didn't ordinarily feel the need for it. The straightforward approach was their preferred approach. Breaking into things wasn't something Drazi considered a worthwhile endeavour; if one wanted to know, why not simply ask?

The two aides, Marcus found, died in similar ways, at roughly the same time: between 2-3 in the morning. Forensics had theorised blood loss due to the peeling of the scales: the backs of their skulls had been prised open. It could also have been quick if there had been any brain damage, but there was no way to tell - the matter had decomposed by the time the bodies were found.

How they got out to the mountains was anyone's guess - there were no tracks leading from the boundaries of the city outward. None up the mountain base on a main path once used by Drazi merchants to cross the range into the next cities beyond. But neither was there anything to motivate their making such a trip at such a strange time, and moreover there were no witnesses in the city. Astounding, given that Drazi streets were always some measure of crowded. Even at three in the morning. But no one saw them, or if someone did, they didn't report it. And they had been in the city, because the day before, both of them had punched in and clocked out of work at the standard times.

How did the aides - both of them - disappear? How did they get to the mountains without anybody seeing them?

It was nearly noon, and Marcus knew he should leave to pick up the Drazi flyer he ordered the night before at the café. They had Neroon's flyer, but it was Minbari, and that was the surest way to spook Ka Phor out of meeting with them at all. This, though, was a beat-up old piece of junk with a similar
class engine as the police spinners, and was thirty credits a day to rent. It'd be slow, but it would handle well enough and they could fly under the radar of suspicion.

Marcus was on his way out the door when the call came in. Call routing through personal link device, location: south corner, quadrant fourteen and thirty-nine, chimed the computer. That was Li Mrakto's offices. Zhoshesh Dorallo, Zhabar, Drazi Freehold. Access code: Alyt Neroon of the Star Riders. Recipient unknown, the computer continued. Sector unknown.

What Marcus wouldn't give to interrupt it now and give Neroon a piece of his mind. But he touched nothing. He made a careful note of the time and duration. The call didn't last long: only about thirty seconds. Part of him couldn't believe Neroon would be this obvious and blatant. Then again, he said it himself, hadn't he? No trickery or deception.

He picked up the Drazi flyer first, giving his excuse as mining business once more, and then flew to quadrant fourteen by thirty-nine. Not a lot of parking. He found a spot and hopped out to find Neroon waiting outside Li Mrakto's offices. "What is that," Neroon spat.

"Our rental," said Marcus, chipper. He patted the side of the door; something inside made a strange clunk-sound. "It'll be a bit slower - they were out of red. The red ones go faster, you know."

"You did not tell me about any of this," said Neroon, mildly enraged.

"No, I didn't," said Marcus. And it was on the tip of his tongue: because you would've run to whoever else you're talking to and told them everything, and we can't have that.

Neroon looked angry, probably because it looked like Marcus didn't trust him. Well, he didn't. "After you," said Marcus.

He took them up in the air and flew them towards the mountains with only a few rattles.

It took two hours. Neroon complained for most of them. "This thing is a death trap," he drawled. "Where in the universe do you take us? This looks like the middle of nowhere."

"Over this way," said Marcus. A bit more up the mountain, where it was a bit cooler, and there was a little more foliage and forests. He set it down in a clearing by the main mountain path. "There," he said triumphantly.

"I refuse to believe this Ka Phor wanted to meet with you here," said Neroon. He squinted. "Isn't this -"

"Too right you are," said Marcus, who was determined not to let Neroon's foul mood ruin his good one. "We're going to explore exactly where the bodies of the two aides were found."

"Surely there remains no mystery for you to solve that the Drazi haven't already tried?" Neroon smirked. "Presumptuous of you to think you know better than they."

The irony of a superior Warrior Caste Alyt, who knew nothing of the Drazi, saying this to a lowly Human Anla'shok, who did, was not lost on Marcus. Probably, that was the joke Neroon thought he was making. Funny. "Of course not," said Marcus, "what I'm going for is to fish out this fellow. I suspect he'll catch us sniffing around and come running. He must have had something to do with their murder, he all but confessed to Gorrom about it."

"He could be covering for someone else?" suggested Neroon.

"Drazi are not that subtle," said Marcus. "If he were covering for someone else, he'd've told Gorrom
"I see. So he didn't contact you at all, did he," sneered Neroon. "And you lied to me."

Marcus said nothing. Neroon huffed and rolled his eyes. "Out we get," said Marcus. "Unless you'd like me to take you back to Li Mrakto's?"

Neroon exited the vehicle immediately.

It was a little ways up the mountain off the path to get to the location quoted in the Drazi forensic reports. There was nothing left - the bodies were photographed, then moved for autopsy. The Zhoshesh police force would have seen to that. There wasn't even any cordoning off in the area anymore. If there were a trace of blood, Marcus couldn't find it - Drazi had better senses in that regard, so if they cleaned up to their standards, there wouldn't be much left for Marcus. "Do you see anything out of the ordinary?" he asked Neroon.

"I would not even know what to look for," Neroon snapped.

They should split up to cover more ground. "Alright. You take the path south, I'm going deeper up. Meet back here in an hour," said Marcus.

"Are you sure that's wise?" asked Neroon. "Surely you don't expect us to find anything."

Marcus <i>loved</i> being second-guessed by condescending arseholes who were only along for the ride on this mission and who unlike him were not integral to it. "On the contrary," he said. "I want to be prepared for any outcome. Oh - that reminds me. So should you be." He dug around in the folds of his robe, past the emergency kit, and handed Neroon his crystal knife, handle first.

There was silence as Neroon processed what happened: that Marcus went through his things, and stole from him.

"I see," said Neroon at last. "Any more deceptions?"

"I don't know," said Marcus, "you tell me."

Neroon bent low to tuck the blade inside his boot and folded his arms across his chest. "What is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Marcus stood his ground, and refused to give up eye contact. They remained in a tense standoff.

"Haven't you got a mountain to search?" bit out Marcus.

"Indeed I do," snapped Neroon. He turned sharply on his heel and walked off down the mountain without another word.

Well. That could've gone better. But Neroon just got to him so easily! Marcus had never had the world's best patience, he knew that, but he also knew by the words and actions that Neroon was practically spoiling for a fight. The longer he did, the more Marcus wanted to give him one - injured ribs or no. How satisfying it'd be to strike him, just once.

Marcus went the opposite direction, ascending the mountain, following parallel paths to the main road, as far as he could see it wend its way through the mountain going north away from Zhoshesh Dorallo. On the other side of the mountains, at the other end of the main road, lay three small towns: Kradlor, Phinti, and Wremak. He was walking not for very long when he stopped.
He turned, just slightly. The wind blew - a cooler breeze, rustling through the trees. A whistling - some sort of avian creature above. All this and more pricked his senses but first and foremost: he could sense someone behind him.

"I heard you're looking for me," said a voice, sneering and cold. Marcus turned to face him.

A single purple Drazi stood there, alone. He spread his hands in welcome, or a mockery of it, and smiled.

"I just wanted a word," said Marcus. "Nothing more."

"Oh yes, you Rangers love getting your words," said Ka Phor - for Marcus recognised him from his earlier research. "Your information."

Marcus shook his head, playing dumb. "Dunno what you mean by that, mate."

"Please," said Ka Phor. "Your outfit alone - that pin -"  

"Stole it," he lied. "Hunting about and asking your 'friends' didn't help. I was around all night yesterday and you never made an appearance. Thought you might be more amenable to meeting if I provoked you. Guess I was right, for here you are."

"I don't take well to being provoked," said Ka Phor.  

"Drazi never do," said Marcus. "You can't help it, can you. Someone picks a fight with you - it's a temptation you've got to act on." Now the irony made him smile. He took out the denn'bok from the holster on his belt. "Luckily my predecessor taught me how to use this," he said, and extended it.

Ka Phor tilted his head, to catch something that clearly only he could hear. He raised an eyebrow.  

"My associates tell me you're lying," he said.

Technically, it wasn't a lie, but it was deflection on who precisely the predecessor was. A subtler distinction than Drazi usually were. Who were these associates, then? Marcus' blood began to run cold. "I don't see any associates around!" he said, blustering.

Marcus had a suspicion about these associates, and why it was they weren't yet making an appearance. After all, who would have the strength to kill Drazi by peeling off their scales? Even Drazi couldn't do that to each other, not when their scales had evolved against precisely such treatment.

It's possible, Marcus thought, that I've bitten off more than I can chew, this time.

He was maybe ten minutes' walk away from where he left Neroon, which meant Neroon - who wasn't injured and could walk faster than him and had walked in the opposite direction - was at least twenty minutes off from Marcus' current location. At Neroon's walking pace that was perhaps two kilometres away. Marcus could scream bloody murder (and it might well be, in a few minutes) and not be heard.

"You don't see them," said Ka Phor. "I know they're there."

"Well. How nice for you. Let's make it a fair fight, then, shall we?" Marcus said, and grinned, spinning his denn'bok back and forth. "Just you and I - no mystery associates I can't even see. Let's have a wager of it: if I win, you answer my questions."

"The presumption is yours - Anla'shok Cole," said Ka Phor, and Marcus' grin fell off his face. "That
I want anything to do with fair fights. The fight I'll take is the fight I'll win. And I will win."

He took out a double-blade dagger, with a curved shaft. In the centre where the two blades met was a bore, in which a thin tube of black liquid was embedded. That wasn't ink, Marcus knew. Most Drazi blades were poisoned. "Yes," said Ka Phor, gloating, "I know who you are. I know all about you."

"Now, now," said Marcus, looking at the blade, "there's no need for that just yet."

"Funny thing to do, going around telling people you're here for mining," said Ka Phor, examining his blade idly. "Your company folded over a year ago. And you have no interests in building it back up again. If you had wanted to build it back up, your Earth insurance gives you six months past the attack to file a claim. But you never did. You were already on Minbar by that time. I checked with my - associates." He sneered. "They know the comings and goings everywhere. Surely it's not for business purposes that you were there so long? And the first thing you do when you leave Minbar, you head to Zagros VII in the Freehold and a listening post for your Rangers is set up. No, that's not a coincidence, it can't be."

How else could he know all this? It was Warrior Caste Minbari who staffed the customs gate at Tuzanor. It was a Warrior Caste Minbari he had been wandering around with. It was a Warrior Caste Minbari who contacted an unknown someone on a link he shouldn't have had.

Bloody hell, had Neroon told the Shadows and their agents everything?

"And now, here you are back again, on our homeworld, in my city, in my territory," said Ka Phor. "You won't escape this time, Ranger."

He grinned and advanced, holding his blade high.

Marcus threw up his pike to block the shot and knocked Ka Phor's arm aside. Ka Phor grunted and spun with the movement. He thrust the blade out again, low, expecting Marcus' belly. Marcus had already danced away.

Another blow with his pike. It missed. Marcus was still aiming for Ka Phor’s arm - he should knock him to the ground, but it was nothing if Ka Phor could simply throw the knife up and slice him! Any breaking of the skin could spell his death. Marcus had no idea what kind of poison that was or how quickly it acted. No, he had to disarm first.

Ka Phor ducked a broad swing of the pike and lunged forward again with the blade. Marcus dodged and barely twisted away in time. His ribs made him a lot less fast than he should be.

Adrenaline could only push him so hard.

He couldn't win this - he needed help.

He should find Neroon.

What help would Neroon be if he was a turncoat Shadow agent too?

Suddenly Ka Phor swung up, throwing himself in the air and launching himself at Marcus. Whether he threw the blade or not, Marcus had to end this quickly. He ducked forward, underneath Ka Phor, and vaulted him away with a pike in his belly. Ka Phor sailed through the air a few feet and he landed flat on his back on the ground, winded. The blade fell, landing outside of his reach but only just, and Marcus sprinted forward. He'd strike across his head, he'd knock him out.
"Now!" croaked Ka Phor. "Do it now! Finish him!"

"I don't think so," said Neroon, low and dangerous.

Marcus hadn't the time. He kicked the blade by the handle, sending it skittering out of reach. Only then did he chance a look back -

To find Neroon climbing up a great blackish grey something. It looked like a massive insect, with a huge triangular head, and fourteen red eyes. Its six legs were tendons, tough black sinew, that ended in sharp-looking spikes knee-down.

Neroon twisted and fell, with his thighs wrapped tight about the beast's neck, past its great shouldered boney mantle. Once on the ground he grimaced and clenched his thighs together and the insect's head turned, violently, with a sharp, painful-looking, unnatural angle. The insect shrieked a metallic sort of cry that permeated Marcus to his core and reminded him of passing Shadow ships.

Oh god, Marcus thought. That's one of them. That's what they look like.

And then Neroon placed his closed fighting pike to the creature's neck and depressed the button to extend it.

The kick-back force of the pike's expansion nearly wrenched Neroon's arm from his shoulder and he barely kept a grip on the pike from flying out of his hands, but half the creature's neck disappeared under the sand, and all six of its legs twitched once in mid-air, then collapsed.

"No!" shrieked Ka Phor. "Get him!"

There was another, realised Marcus.

It appeared, dissolving into view, and scuttled fast towards Neroon and its fallen friend. Neroon rolled off the beast and away, just in time to miss one of its sharp spike limbs, coming down hard on the ground where he'd been. He looked up at Marcus through the creature's six legs, desperate. "Behind you!" Neroon yelled.

Marcus whirled around to find Ka Phor's blade in his face. He ducked, knocked it aside with an oblique swing of his pike, but Ka Phor caught it and compensated with another slash. He swung back and forth and Marcus dodged the first two easily but the third had the blade whizzing by his head, narrowly shaving off a lock of his hair.

"Get back here," grunted Ka Phor, as Marcus danced a few paces away. Ka Phor lunged, Marcus skirted it. One slice - another. Ka Phor fought like a frenzied man. Marcus couldn't keep relying on luck. He lashed out with his pike and knocked him once in the face, but Ka Phor retaliated with a vicious swing that Marcus barely deflected.

He aimed a high knee at Ka Phor's wrist in the air and missed. Ka Phor kicked out at his gut and didn't, and Marcus toppled, arse over tea-kettle. He rolled back onto his shoulders and kipped himself up to his feet, but Ka Phor was already there with his blade and lashed out again, and Marcus sidestepped to avoid the contact on his left shoulder. His midsection blossomed suddenly in pain. He was growing slower and slower with every move - Ka Phor lunged -

Something hit him in the cheek. He gasped.

He put his hand to his skin - no blood - then it wasn't Ka Phor and his nasty blade. And something small tumbled from the folds of his robes to the ground. A little pyramidal grey rock, pinkish on one side -
Marcus threw out the butt of his pike and from the sound of it caught Ka Phor in the solar plexus. He dropped and rolled, grabbing the rock, and flung out his pike. It hit Ka Phor in the shin and tripped him, sending him sprawling.

It didn't look like any other Drazi rock - colour was wrong - one side was smooth, almost polished. One face red-grey, perforated like sponge toffee. The red colour came off on Marcus' thumb as he brushed it.

He turned, and saw out of the corner of his eye - Neroon, the back of his head a mess of bright red blood, lying face-down in a growing pool of it.

It was not a rock. It was a broken shard of Neroon's sodding bone crest.

Neroon was not moving.

And as the second creature advanced on Marcus' prone would-be ally, and as Ka Phor scambled to his feet and let loose a furious attack cry behind him, Marcus felt something inside, some part of his control, snap, and his rage conflagrated.

"Don't you touch him!" he roared. He fled Ka Phor. The first boulder he saw he sprang upon and leapt off for the height, then swung his pike down on the creature's head. It didn't even break the skin of whatever carapace the insect possessed, but the force of it had the insect momentarily bowed, distracted from Neroon. Marcus threw it another blow across the torso. That did nothing, and the creature was so heavy the connection probably hurt Marcus more -

- but Ka Phor was already at his back again and Marcus whirled about and struck him across the face -

- he lashed out with his leg, kicking down, against one of the creature's skeletal legs at the bend, and it wiggled but five out of six legs maintained its balance, and the creature darted its spiny claws out to grab Marcus -

- he swung his knee up as Ka Phor brought his blade down - dumb, so dumb, he could've been cut - and caught Ka Phor's wrist, then threw his bony elbow into Ka Phor's grip. The blade fell, sharp end down, to the ground and stuck there -

- he knocked the creature's spindly little quill-fingers away with the other end of his pike - fingers like those had peeled off Drazi scales -

- he put his foot down on the handle of the blade and used the extra foot of height he got to lift himself up and push it in, and when he was back on the ground, a blow to the side of Ka Phor's head later, he found that the blade had embedded itself into the earth, and with him standing guard it wouldn't be easy to take -

- and then Marcus somewhat lost himself in the volley of blows, the back and forth, becoming more and more heedless of where precisely they rained, but noting somewhere in the back of his mind that: although most of them connected and Ka Phor was losing breath with every bolt from Marcus' pike in his chest, the Shadow wasn't strained at all. The best Marcus could do was keep it at bay, its six legs darting its massive body this way and that, avoiding many of Marcus' blows. Those that connected did nothing.

It was luck, then, that Ka Phor finally shouted, "I can't take much more of this - we need help!" and the creature shrieked again - and began to retreat.

Marcus collapsed to his knees as Ka Phor limped off, joining his insectoid friend. They scurried
beyond a hill and were out of sight as quickly as they had appeared.

Neroon had not moved.

"Oh christ," Marcus muttered. He got to his feet, shakily. He staggered over to Neroon and reached down to pull him up. No part of this wasn't agony, given Marcus' existing injuries, but worst of all was how heavy Neroon was. He collapsed both their pikes and shoved them in his pocket to be able to muster the strength to sling one of Neroon's arms around his shoulders. Then, he shuffled them away, barely keeping his balance. He should probably pick up that Drazi blade. He'd have to come back for it.

Marcus wove them in and out of the main path and along the sidelines. He couldn't keep going like this forever, but he didn't have enough energy to return them to Zhoshesh Dorallo. It had been two hours' air ride outside the city, that put them at perhaps fifty kilometres away - Marcus couldn't make that on his own in his state, let alone supporting Neroon in his! And he didn't know when the Shadow would return with reinforcements. Moments later he saw a ship emerge from behind the horizon - a small Shadow Fighter. Its shriek shredded the air.

Terror gripped him by the throat. We need to hide, thought Marcus.

No sooner had he ducked them past a heavy nest of foliage did he hear a loud discharge and a boom. A massive energy pulse struck land, back where they'd fought. It shook the ground where they stood, and Marcus held his breath, wondering if the next one would hit them.

None came.

Marcus darted out, Neroon deadweight on his shoulder, once they'd passed a moment without weapons fire. He kept going, scrambling for safety, and found the first out-of-the-way rock overhang that looked like a large enough cave to host two. He threw Neroon down into the darkness, a few metres past the cave entrance, just out of sight.

Neroon fell like a sack of grain and lay there, immobile.

As Marcus watched his head loll back and forth until it stilled, he thought it a bit dangerous that Neroon had not once regained consciousness throughout all of this. Probably shouldn't've dropped him like that, either. But Neroon was bloody heavy. He was stockier built than Marcus generally and if that weren't enough, that famed Minbari bone density! Lifting him alone had been hell on Marcus' ribs and dragging his deadweight half a klick in random directions to cover their tracks wasn't much better!

And now Marcus was internally complaining to distract himself from the very real problem which was this current sorry state. He was all alone, on another world, with an unconscious Minbari, and two people were pursuing them, and one of those people was dangerously strong with significantly better technology.

He knelt down next to Neroon and groped for a pulse. Warrior Caste robes would've come in handy here - Marcus could easily undo a cross-over-tunic, but Worker Caste robes had this awful high collar and he couldn't locate the fastenings. No wonder Neroon had been bitching about the seaming. Sod this, Marcus thought, and finally gave up. He took hold of the material by the neckline, whispered, "Forgive me for this later, yeah?" and then tugged hard to rip the robe open.

There was a pulse at Neroon's neck, if it could be called that - fluttery and faint, but it was there. Was it supposed to be that faint? His skin was so warm. Was that normal Minbari temperature? Marcus had no idea. The bleeding had stopped, at any rate. That was surprisingly fast. Was that normal?
Then he recalled something from his Earthforce training intel about the speed of Minbari blood clotting and how they could lose a lot more than Humans could and still live to tell the tale.

Intel about an enemy, he realised. They hadn't really been looking to save their buggering lives, they'd been looking for ways to eliminate them.

It was at this moment that Marcus realised he lacked an objective basis for judging Minbari health. He needed to talk to someone about this.

Neroon had a link, hadn't he? And he must have taken it with him this morning with his Worker Caste wear, because he placed that call shortly before noon. Then it had to be on him.

Marcus felt around for pockets in what he thought were the usual places - at the sides, on the hips, on the thighs - and found a deep one on Neroon's right thigh. From the feel of it, the pocket lay on top of the denn'bok holster.

Within was the little device Neroon had used to open his flyer door. It was a strange piece of silver metal, sculpted and curved with the same aesthetic of all Minbari ships. It had a shiny screen and a single button. He pressed the button and a menu appeared with writing in Fik. Lucky I understand all this, he thought.

Three calls in the call history - those would have been the unknown recipient. The dialled address wasn't one Marcus recognised. It didn't even look Minbari. That made little sense - unless the person in question were covering their tracks very well.

I don't get any answers out of this blighter unless he's conscious, thought Marcus angrily, and found the menu to place his own call. Then, he dialled in a number to an old Ranger friend, who had been a medic for the Worker Caste before becoming Anla'shok.

As he waited, he worried: she'll probably be busy - what if she's graduated - what if she's undercover - what if I give away our position - as though the trail of Minbari blood hadn't already done that - what if we're too far away for it to route through the apartment computer connection - but it worked and she was evidently free. A click sound told him Anla'shok Iriell had connected. "Iriell, it's Marcus Cole," he said.

"Marcus!" she replied. "What are you - where are you? Are you on Babylon 5?"

"Not at the moment," he said. "Please, I've got to be quick - it's an emergency. I have a Minbari male here who is unconscious. He took a blow to the back of the head on the crest and I don't know anything more about it except that it was deep enough to bleed. He's lost a fair bit of blood." And a spike from his crest - the piece of which still hid in Marcus' pocket. Minbari hated asymmetry, didn't they? Maybe Neroon could glue it back on. "What do I do?"

There was a moment's silence. "And he is not responsive?"

"He's breathing, and there's a pulse," said Marcus, "but I have no idea if that's what you mean by responsive. He won't wake. Should I shake him?"

"No!" said Iriell. "No, do not do that. Press upon his flok'tal nerve - yes, I'll give you instructions. Free his chest -"

"Ahead of you there," said Marcus, a little guilty.

"- one hand's breadth immediately up from the right nipple. Press down firmly and pinch."
Marcus followed her orders. Suddenly Neroon spasmed and curled onto his side into a fetal position, his facial features contorting in a wince. "Alright, there?" Marcus tried. "Wake up!" But Neroon didn't, and after a moment he relaxed in this new position.

He reported his findings to Iriell. "Good," she replied. "That is good. Watch him for signs of seizure. If you see one, do that again, and he will cease. If the implement was blunt and unpoisoned, and nothing penetrated the wound, then a Minbari brain should be able to handle it in tamok'lan - that is something like a healing trance. His brainwaves should be within a certain parameter."

"I have no way to quantify that," said Marcus, desperate.

"Shine a light into his eyes," she said. "How quickly do the pupils contract?"

He took a moment to fish out a box of matches from his emergency packet. He lit one, then carefully prised Neroon's eyelids open and held the match up. Neroon had brown eyes - not black, very dark brown - and if it weren't for the light Marcus would have a hard time separating iris from pupil. "Perhaps three seconds," he announced, and shook out the match.

"That is slow," said Iriell. "That means ocular bloodflow is being diverted to the site of impact. That is good, sign of healing. And it was the back of the head?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Where the healing lobe is. Keep him there, don't move him, and keep him propped up on his side, unelevated. You should wait no more than a day."

"What if it's longer?" asked Marcus.

"Check his pupils again in three hours," she said, "if they contract more quickly or the same rate, and you have already determined his central reflexes remain intact, then he will be fine. Perhaps two days. If they contract more slowly..."

Iriell trailed off. "What?" asked Marcus. "What happens if they're slower?"

"Who is it?" she asked instead.

And have everybody know that a Warrior Caste Minbari was in the Drazi Freehold, undercover, and ailing? Only Delenn knew what they were doing here. If word of that got out, it could jeopardise everything she worked towards, in getting the Warrior Caste on board against the Shadows. If Neroon woke up, he'd be convinced. He'd have to be. Mission successful. Neroon had just slain a Shadow. "I can't say, I'm sorry."

And what if Neroon didn't wake up, he wondered, terrified.

"Anla'shok?" she asked. "I could notify his family. The Entil'Zha."

"I can't say," he repeated.

"Call back on this line if you need," she said. "For now - try not to move, and let him rest, and if he seizes, put a stop to it. The brain will take care of itself. Remember, it is what we have evolved for."

"What can I do?" asked Marcus.

"Watch over him and pray," Iriell offered.

"Great, thanks," he murmured. He hung up before he could admit that he was an atheist. Prayer had
never done him any good before, and it wasn't likely to start now.

Chapter End Notes

Gee I Hope Neroon's Okay! :D!
Neroon remained unconscious for the remainder of that day, which gave Marcus a lot of time to prepare and think.

He began by constructing a makeshift barricade around Neroon's body. As it was, they were mostly hidden by the entrance to the cave, as everything past of the mouth of the cave was a downward slope, but to make it clearer he shifted boulders. This took the rest of the day, and by the time he was done he had firmly secured them from sight with a waist-high mound of rubble that was artfully arranged to look like a cave-in, but he was exhausted and parched.

I've deserved this ration meal, he thought, digging out his emergency pack from his pocket. There was inside a flat hip flask spanning the dimension of the package, of which he risked three sips' worth. Dinner was a snack bar, compressed soy protein supplement flavoured artificially like apricot. Probably a real Earther would've found it disgusting, but Marcus had not been raised on fine dining and had eaten far worse in mining colonies in his day. It was delicious, and he should have chewed it slower. The knowledge that it was technically three thousand calories didn't help how it felt in his belly. He only had two more bars, and he'd have to make them stretch, or find food. Of all the things he recalled from his time in the Drazi Freehold, the language was the bulk of it - foraging was not. Honestly, when they'd been in the Freehold, they'd mostly stayed on the mining colonies, descending to Zhabar only occasionally for weekend trips.

Those weekends, Marcus reflected, were probably the closest he had ever come to a real vacation in his life.

That's all this is, he thought, trying to remain bright, and not dwell on how terrible things really were. There would be more food and water in the Drazi spinner. He could get it the following day in full light. A vacation. A strange vacation with the least likely companion, but a vacation nonetheless.

The sun had set a half an hour ago, though the feeble orange glow remained. He took the time to flick a match on (he had plenty to spare) and check Neroon's eyes. Still three seconds to full contraction. That was no improvement from when he'd called Iriell.

"You'd better wake," he told Neroon softly. "I've got a heap of questions for you and you won't like a single one."

Such as who was Neroon calling, which had been on Marcus' mind since he'd discovered the calls in the first place.

Next was how did Neroon know the Shadows were there? They were invisible until they attacked, so unless one attacked Marcus (who had been fighting Ka Phor at the time, and Ka Phor had been doing well enough not to need immediate reinforcements), the only way someone could have known they were there was with forward notice.

Marcus did not like the idea that Neroon had forward notice of the Shadows' movements on Zhabar, because it meant one of two things: either Neroon was alerted in advance because he'd been keeping track of them - but why would he, monitoring the ancient enemy was the job of the Rangers - or he was alerted in advance because the Shadows were his allies.
Which meant Neroon was the Shadow agent.

Could it be the case?

Neroon clearly hadn't followed Marcus' instructions in searching. He had been following Marcus instead - there was no other way to have covered two kilometres from the time Marcus began fighting with Ka Phor to the time that Neroon appeared on scene. Alas, Marcus was kind of glad that Neroon had been disobedient - otherwise Marcus would have been dead meat. Two Shadows, and a Drazi, and Marcus with his wounded ribs? No, it would've been no contest.

But there was more to it than that, because Ka Phor clearly knew Marcus as a Ranger. He said it himself: Anla'shok Cole, and he'd used the Minbari word, which implied knowledge from the Minbari. The only one who knew this was a Ranger mission was Neroon. Or Josheem Lrkta, possibly. But nobody else would have known - even the uniform wasn't recognisable to any of the Drazi. The Rangers had only just gone public, due to Delenn's Entil'Zha ceremony on Babylon 5, and there hadn't been enough traffic from Babylon 5 to Zhoshesh Dorallo yet to justify Ka Phor's knowledge. Gorrom could have known of Rangers as he was the one to give information about Zagros VII, but according to the computer research Marcus did, Gorrom had never left the planet for Zagros VII - he only gave the information about the base's coordinates. And he didn't recognise the uniform. Neither did Li Dro Lrkta, for that matter. Who had taught Ka Phor to recognise a Ranger's pin?

He'd have to buy new clothing. It'd be Drazi wear, but all the better to fit in. Delenn had not told him in advance that the mission would be off-world and Marcus had only had the chance to grab two spare uniforms from the base in Tuzanor when he'd packed.

Marcus' Babylon 5 security clearance didn't have any Ranger information connected to it: it said only that he had high level clearance, but not why. If any Drazi had figured out that he had accessed information he shouldn't have access to, using the computer in the apartment rented to Marcus Cole, they wouldn't know to what end besides confidential Babylon 5 security personnel use. Marcus didn't carry an Identcard, and on the Identcard he left at Babylon 5, it didn't mention his alliances.

The only one who knew he was here, on Anla'shok business, was Neroon.

...Or whoever Neroon was calling.

Alright, thought Marcus. Now we're getting somewhere. Hypothesis one: Neroon was calling someone who was a Shadow agent. Either Neroon knew this, which made him an indirect Shadow agent himself (this was unlikely, or Neroon was a fantastic actor - and he hated lying far too much to be that good an actor - and he'd also have to have been lying to Delenn), or he didn't, which made him an unwitting pawn of this Shadow agent whom he called.

Furthermore, Neroon was not likely to contact anyone non-Minbari. If Gorrom or Lrkta were agents, Neroon would not have contacted them. He didn't have any allies in any other race besides the Minbari. Delenn told him as they walked back from the temple of Lith Shorell that first night that Neroon didn't even know who the pak'ma'ra were until two years ago.

That meant: a Minbari Shadow agent.

The likelihood was strong that it was his Warrior Caste handler. He could have contacted his mother (who had not been listed as deceased in the file) but his mother's location was in a temple (curious, as she was Warrior Caste) and this information would not have been redacted from the computer after placing the call. His father had perished during the War. Likely on the Drala Fi, judging by the date of death. Neroon had no siblings. According to the file - if the file could be believed.
There was at least one discrepancy so far, which was that his father, according to Neroon, was Worker Caste. And according to Li Mrakto (who also didn't know Marcus was a Ranger), Neroon was a decent enough cook that it fit the bill, and Neroon knew things about the Starship Crafters that he probably shouldn't know, if he were the son of two Warriors. Marcus really needed to ask about that mystery, and soon.

There was also the notion that there could be omissions - not technically lies, but perhaps not technically information that Marcus was believed to require. For example, it didn't show any further of Neroon's family tree but presumably he had grandparents still alive? Aunts, uncles? Cousins? Those weren't mentioned. Perhaps, too, that was the reason siblings weren't mentioned (nephews? nieces?). But one would really think immediate family meant siblings! After all, in Marcus' file, there was mention of Will.

But if Neroon were in contact with the Shadow agent, it did not explain why Neroon had known there were Shadows with Ka Phor. After all, Marcus had told Neroon a completely different story the night before and that story was the one waylaid to whoever he was contacting. Marcus double-checked Neroon's link: no calls were made today after the one before noon. Then there was no way Neroon could have gotten word that they would go to the mountains to whoever he was contacting in time. And there was no way for him to have been told by this possible Minbari agent that they would encounter a direct Shadow threat.

Which implied Hypothesis two. Neroon himself was the Shadow agent.

This was a dangerous thing.

Marcus really didn't want it to be the case. Neroon was ... not nice. Sarcastic. Racist, certainly. Superior. He didn't think Marcus was worth anything at all. Whatever it was Humans had done in the war to piss Neroon off, it evidently had long-lasting effects.

Ah, but Minbari were like that - held grudges like they'd evolved for it. And anyway, Neroon said he was willing to be flexible...

But maybe he only said that so that Marcus would stop pawning him off on Li Mrakto all the time.

But then he apologised for being such a prat lately, due to the heat ... hadn't they formed some sort of rapport? He was starting to come around, Marcus felt, he could see things Marcus' way - this was after all Marcus' mission, it wasn't a joint endeavour, and Marcus was calling the shots, and Neroon seemed to be understanding of that.

He seemed. He could have lied. He wasn't entirely understanding of anything after he followed Marcus instead of searching out where he'd been told. And he was calling someone at all hours of the night like a dodgy bugger.

But he hated lies. He abhorred them openly.

But why else would he want the Warrior Caste to control the Rangers, who were - to Marcus' knowledge - the only Minbari fighting force currently in opposition to the Shadows? Why else would he want that so badly that he'd be willing to kill Delenn for it?

To be fair, he never technically said he'd kill her.

But he implied it.

*Did* he, though?
He had been willing to fight Marcus to the death.

But he'd probably consider beating a Human to death as nothing more than part and parcel of his warrior honour. Their caste had never considered the war to be over.

Marcus checked Neroon's eyes again, and if his grip on Neroon's face as he did it was a little strong, it didn't change anything about how quickly his pupils contracted. "You'd better wake up," Marcus muttered.

It was not until Marcus really sat down and considered hard the reasons why not to trust the Warrior Caste - why not to trust this particular Warrior Caste member - that he realised how very badly he wanted to trust them.

He looked down once more at Neroon's passive face. What a victory it'd be, if they could trust each other. If they could befriend each other.

Why d'you have to be like this, he thought.

And the more Marcus thought about it the more he began to think - maybe it was true. Neroon really was the Shadow agent.

Why would he do it? For power? For the glory of the Warrior Caste? So that they would finally win over Minbar, and break the subtle powerful rule of the Religious Caste?

That must've been what Delenn meant when she said there were frictions. Why the warriors looked at her and saw an enemy. As far as they were concerned, she was the enemy commander! And what else were the Rangers but an answering war-like force to the Warrior Caste's own. The Warrior Caste didn't see it as carrying out Valen's prophecy. They saw it as rearmament.

But the Rangers were so few in number compared to the Warrior Caste - they couldn't really think the Rangers were any real threat?

Unless there was interference in the numbers - like a shedload of Humans who had joined up - like the Human Anla'shok Na who had allowed Religious and Worker to join -

And they still hate us from the war, thought Marcus.

Marcus didn't sleep that night. His thoughts were too tumultuous, and he needed to keep watch to make sure Neroon didn't seize. Somewhere in the middle of the darkness, Neroon began to twitch, and his breathing became erratic, but as Marcus continued to watch, he calmed and relaxed. Marcus lit another match and timed the pupil contraction. Two seconds, this time. He tried the other eye just to be sure, to make certain it wasn't wishful thinking. Yes, two seconds! That was progress, at any rate.

That first night, as he sat there alone in the dark for hours, Marcus found out how cold and long the nights on Zhabar were. (The weekend excursions to Zhoshesh Dorallo had never featured camping, and in the apartment, the heat of the city persisted until well after he fell asleep.) Neroon didn't suffer at all - he was still radiant warm to the touch. Raised on Minbar for Minbar's temperature, hadn't he said? Five degrees at night must be balmy for him. It certainly wasn't for Marcus, who began monitoring Neroon's pulse as an excuse to rest his icy fingertips on Neroon's warm neck.

Touching him in this fashion was a bit personal, even for Marcus, who was handsier than most. Lennier's words came again to him: do not touch me in this fashion. But Neroon was unconscious, and Marcus was both concerned and cold.
He really shouldn't have exerted himself so hard with those boulders. It had made him sweat, and sweat was water loss as well as heat loss - he needed both. He shivered and fought the resultant fatigue until the sun rose. From time to time he got up and paced around the cave to try and shake himself awake.

Neroon slept on. Marcus did not.

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Finally, sunrise. Finally, warmth. Although warmth did not fully happen until about mid-morning, a sunbeam struck the cave at its ledge and Marcus took an hour to bask in it, waiting for his limbs to reactivate.

Once they did, and he could feel the drowsiness pressing at the edge of his mind, he carefully slipped out of the cave.

Nothing in the skies. No waiting ships. Might they have the technology to pinpoint his lifesigns anyway? If so, there was no point in playing hide and seek. The Drazi spinner didn't have such a feature. Neither had Neroon's flyer did. If the Shadow ships did, they would've used it during the night.

Nothing in the sky meant ostensibly free movement. Moreover, he couldn't hear anything out of the ordinary. No shrieks from the Shadow ship.

He peered out at the foliage. Nothing. Only rustling: birds and small animals.

Marcus wasn't keen on leaving Neroon alone. There were no large predators around - he had heard a few howls last night but nothing drew near their hideout. The Drazi were avid hunters; with Zhoshesh Dorallo being so near, perhaps whatever predators there were in the mountains were used to two-legged creatures being a tough kill and not worth the meat. And there was no sign of the Shadow or Ka Phor or of any reinforcements. Nevertheless, Marcus took one of the denn'boks - he couldn't tell which was Neroon's and which was his, they looked identical - and did a walking perimeter around the ledge of the cave, growing his radius away from it to five hundred metres, until he was satisfied to go any further afield.

With another worried look back at the cave, Marcus thought a promise to himself: he'd be very quick, and he'd come right back.

First, he returned to the clearing where they fought. There, he found carnage: the pool of Neroon's blood where he had lain, now a dark brown, and a great black blast-mark and a crater in the sand where the fallen Shadow was burnt beyond belief. That was probably the idea, Marcus supposed. Leave nothing for us to get any intelligence on. No body to autopsy. The Drazi blade was there too, stuck fast in the sand, or what was left of it: it was charred and curled, and as Marcus nudged it with the toe of his boot it crumbled into ash. Well. At least it meant Ka Phor was unarmed too.

Marcus had aims to return to the spinner, but something weighed on his mind and he returned to the cave. Just to check.

Neroon hadn't moved. Pulse - fine. Eyes - very good, one second now. Breathing - normal. Marcus sighed in some relief.

It was the responsibility. Responsibility for managing a project - like being colony chief on Arisia - was not difficult, technically or emotionally. He'd managed that for years and it was well and good. All he had to do was provide return on investment to shareholders and the demand for Quantum-40
made that so easy it was cushy. Responsibility for another person's health was another thing. This was anxiety-inducing in the worst way and Marcus had only been on the job a single night.

No wonder Stephen had taken to medicating himself.

Marcus didn't envy Delenn her job, either. If she told him to go out and die, sure, he'd do it. After all, he believed in the cause. But he couldn't see himself telling someone else. Perhaps the trick was to believe so firmly in the cause that you believed it enough for other people when telling them to fight to their last breaths. Marcus doubted he believed in anything that hard.

Did Neroon? He'd wanted control of the Rangers to return to the Warrior Caste, hadn't he? Telling people to go out and fight to the death was something the Warrior Caste practically dealt in as a rule. Marcus supposed they didn't need belief or anything like it to support their service. If they had such convictions and beliefs, they were in the wrong caste. How could they adequately have control of the Rangers if they didn't believe in the cause themselves? They didn't think the Shadows were enough threat to participate in the growing conflict!

A more worrying thought: did they want control of the Rangers as a favour to the Shadows, who wanted Rangers out of the running?

Marcus remained with Neroon another half hour, putting off the moment where he would leave him again. It just felt better, having an eye on him. Eventually he exited and returned to where he had parked his Drazi spinner a day before.

Problem: the spinner was gone.

There was one set of footprints in the sandy dirt, leading up to where the craft had been, that hadn't entirely been blown away by the engine exhaust winds from the spinner itself. Furthermore, they were footprints of a bipedal person, not the six points he'd have expected from the scuttling Shadow. The Shadow must have left in the fighter, which meant Ka Phor - that rat bastard - had absconded with Marcus' rented Drazi spinner.

Not getting the deposit back there, thought Marcus.

Did that mean they had both definitively left? It wasn't certain. Marcus couldn't take the chance they weren't hiding out anywhere. These craggy mountains had a lot of nice ledges - perhaps Ka Phor had done the same thing they'd done and retreated to the sanctuary of one of them to lick his wounds. To do a better terrain search, Marcus would have to wait until he had a second pair of eyes, until Neroon woke. That meant no fire, which could attract someone.

Unfortunately, no spinner meant no first aid kit, or the two full canteens of water, or the extra food, or any implements or tools, that there were in the craft. It would be only him and his emergency pocket kit, and a stroke of genius that had been to pack one.

He pulled it out of his pocket now to take stock of it again. About the size of his hand in breadth and width, not terribly thick. A few bandages, a packet of gauze (no tape or scissors), the hip flask of water, two ration bars left, ten water purification tablets, a dwindling pack of waterproof matches, and - oh, he'd forgotten about that. One carefully-folded emergency blanket, stuffed at the bottom. That could come in handy in tonight's cold.

Two ration bars left at three thousand calories apiece would more than extend him until Neroon would wake. If what Iriell had said was true, he should awake any moment now - a day, perhaps two.
She had mentioned longer... Marcus didn't really want to think about longer. Besides, he was diligently checking Neroon's pupil contraction and the reaction time had grown shorter and shorter to a single second. That was good, wasn't it? That had to be good.

The flask of water needed refilling, though. Marcus could push it another day without a refill but any more and it'd be dangerous. He made his way back to Neroon, straining to listen for insects or birdsong, any sign that would lead him to a water source.

No change from before on Neroon's eyes.

Out of dread or distress or perhaps both at Neroon's less than heartening symptoms, Marcus left to search further afield for water. He found it about a kilometre down the mountain by a cliff: a spring cutting a swathe through the middle of a dark thicket, the sound of the brook almost obscured by the rustle of leaves. Was it drinkable? Would the purification tablets he'd brought be able to handle alien bacteria? He'd no clue, but he didn't really have much of a choice. He swigged the rest of the flask, sacrificed a tablet to drink two more flasks' worth, and then refilled the bottle for the night.

He'd been gone nearly three hours now. Time to have another look at Neroon.

Every time that Marcus walked up to the little ledge and peered past the boulder barrier, his heart picked up the pace, anticipating Neroon would already be awake. Wondering where Marcus had got off to. Maybe even up and about himself. Hopefully without wandering too far. No more trouble, no more worry about whether Neroon would wake. Every time that Marcus set eyes on him and found no change - Neroon hadn't even moved - his heart plummeted, and a candlelight hope Marcus hadn't known he was even nursing was snuffed out.

"Should start talking to myself," said Marcus aloud. "Evidently I'm going mad without hearing my own voice." What else could it be but madness when he fretted over this awful, violent, rude Warrior Caste Minbari, who had tried to beat him to death? How absurd!

It had been over twenty-four hours, by this point.

Marcus checked Neroon's pulse. Neroon was a bit warm, he decided. Should Marcus try and give him water and hope his reflexes could make him swallow it unconscious? No, Neroon wouldn't sweat anyway. But he could use the same trick Neroon used earlier. Carefully he tipped out a handful of water and dripped it over Neroon's face and neck, then smoothed it in with his fingers. Absently he noted some peculiarities - see, he thought, we're different, he's an alien; like Lennier was saying, they may look like us but they aren't us. The hard ridge above his eyes where his eyebrows would be if he were Human, the strange and almost scaly connection between skin and bone where the crest grew out, the unexpectedly soft bluish-tinged skin at the nape of his neck, which Marcus knew from Earthforce intel hid thick plating from the endoskeleton to support the weight of the heavier Minbari skull.

It was an attempt to impersonalise the scope of care; it didn't really work.

This is far, far more than friendly, thought Marcus. "This would be much easier if your people knew how to perspire, so, look," he said, embarrassed and uncomfortable, "just - just don't wake up, alright?"

Neroon did not. He didn't even stir.

Marcus capped the flask and returned it to his pocket. "I take it back," he said softly, "you can wake up. Any moment now." Nothing. "Well, don't rush!"
No chance. Marcus sighed - alone again.

Around mid-afternoon Marcus began eating another ration bar, and purposefully ate it slowly, nibbling away once every two hours until sundown so that it'd last him a bit longer this time. He still felt terribly hungry, but that was the thing you were supposed to do with these bars. He had to remember it was technically three thousand calories.

"We're going to get home," he said, waving the half-eaten bar at Neroon, "and you're going to go back to Li Mrakto, and make me a banquet. That's your job now, because you're a piss-poor bodyguard when I have to play nursemaid for two nights. I hope you know that." He ate another bite and took five minutes to swallow it. "And I'm upgrading from duck to swan at least," he decided.

Night fell, and with it the temperature. The birdsong ceased. Chirping insects took up the melody. Marcus opened the emergency blanket and wrapped it around himself, and for a time it worked well but as the night drew on he found it wasn't really good enough. Too exhausted to generate heat, maybe. There was less to reflect. He found himself drifting, and his eyes closed ... it had been two days after all, two days without a wink of proper sleep, just dozing at best ... knackered didn't even begin to cover it ... perhaps just five minutes ... perhaps ten ... he began to lose track of time as he slipped into unconsciousness ...

There was a sudden jerk next to him.

Marcus blinked himself alert. It was still night out, almost too dark to see. Neroon was moving beside him, it seemed.

"Are you finally awake, then?" said Marcus, excited. He dug out the matches and struck one aflame. "It's about time. How are the eyes?"

There was no response. It looked like Neroon was having a nasty dream. His eyes remained shut, and as Marcus leaned over, thinking to check his pupils again, he realised what was happening: this was no dream.

This was a seizure.

"Shit," said Marcus, and backed up in horror. He dropped the match and it extinguished in the sand next to them with a hiss. He couldn't spare a hand to hold it up anyway. "Oh, shit, bugger, shit," he muttered, wringing his fingers. What had Iriell said? Press and pinch the flok'tal nerve - don't let him seize. In the pitch darkness, he felt around for Neroon's neck and slipped his hand down, past the ripped neckline of Neroon's robes to his chest, groping for the right spot. Right nipple, hand's breadth up. He pressed down and pinched hard.

There came a huff of breath and a sudden weight as Neroon's body gave a single involuntary twitch and rolled over again, once more on his side. Then there was only the sound of their panting breaths in the dark, over Marcus' hammering heartrate.

He felt around for the matchbox and struck another. Neroon was breathing, but he looked strained. Carefully Marcus nudged him in the shoulder, hoping this episode had woken him.

Nothing.

So he leaned over further and pried open the eyelids on one eye, and held up the match.

Three seconds' contraction.

"Shit," Marcus hissed. "Ah, god, you've regressed. I can't believe this." He shook out the match and
tucked his knees into his chest underneath the blanket. Well, he certainly wasn't tired now, not after all that, and the adrenaline had warmed him a bit, but at what cost? "This is so - this is awful - why can't you bloody wake," he groaned. "I can't believe Stephen does this for a living - who would ever choose to do this as an occupation, you're going to send me into an early grave from heart failure and I don't even bloody like you, this isn't fair!"

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair because it was always Marcus getting off scot-free and narrowly evading his demise by a hair with his reckless manner as he jumped into death looking to be caught (and sometimes looking not to be caught). And it was always other people who were more careful and more clever and less rash who paid the price Marcus himself owed with *their* lives or *their* limbs and *that wasn't fair.* It wasn't fair for him to be so lucky! He'd never asked for that luck, and he'd traded it three-fold to have saved any of the faces he strained to remember. Hasina. Will. Any one of the hundred and fifty some-odd souls from Arisia. His Earthforce mates. Catherine Sakai - wherever and whenever she was now. Anyone but him.

Marcus clapped his hands over his mouth and breathed in deeply, trying to stave off hyperventilation.

"This isn't funny at all," he said crossly. Neroon wasn't answering anyway, he might as well have a bit of a rant! "I'd rather it be me in that stupid coma, then you could sit here and fuss over me as my health rate improves at the rate of, oh, fossilisation, and I wouldn't have to be sick out of my mind with worry. What even is this?! Is this normal?"

He huffed. "This is so much worse than tagging around to Sigma-957 for so many reasons. Sigma-957 was cracking in comparison and we did fuck-all for days, I nearly drove myself mad. Probably drove Susan mad! You- you're not even nice, you're an arse who thinks he's better than everyone he's ever met, every Human he's ever met! Would love to know what you think of the fact that your darling Valen was bloody one of us, only I can't even tell you, because I'm sworn to secrecy -!"

He waited a second, hoping against hope.

"See? You're not awake, you can't be, because if you had, you'd be roaring, I've no doubt! I don't know why I care so much that you live at all when you've been an utter prick for the past three days as well as ever since I've known you and don't you think for one second that your naff apology is going to change any of that! You don't even realise when I'm trying so hard to like you, trying to find something in common with you, trying to work with you - and you don't care a whit, it doesn't change anything, for things that other Humans did over ten years ago! And really, your people hunted *mine* straight back to Homeworld, so I don't see what you've got to moan about in the first place!" Neroon said nothing and Marcus felt like throttling him for his blasted silence.

"You just can't bloody quit," Marcus said viciously instead. "Everything's a competition with you, isn't it. I'm up against a Drazi, you pick a fight with a Shadow. I've got bum ribs - which is still your fault by the way - so you've got to go get yourself knocked out and bleed half to death. Brilliant."

Neroon continued to say nothing.

"You know, I think I hate you," said Marcus. "But even then I'm not daft enough to think that extends to all Minbari, even those I've never met."

He exhaled long and hard until it made his ribs twinge. "If I find out that you're the Shadow agent - that you're the one slipping information about everything we've done here - I think I'm going to go ballistic," he decided. "Delenn's got so much faith in you. D'you realise you bear the flag of her trust for your entire shite caste?"

No reply.
"Out of the lot of you pike-wielding maniacs, you're her last hope. And if you let her down," he warned.

No reply.

"Oh, please, just wake up," Marcus moaned.

No reply.

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The next day began bright and early when Neroon had another seizure at dawn. Marcus checked his eyes again. Still too long. Was this to be expected?

He finally gave in and called Iriell on Neroon's link device. Unfortunately it was now very late her time, or very early, and he had disturbed her rest. "Iriell, I'm so sorry," he said.

"I had said you could call back on this line," she muttered. Marcus heard a yawn, which made him yawn. He'd gone nearly seventy-two hours without full sleep.

"I'll be quick," he promised. "He's had two seizures now - one last night, one just now, and - and his eyes were good, it was down to one second contraction time, but -"

"Now it has returned to three seconds," supplied Iriell.

"Yes. God, is this normal? Tell me it's normal."

"There is not much research on the tamok'lan," Iriell admitted. "Minbari do not often get grievously injured. Injuries are either too light to require one, or too severe for it to be of any assistance. It was a bad hit, you said?"

"Bled like a stuck pig for awhile," said Marcus. "Tore off a spike from his crest." Which was still in Marcus' pocket, and which he was idly running his fingers over from time to time to distract himself.

"You did not tell me that before," said Iriell.

"I wasn't sure it was relevant," he replied. "Does it change anything?"

"I would expect a longer recovery in tamok'lan," she advised.

"You're joking," he said.

"Our bones bleed," she replied. "How large was the piece?"

"Not very," said Marcus, "about the size of a thumbnail."

Iriell was silent a moment. "I would not think that large enough to warrant a third day in tamok'lan," she said at last.

"But you don't know for sure," said Marcus, "you said there's not a lot of research."

"That is true. The only other option - but he would have told you if he were a telepath!"

"He isn't." Was he? That might explain how Neroon could sense the Shadows when they weren't visible. Marcus would gladly pick secret telepath over secret Shadow agent any day.
"Because the alternative," Iriell explained, "is that he has one of many telepathy-linked latencies that manifest in progressive neurological disorders. Is he Warrior Caste?"

Marcus said nothing.

"They have highest incidences of these diseases. Many of their elders find their ways into long-term care facilities."

"Long-term care facilities," Marcus murmured. "I didn't even realise you had them."

"Yes, they are run out of the Religious Caste," said Iriell. "Sons of Lo'Domo, Sisters of Valeria, Temple of Plak'mi. They all have departments that provide care. It is one of the ways they generate revenue."

Neroon's mother, Marcus realised suddenly.

Were these disorders genetic? Telepathy was genetic. If the disorders were telepathy-linked - they would be genetic too.

Of course he wouldn't have told me about this, thought Marcus. This felt like a secret Marcus shouldn't know.

"He must have not told me he's a latent telepath," said Marcus, covering up. "That must've been it."

Iriell snorted. "Dishonourable of him to keep such knowledge from you," she said, "when it could have been useful. I see now why you won't give up his name. My advice: if by tomorrow there is no change, then call a healer of... whatever world you are on. They will find appropriate Minbari healer contacts for his condition."

"One more day," agreed Marcus, as Iriell disconnected.

It was not until he disconnected with Iriell that Marcus realised there had been an incoming call to the link device yesterday mid-day. It must have occurred when Marcus was out looking for water, or he would have heard the device chirp as it received the call. Neroon being unconscious, there had been no one to pick up. Marcus queried the caller. **Caller unknown. Sector unknown**, the details read, in Fik. The same person who Neroon kept calling must have wanted an update. Just like that, Marcus' ire at being lied to reinflamed, and he impetuously flung the link device down in the sand.

He drank his fill of the flask throughout the day, watching Neroon more carefully than before. He paced out a few sips every half-hour that Neroon didn't seizure, and by mid-afternoon he was empty. Neroon had not so much as twitched, and Marcus was optimistic. He checked Neroon's eyes once again. Back to one second.

"Please tell me this is the end of it," he said. "When I come back here, I want you awake, got it?"

Marcus left again for the spring, drank what he would and refilled the flask. By the time he returned to Neroon hardly a half hour had passed, but Marcus' nerves were well-shot and it felt like much longer. Again he felt dread in the pit of his belly as he reached the mouth of the cave - if Neroon had suffered another seizure after Marcus had left, that was a half hour alone -

But it didn't look like Neroon had budged an inch. Unfortunately, neither had the state of his consciousness, and he was too warm again. "No wonder you falter in this climate," said Marcus, and tipped out a few handfuls to smoothe into Neroon's skin. "You're not even doing anything, and you've overheated. Walking around was enough to exert you, I'd imagine."
He reflected. "Though I suppose it can't be said you're doing nothing," he figured. "That brain of yours is working overtime to repair whatever damage was done."

Marcus was silent a little while. He fished out the little grey boneshard from his pocket and inspected it, trying to place it again on the back of Neroon’s skull, but that was a mess of scabbed blood and sand. Where the piece fit, he couldn't tell. It was such a tiny thing.

Marcus had not seen action in the way that some had. Susan had, he knew, but she didn’t talk about it - at least not to him. Clearly their relationship hadn't progressed far enough. Marcus had not killed anyone directly, but his indirect activities had resulted in many dead Minbari, and he had been privy to a substantial amount of intel.

What Iriell said about the healing process fit with what Marcus knew from those days. The quickest way to kill a Minbari - and this was hard to think about after he’d gotten to know so many - was a shot to the back of the head. Not the front - they'd survive. Not the sides - they'd survive. As for the body, it depended on where you shot them, and if they wore armour - they would survive. But the back of the head was, as Earthforce had found out from autopsies of their newest enemy, where a fifth lobe was located: like a cerebellum only much larger and made of the same stuff as the rest of the brain. This lobe seemed to be what sustained them, what helped them heal, what made them relentless, what made them so difficult to kill. One needed a few shots of some projectile weapon to pry off the bone, or a few blows to hack it away, and then a single plasma shot would kill.

It was a necessarily grisly affair. Marcus had seen pictures in files.

That was, as far as Marcus knew, their only weakness against plasma weapons, and it demonstrated the use for the bone crest in the first place. He also knew that growth could be encouraged by repeated hairline fractures in the bone, which formed a thicker barrier as the fractures healed. That explained the stylistic choices of the Warrior Caste: any intricate crest was probably shaped out of years and years of miniature breaks that fused it stronger: armour upon armour.

Neroon’s crest was relatively massive, and heavy. It had taken only a few strokes from a Shadow attack to penetrate the bone. Three days was maybe to be expected to repair such an important part.

Marcus ate his last ration bar alone, and prepared for the long, cold night.

In the blue hours of the morning - which on Zhabar weren't blue at all but burnt ochre hours didn’t have the same ring - Marcus grew sick and tired of shivering. He shifted closer to Neroon, lifting the blanket to include him in it. Better - much better. He lay down next to him, shifting closer still until he was pressed against Neroon's back, closer than any awake alert Minbari would tolerate, and far closer than Neroon would prefer if he knew.

Marcus gratefully clung to him. That thin Worker Caste robe Neroon wore did nothing to prevent heat loss, so it practically soaked through to Marcus as they lay there, wrapped beneath the blanket. Intimate? Yes, but Marcus was useless to Neroon's health if he fell asleep because he kept losing energy by shivering. Did Minbari shiver? He was too tired to think about it, but probably not, and now neither did he.

Chapter End Notes

I promise he'll wake up next chapter. We need more bickering, for one.
On the fourth day, Marcus shook off the reverie of the morning. He left, refilled the flask, and when he returned, Neroon's eyes were open and staring at him.

He nearly dropped the flask. "Finally!" he exclaimed. "Christ, those were the longest three nights of my life. Listen, how are you feeling?"

Neroon blinked, and frowned.

Marcus tried again. "What do you remember?" he asked.

Neroon frowned harder. He shifted and rolled up to a kneeling position, ducking out of the blanket. He reached behind and felt the back of his head with some surprise.

"Yeah, that's - you'd best not touch that," said Marcus. "Unless that's what you're meant to do - get your grubby little fingers all over an open wound - in which case, well, ignore me!" He grinned, elated. "What do I know, right? Not a doctor!"

Neroon sank gingerly back against the cave wall, as though mentally adjusting. He cleared his throat, opened his mouth, then abruptly closed it again. Something like horror was in the glance he threw Marcus. He began gesturing wildly in what looked like sign language.

"I - don't speak that," said Marcus. "Whatever that is." Neroon didn't understand and pointed to his ears, then his mouth, then made a few more elaborate gestures. Marcus sighed. "I," he said, pointing to his chest, "don't," he shook his head, "speak," pointing to his mouth, "that," pointing to whatever Neroon was doing with his hands. "I don't know what you're trying to tell me," Marcus said.

Neroon - there was no other word for it - pouted. Then he pointed to his chest, then shook his head, then pointed to his mouth, then made a few more elaborate gestures. Marcus supposed it was something like I'm not mad.

"<I'll ask you some questions>," Marcus decided. "<I want you to blink once for no, twice for yes. Sound good?>" Neroon blinked twice his assent, and Marcus began.
"Do you remember anything from - four days ago now?" Neroon held up four fingers in dismay. "<Yes, four>," said Marcus.

Yes.

"<Do you remember that we got here via your flyer, and that we're staying in Zhoshesh Dorallo?>"

Yes, followed by an impatient eye roll.

"<Do you remember how we got to the mountains? Do you remember the fight?>"

Two blinks yes, a huff, then another two blinks yes.

"<Do you remember what it was you fought?>" This was crucial. "<Do you remember that you killed it?>"

Two solemn blinks yes. It seemed the Shadows commanded some reverence among the Warrior Caste, even if that wasn't enough to go after them. Neroon prodded two fingers into his neck, then made a fist, and drew it out, miming the lethal motion his pike had taken when he had extended it.

"<Do you remember the fact that I distinctly told you go off and search in another direction and you completely disregarded me because apparently, Alyt Neroon of the Sacred Star Riders, Last Bastion of Honour of the Warrior Caste Even Though He's Lying to Me About Nearly Everything, Mannerless Prick and Royal Pain in My Arse Even Though He Slew One of the Ancient Enemy, is too good to follow simple instructions from a lowly Human ->"

Neroon had begun gesturing wildly during the middle of this diatribe. "Yeah, I still don't understand that, mate," said Marcus flatly. This did not stop Neroon's gestures and in fact only fueled them, combined with a nearly apoplectic facial expression. The blueish skin around the fore-front spike of bone in his headcrest had deepened considerably, with what Marcus assumed was rage. "<Don't give me that look! You keep talking to me in something I don't understand, I'll talk to you in something you don't understand>," Marcus snapped. "<See how you like it.>"

Neroon folded his arms over his chest. Finally, two blinks yes.

Well. So there was no getting any real answers about anything until his words returned. "<So you can't speak, then?>" Marcus said instead, more gently.

Neroon looked miffed - and kind of pathetic, really - and blinked once for no.

"<Not even a little? You can't even try?>"

A helpless gesture, like he was saying, but I did try! And another blink no.

"<And you've lost all understanding of English>," Marcus supposed.

Yes.

"<You look really upset about it>," he added, which probably wasn't helping Neroon's mood at all. A frustrated yes.

"<Has this happened before?>"

Yes.
"<When?> Wait- sorry. <You can't answer that if it's not yes or no.>"

A sad single blink no.

"<Was it during the war?>"

No.

"<During your training?>"

Yes.

"<Do you know what causes this?>"

Neroon pointed to his head.

"<Oh no>," said Marcus, "<you are telepathic.>"

Neroon frantically shook his head no, then blinked firmly the once to hammer the point home. He mimed a blow upside the head, then lay down on his side, and put up four fingers. Then he sat back upright, and covered his mouth.

"<It's because you're hurt in the head, which caused tamok'lan, for an extended period of four days>," Marcus reasoned. It dawned on him then. "<You've already told me>," he realised. "<You said it days ago, on the way over here - Minbari head injuries result in a loss of speech but you retain all your memories.>"

Neroon's face was the picture perfect image of the expression, I have been trying to tell you this for ten minutes now but you are a dolt of a Human.

"<Very well>," said Marcus. "<More important question: does it wear off?>"

Neroon blinked twice, nodding emphatically.

"<Pity>," said Marcus, "<this is really working for me, personally.>" Neroon threw him an nasty gesture that looked simultaneously aggressive and flippant and must have been the Minbari equivalent of a two-fingered salute. Marcus couldn't help laughing at him and while Neroon didn't exactly laugh back, his facial expression turned from irate to somewhat sardonic. See, he thought, now this is why we need to talk to the Warrior Caste more regularly. Religious Caste would never teach them a gesture like that.


At this, Neroon shook his head, and struggled to his feet. It was not a smooth movement; he nearly pitched forward and his left leg trembled a bit, and when he finally got to his feet he took a moment to remain there, clinging to the cave wall. This was insane, thought Marcus. Then he took a shaky step forward and held harder onto the wall.

Marcus got to his feet. "<Here>," he said without thinking, and offered his arm.

Neroon looked at it, then up at him, then again at the arm. Just take it, you daft proud fool, thought Marcus, and Neroon actually did, looping their forearms together and gripping Marcus' wrist. He didn't look grateful about having to lean on Marcus for balance, but he let Marcus lead them out of the cave.
Neroon did not go far. There was a little bed of sand outside the cave wall and he fell to his knees beside it the moment he reached it. Then he smoothed it flat with his hands, and wrote in hasty, messy Fik with his index finger.

Marcus knelt at Neroon’s side, to be able to read the message right-side up. If Neroon disliked the closeness - for Marcus could feel him, leaning into his shoulder - he didn’t move away. I don't know how long this will last, he read, and Neroon’s face, when he looked up at it, showed uncertain anxiety.

"<Tell me about the time it happened to you before>," Marcus asked.

Neroon nodded, erasing the message. I was 18. 2 cycles before graduating, chipped a spike. Caused a bleed, was in bed all day. Had to reshape the spike, no time to regrow before graduation from academy, military induction ceremony. He reached up and felt around the back of the crest, judging. Then he wrote, this will take much longer to style and shape. Easier to file it down.

Honestly, Marcus cared a little less about Neroon's self-image and vanity than he did about his current vocal impairment. But he reached into his pocket and pulled out the little piece of bone he'd kept. "<I have the piece here>," he offered. "<Attach it back if you really feel so upset about it.>>" Neroon gave him a long, peculiar look. Why did you keep it, he wrote. Like a token. Why would you do something so strange?

"<Listen>," said Marcus hotly, peeved that Neroon could be so annoyingly critical without the ability to speak, "<I don't have time for deciphering your Minbari mores.>>" Even though this was equally weird by Human standards. Well, Neroon didn't know that. "<I did my best with the little knowledge I had. I had to contact a friend about this whole thing because I had no idea what tamok'lan even was. You could have told me about literally any of this to prepare me for a worst case scenario.>>"

Ideally it would never happen, wrote Neroon.

"<Yes, well, this obviously is not an ideal situation!>" protested Marcus.

I did not enter a fight expecting to be taken down so easily!

"<Why did you enter it, then?>" asked Marcus.

There was a moment of quiet reflection as Neroon took his time in thinking about what to write before he committed it to the sand. There is no way to explain it, he wrote. I had a suspicion.

"<You had a suspicion. That there would be an attack>," said Marcus in disbelief. "<Surely you realise how untrustworthy this sounds.>>"

Neroon went madder than he'd been all morning, and that was a high bar to pass. He got to his feet, kicked the message in the sand away, and began to stalk off into the trees.

"<How do you expect me to trust you when you've been calling someone behind my back?>" Marcus exploded. "<When you don't give me any information! When you don't tell me anything at all!>>"

Neroon whirled back and gestured with indignant jabs, like he was shouting the words, I - CAN'T - SPEAK.

"<I mean before and you know it!>" Marcus couldn't let Neroon alone. He stood, prepared to run
after Neroon if he needed to. "<Get back here!>" he shouted. "<Or don't you want to know what happened after you lost consciousness?>"

Neroon gave no quarter on his facial expression, which remained in a murderous glare. But he edged closer to the sand pit, where he stood with his weight on one hip and his arms crossed, in a perfect well? I'm waiting pose.

So Marcus explained, how he looked behind him mid-strike to find Neroon unconscious and face-down in a pool of blood, and beat off Ka Phor and the other Shadow as best he could - Neroon clearly found this claim dubious but Marcus pressed on; he was still here, wasn't he? and unlike Neroon he had no reason to lie about it! Ka Phor, he found, was an easier target than the Shadow, and he further explained that if Neroon had not disposed of the first one so quickly, they probably would both have been killed. At this, Neroon shrugged. Modesty? thought Marcus. Or concealment?

Marcus continued, detailing how he brought them to the cave, and hid there for the next few nights. He found a stream for water, and he had had some meagre supplies, but now he was out of food and they'd have to find something to eat. He had called only one person on Neroon's link device - Neroon checked, as though Marcus were really the one who was covering things up - Anla'shok Iriell, currently stationed in the Tuzanor Ranger Base. Iriell, he explained, was who he had called when they first arrived, and after Neroon had had two seizures. Marcus confirmed he hadn't divulged any other information about Neroon, only that he was a Minbari male. "<She said you must be a telepath for such a long recovery>," Marcus said, as he finished his explanation.

Neroon shook his head.

"<Look>," said Marcus. "<I really think it's high time you told me who you were calling.>"

Neroon sighed, then knelt down in the sand. Too much to write. I will explain when I can speak again, he wrote. Allow me that much.

"<You'll explain everything>," Marcus said.

This didn't please Neroon, by the looks of it, but he didn't write anything more.

Enough implication that Neroon was a liar (even though he was). "<Well>," said Marcus. "<Do you think we can make it back to the apartment? We're about fifty kilometres away. Mostly downhill. But it's a long walk.>"

Neroon nodded, and blinked twice. Then he felt around his thigh for his denn'bok. He found it missing, and looked alarmed.

Both denn'boks were in Marcus' pocket. He handed over the one he felt was Neroon's.

Neroon took it and stood. He hefted it in his hand, looking confused. He extended it, then paused, then collapsed the pike, reconsidering, and handed it back.

"<Wrong one?>" asked Marcus. "<I genuinely can't tell them apart. Sorry if you think that makes me unworthy of wielding it in the first place, but I really don't care what you think anymore.>" He handed over the other.

Neroon applied the same tests and looked exactly as confused. He collapsed the new pike and then took both in his hands, squinting and trying to find some difference between them. If he was finding anything, he wasn't letting on.

Finally he took one of the pikes, extended it, and used it to write in the sand, I can't believe you lost...
"<I can't believe you can't tell yours apart from someone else's!>"

They are made too well to keep a catalogue of identifying marks on them!

"<Look>," reasoned Marcus, "<does it really matter? And before you get all grumpy with me ->" because Neroon had been about to do exactly that, since from the aghast expression on his face it absolutely did matter and how very dare this insolent Human imply otherwise - "<if it were something of serious consequence, then you should be able to tell them apart too.>"

Neroon glared. He handed the collapsed pike back to Marcus by slapping it in his palm. The other, he propped his weight on, like a walking stick, as he started on the trail down from the mountain.

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Marcus plotted them a path leading down the mountain that went by the spring, so that they could drink and refill the flask. Fifty kilometres would not be easy in this weather, with two of them sharing that tiny vessel. It was barely mid-morning and it had already reached well over thirty degrees, outside the shade.

Neroon was evidently not having a good time, but the water helped to invigorate him. He splashed it over his face and hands first, and then down his neck. Then he lifted the robe to moisten the rest of him. Marcus turned away, embarrassed.

Then he drank four flask's worth of water from his cupped hands before stopping to take a breath. "<You sure you should be doing that>," asked Marcus. "<Drinking it straight?>"

Neroon bent down to write in the mud at the stream bed, Minbari stomachs are strong enough.

"<I don't fancy nursing you any longer, let me tell you>," said Marcus.

You will not have to. I did research on this planet before we arrived. I know precisely what I can and cannot eat.

Well, imagine that, thought Marcus. Neroon actually bothered to learn anything at all about the Drazi homeworld.

Which meant, according to Marcus' silent pledge to himself nearly a week ago, Marcus should try and learn something about the Warrior Caste.

He'd shelve that for later. It would be difficult enough getting Neroon to divulge his secret doings. Poking about information about the Warrior Caste as a whole might only make him more tight-lipped.

When the sun reached zenith - this gave them another seven hours until it set again - they found a clearing. Marcus suggested they start looking for something to eat. Neroon nodded and knelt to retrieve the crystal blade tucked into his boot. You start a fire, he wrote in sand, I will return in a few moments. And he vanished into the distance of the trees without so much as a by-your-leave.

Yes sir, thought Marcus, so pleased Neroon had regained his condescension as well as his balance.

Once the flames were roaring, Neroon had returned with something that was the size of a rabbit, except with quills and cat's ears. It was a horraph, Marcus recognised, and much smaller than it should be. Possibly because it was young, or because it was wild. Some Drazi kept them as pets;
Marcus wouldn't tell anybody they were about to eat one. Neroon took a stick and sharpened one end with the crystal blade, then patiently skinned and gutted the animal while the flames died down. By the time the embers fell apart in the sandpit, he had threaded the meat on the makeshift skewer and set it over the coals to roast.

It did not take long to cook. After three days of ration bars the meat smelled nothing short of heavenly, and there wasn't even any seasoning. "Is there enough for both of us there?" asked Marcus dubiously.

Neroon had been quietly turning the spit over the embers. Without writing anything, he removed it from the fire and handed the whole stick to Marcus.

"You're not having any?" asked Marcus.

Remember that Minbari biology cannot tolerate Drazi meats, wrote Neroon in the sand. I will eat when we return home.

"Neroon," Marcus said. "You haven't eaten in days now. The last thing you would've eaten was testing Li Mrakto's cuisine."

I am aware, Neroon wrote, with a wry expression on his face. I did not find anything in the forest that was edible for me, he added. I will not until we return to the apartment.

Marcus looked down at the meat. The skin was shiny red and glistening in its own grease. Just to look at it made him salivate.

Eat, wrote Neroon. Marcus did, and tried to pretend he didn't hear Neroon's own stomach growling. It was the guiltiest, tastiest thing he'd ever put in his mouth.

Four hours later found them mostly down the mountain and nearing the edge of Zhoshesh Dorallo. A few hours' walk remained to the closest city train stop, but unfortunately to get there meant walking in broad daylight. They had reached the limit of the tree line. "You'd best put your hood up," advised Marcus. "This will be uncomfortable." He handed Neroon the flask, and when Neroon tried to give it back after a few sips, he refused. "You keep it for now," he said. "I'm sick of carrying it." You need it far more, he did not say.

From the look of it Neroon was not fooled, but he pocketed the flask gratefully.

They were three extremely long hours. The sun beat down relentlessly, and the heated air rippled in the distance. It seemed to stretch on and on. Even Marcus found it difficult, and he tolerated heat much better than Neroon and was in fitter shape. An hour before they reached Zhoshesh Dorallo city limits, Neroon stopped suddenly and leaned on his extended denn'bok for a full thirty seconds before he could take another step. When he looked up at Marcus he tried to explain without the advantage of sand by pointing to his eyes and moving his hand by twisting his wrist, like a whirlwind.

"You're dizzy," supplied Marcus. Neroon nodded, too exhausted to say anything biting. Marcus took a step nearer. "Let me just," he said, but before Neroon could really answer he had put two fingers on Neroon's neck, where he'd found Neroon's pulse before. Then he lay his hand below Neroon's nose to check his breathing. Surprise of surprises, Neroon let him, and curled into Marcus' touch, which must have seemed cooler to him. He's completely out of it, thought Marcus. He'd never let me touch him otherwise. "Heat stroke," decided Marcus, wondering whether Neroon had ever experienced it before. "Not terrible, but we really ought to get you home and in bed. Any water left?" Neroon nodded. "Drink it," Marcus advised, "all of it. Don't spare any. Just get you through one more hour."
When they finally got to the transit stop, the train was blessedly on time. It wasn't climate-controlled, but there was a shaded portion, and Neroon sank gratefully into the seat, and then curled against Marcus. He made the motion of spinning vision again. "<Close your eyes>," Marcus advised, "<try not to give in to the nausea. And if you do, for the love of the universe do not retch on me.>" Neroon snorted. "<We'll be home soon.>"

This is torture for him, Marcus realised. The first few days were funny, watching Neroon suffer, but he really hadn't anticipated how poorly Neroon took extended, direct heat. Possibly, that was the fault of the Minbari, for pretending to be flawless, and for pretending to be too honourable to lie, which meant they concealed flaws that they knew existed. In the end, Marcus decided, he really didn't hate Neroon that much. In fact, perhaps not at all. Though that was probably the pity talking.

"So no more desert mountain hikes for us, then," he said calmly. "Very well. You've done your penance. I forgive you for beating me half to death." Neroon made some sort of murmuring noise and sank back into sleep at Marcus' side.

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Returning to the apartment was a balm of relief. Marcus flopped backwards on the bed. "Finally," he sighed.

Neroon entered, more apprehensively. He noticed the unfolded Warrior Caste uniform, strewn on the bed, one arm still stuck inside his bag. He picked it up, pensive.

"<That was probably me, I already took the knife>," said Marcus, "<though I thought I'd had better manners to fold it again.>"

Neroon gave him a curious look, then began checking the pockets and the hems. He stopped part-way down the front of the garment and frowned.

Marcus sat up in a flash. "<What? What's wrong?>"

Neroon did not answer. He strode over to the balcony and peered out; when he'd satisfied himself with an inspection there, he headed for the bathroom and disappeared within. Seconds later he exited, and collapsed the pike. Then he fetched the complementary notebook from the writing desk on the balcony and a pen. Someone has been here while we were away, he scrawled in English.

"Your English has returned," Marcus noted. Neroon nodded impatiently, and then pointed to the notebook again. "Yes, of course, that's slightly more relevant at the moment. How can you tell?"

Neroon took the notebook back and began writing furiously. My Minbari identity chip is missing. Ordinarily it remains in my Warrior uniform. There is a specially-shaped pocket for it along the inside hem of the surcoat.

"You didn't take your identity chip with you in the Worker Caste robes?" asked Marcus.

Neroon shook his head. There was no pocket for it. And anyway, someone - this was thrice-underlined and as Neroon did it, he threw Marcus a pointed glare - failed to tell me there would be need to keep it on my person. The uniform as well has been removed from the bag. You are correct - you would have re-folded it. Someone else did not bother.

"I didn't touch your identity chip," said Marcus. "I didn't even know it was there." That suggested whoever had broken into their apartment knew what they were looking for, or had plenty of time for a leisurely snoop. "There's no daily housekeeping," he murmured. "Not until we leave. What would they have wanted your chip for?"
Neroon shook his head and shrugged. More to the point, he wrote, I shall have to contact the Shai Alyt. Someone on this planet knows there is a Warrior where he shouldn't be, and has proof.

"Alright," said Marcus. "So - the computer's right there. Have at it."

You should not be in view, wrote Neroon, and gestured to the balcony, shooing Marcus away.

Why would that matter? Surely the Shai Alyt knew all about this mission, seeing as how Neroon himself was on loan to the Entil'Zha for it. She must have had to ask his superior officer. "This is just a ploy to get the bed tonight, isn't it," joked Marcus. "Won't work." But he hopped off the bed and stood waiting on the balcony for Neroon to finish his call.

It never came. Instead, Marcus watched as Neroon looked at the message history on the computer and then his link device, and back again. And then he frowned.

"I told you already I called a friend at the Ranger base about your condition," said Marcus.

Neroon nodded, and held up two fingers, for the two times Marcus had called Iriell. Then he beckoned Marcus closer.

There was a chip reader compatible for Minbari chips on the side of the computer. Neroon tapped it to direct Marcus' attention to it. "Yes, very good," said Marcus, "what of it?" Then Neroon selected the computer's history for viewing and pointed out the record of the viewing of the file, logged from yesterday. "So you're confirming they definitely viewed you. They know you're here?" asked Marcus.

Shaking his head, Neroon held up another finger. Not quite, Marcus felt he could hear. Then he directed Marcus' attention to the call history. Li Mrakto had rung the apartment a few times the day after they left, probably wondering where 'Mikrine' was when he didn't show up for class. She'd tried again a few times the day after that, but didn't ring at all yesterday. There was also the outgoing call to Iriell the first day Neroon fell, and the third day after his second seizure.

There were also Neroon's calls, placed to an unknown recipient in an unknown sector. Neroon pointed them out too, voluntarily, and not even bothering to hide them, which surprised Marcus. He took up the notepad again and wrote, I will explain these. I had thought it would be clear.

"I really disagree," said Marcus.

Neroon then pointed to the call logged in the link device, the one that had connected to Neroon's link on the second day, the one Marcus missed when he had gone out for water. He then pointed to the computer, and threw up his hands.

"This call log is missing," Marcus murmured.

Neroon nodded and began writing furiously. Is there a possibility with Drazi computer security to be able to erase the call history in a networked apartment such as this? he wrote.

"Yes," Marcus replied, "but you'd have to be pretty high up for such a thing. Specifically, you'd have to be employed at some level." Ka Phor, meanwhile, had lost his job a little over a year ago.

Can you retrieve the deleted history using your security clearance? wrote Neroon.

"I can try," said Marcus.

It took about thirty minutes to do, and it was less security clearance and more hacking, but he located
the files in a trash backup that had been emptied a day ago. The logged incoming call to Neroon's
link from two days ago was there, having been deleted by someone with Finance Ministry
permissions. But Ka Phor no longer had these, which meant someone on the inside. Gorrom, thought
Marcus. Ka Phor had already been once to bully or blackmail Gorrom into doing something and to
keep quiet about the results. Was this one more favour for the Shadow agent?

But the dates didn't match. First the mystery call was logged, then the profile was viewed
(presumably at the same time the apartment was searched), then the call log was deleted.

When Marcus pointed this out to Neroon, his expression changed about five times in the space of ten
seconds, from disbelief, to mild annoyance, to rage, and then to bitter acceptance. "So you will have
to contact your superior," Marcus said. "Someone definitely knows you're here."

Neroon shook his head and took out the notepad again. *I decided against that. I will not call him
until I can speak again*, he wrote. Then he thought a moment. *I will need the washroom for
approximately an hour.*

Marcus frowned. Neroon saw it, struck out *approximately* and wrote above, *at least.*

"You're not serious," said Marcus. "I'd like to sleep too!"

*It has been nearly a week since I last bathed*, Neroon wrote, *during which time I was both far too
warm and also convalescent.*

That... skin-rebirth chemical peel thing. "You know, perspiration would be easier," said Marcus.

Neroon wrote something else on the notepad and tossed it on the bed with a smirk before he
disappeared into the bathroom and locked the door. Marcus peered down at it. *Perhaps, he read, but
then I'd smell like a Human, and that would be a tragedy.*

Prick. Marcus smelled perfectly fine, for someone who'd been camping four days in the same Ranger
uniform, thank you very much. "Charming! See if I bring you back anything to eat after that," he
said, as he left the apartment for the grocer's down the street.

Neroon was still in the bathroom by the time Marcus returned. He did not leave the washroom until
after Marcus had had a chance to firstly ring up Li Mrakto and make apologies and excuses for the
truant would-be chef Mikrine and to secondly heat up their dinners on the balcony stove.

Li Mrakto said something interesting. "<Someone asked about him, two days ago, just before I
closed up for the day>," she said. "<A man - he didn't give a name. Purple Drazi. Young guy.>"

So Ka Phor had been by. "<How he find you?>"

"<He returned in your spinner>," said Li Mrakto, "<so I imagine he checked its flight path in the
city. Found that you had stopped here. Plus which, Mikrine is the only Minbari in Zhoshesh Dorallo
at the moment. It would not be too hard to ask after him.>"

"<You tell him anything?>"

"<What I knew>," said Li Mrakto. "<I told him there was a Minbari by the name of Mikrine, posing
as a Starship Crafter. He wanted to learn about spices. He was here legally.>"

"<So you told him, Mikrine lying about guild>," said Marcus. "<And you told him, Mikrine address.
My address.>"
"<I had no reason to hide>," said Li Mrakto simply. "<And he was purple, like me. I am therefore inclined to give favours if he should ask. And he did ask.>"

Marcus was suddenly very glad he had not told Li Mrakto everything about Neroon.

But that made the timeline that much more interesting. After the mystery call was logged, and before the profile was viewed, Ka Phor paid a visit to Li Mrakto. The legend must not have satisfied him, and after getting an address, he picked the lock (as the apartment door had not been forced) to gain access. Even if he hadn't had all day to search the apartment, he would have made a beeline for the black Warrior Caste uniform and ignored anything of Marcus' (like his credit chip, which had lain on the bedside table, undisturbed). And Ka Phor would have had all the time he liked to check hems and pockets for anything concealed.

Finally, Marcus heard the bathroom door open. "About time," he called, and sauntered back from the balcony, "dinner's been ready for -"

The overwhelming scent of something chemical - an undefinable aroma, somewhere between the harshness of bleach with the pungency of rubbing alcohol - pervaded his nostrils the moment Marcus stepped back inside the room. "God, that's noxious," he muttered, "keep the fan on, would you? I've also got to bathe sometime tonight, I'd like not to do it in a caustic sauna."

Then his words failed him, for Neroon wore nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist, holding the golden Worker Caste robes in his hand. He draped the robes over the back of the chair. His expression lay somewhere between mild innocence and sly daring, like what? What could be your problem, Anla'shok?

What indeed. Marcus had seen more Minbari skin than this. - Yes, but it was Neroon, of all people. All of him was so moonlit pale.

Neroon bent to grab the Warrior Caste uniform from the bed, and as he did so he removed the towel. Marcus averted his eyes and turned to conceal the flush he knew was on his cheeks from the sudden warmth of them. "More comfortable?" asked Marcus, who was very uncomfortable and trying desperately not to show it.

There was naturally no answer, but Marcus didn't look back until he was reasonably certain Neroon had shrugged into the familiar black tunic and stepped into the trousers. When he cast a glance down to check - yes, ankles covered, Marcus had never felt so Victorian Earther - he finally looked up. Neroon was pointing to the ruined neckline on the Worker Caste robes. In his other hand he held a small sewing kit, which he'd nicked from the washroom basket of complementary odds and ends. Of course - he couldn't repair the robe while wearing it.

"Sorry about that," said Marcus, speaking about the neckline.

Neroon shrugged and took up the notepad again. They're difficult to get in and out of, he wrote, seeming to understand. I was unconscious. You were panicking. I understand.

"I was not panicking," said Marcus defiantly. "I had everything well under control."

The wry look Neroon threw him said he wasn't convinced. He swept by Marcus to get to the balcony - food clearly took precedence over needlework. Marcus half-expected that chemical scent to trail behind, but there was nothing. He stared after Neroon, convincing himself the reason he stared was to figure out what had been done to that broken crest to make it look so whole. There was no mark he could see. Filed the chipped spike down, Marcus decided. The remainder of the spike remained tucked in Marcus' pocket.
They ate in relative quiet, only because Neroon was too busy eating to stop to jot down his answers to the questions Marcus kept trying to fill the silence with, such as whether he wanted to make an appearance with Li Mrakto tomorrow (he absolutely did not) and what he thought of paying Finance Minister Gorrom another visit (excellent idea) and whether the Entil’Zha would reimburse him for the lost Drazi spinner (probably, but was it even worth the scrap metal?). "You've no patience," tutted Marcus, amused.

Neroon inhaled the Drazi flatbread he was working on and wrote as he chewed. *Patience has no caloric content, and thus it is for those of us who have eaten in the last week,* he wrote.

Marcus could practically hear the low drawl and couldn't help grinning. So they'd moved into the realm of friendly snark, had they? That was kind of nice, actually. Maybe Neroon would be in a pleasant mood for tomorrow's questions.

It would have to be tomorrow. Almost immediately after they finished eating, Marcus felt himself fading fast. It had been several very long days without any deep sleep. "Alright," he said, "I've really got to get some rest." Neroon nodded, hardly looking up from his stitching.

Marcus took the quickest shower - no pleasure, all business, because it still smelled strangely sharp - and when he exited, redressed in a clean uniform, he said, "So, then. Er. I suppose - well. You ought to take the bed. I'll take the armchair on the balcony, if you can spare me a blanket for the night chill."

Neroon shook his head and pointed to the pillows on the floor, and then to himself. "No, you're injured," argued Marcus.

With a sly smirk, Neroon pointed to his own ribs and then gestured to Marcus. Marcus figured the message was *so are you.*

"There's really no need to be a gentleman," he replied, "it's entirely out of character."

Neroon gave him that insulting hand gesture again, but this time with a grin. "We could both take the bed," offered Marcus.

Even as he said it, he thought, what a foolish idea. How could he even suggest something so absurd? Two full-grown men. Not even the same race. Not even friends. But Neroon's problem with the idea didn't stem from any social discomfort. Rather he looked at the bed and then set aside the robe he was mending in order to make a gesture like he was packing a tiny box.

"I know it's small," said Marcus. Embarrassingly, that was almost the idea. He had gotten uncomfortably used to Neroon's warmth next to him during the cool night, even if it wouldn't get nearly as cold in the city as it did in the mountains. But Marcus had slept on far smaller beds with far more people. Mining colonies weren't exactly luxury hotels.

Neroon made another gesture of it being flat.

"And it's horizontal," added Marcus, "yes, but you could do your - pillow thing for elevation."

Neroon rolled his eyes and tutted.

"Don't give me that," said Marcus. "I'm sure you think it's very important but it won't kill you to sleep flat one night! And you know, it's better for the blood flow anyway."
Neroon conceded the point with a raised eyebrow and a lift of his shoulder.

"Just - sleep where you want, you know what, I'm too exhausted to argue," muttered Marcus. "Looking after you for three bloody nights." And he toed off his shoes and climbed into bed - his clothes still on, in case Neroon should reconsider.

There was a silence more silent than the slide of thread in cloth. Marcus propped himself up on his elbows. Neroon looked shocked. "What now?" he asked.

"Y-you," said Neroon, then hastily switched to Fik. It was still somewhat slurred. "<You lllooked over me for thr-, for three nnnights?>"

"Four days means three nights in between - they told me you were adept at arithmetic," said Marcus. This did not calm Neroon at all. "Look, you were exsanguinating," he added, "it doesn't mean anything. Honestly, I wasn't even worried."

"<Yyyou watched mmy sleep - you guarded my ssleep>," protested Neroon, "<ffor three nights? You?>"

"Goodnight," ground Marcus through his teeth, and flopped back on the pillow. He was asleep, deeply and fully, within minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Hur hur, they exchanged pikes. (°‿°) Next chapter, some answers! I Promise. So don't feel too bad for Neroon.

I'm estimating maaayyybe on the order of 20ish chapters? Maybe 25, depending on how we break them up. Anyway, we're not quite at the half-way point yet, is what I'm saying...
In the morning, Marcus woke to find Neroon beside him, horizontal and asleep. His eyelids snapped open as Marcus shifted, as though unused to a bedfellow, and the expression in his face went from shock to revulsion to accusatory before it landed back in impassive.

"'Morning," said Marcus blearily.

"Likewise," said Neroon, in the low rumble of little-used vocal chords from his day of silence. He reflected. "I appear to have regained speaking ability in your language."

"Shame," teased Marcus.

Neroon watched him for a quiet moment, with a curious, undefinable look in his eyes, before glowering. "You hog the covers," he blurted.

"You hardly need them! You're a furnace," said Marcus.

Marcus took the bathroom first, which still smelled faintly of bleach (but at least Neroon himself hadn't), and when he exited there was two mugs of tea on the balcony table. "You found the victuals, I see," said Marcus.

"Consider it my thanks for not making me go to Li Mrako's today," said Neroon.

Marcus took a cautious sip. Palatable, if bland, but that was Drazi tea blend, not Neroon's fault. "Now, you not going to Li Mrako's was a compromise," he said. "I want answers."

Neroon kept his expression fixed but valiant, like he'd been expecting this. "Of course," he replied, "I will be truthful."

"The whole truth," added Marcus. "I'm sick and tired of this nonsense lies of omission thing you do. Only providing the information you think I need to know." He set his mug down hard into the table and was satisfied at hearing a loud crockery clink, jarring enough to make Neroon twitch. "Well, I need to know how it is you knew the Shadows were there. Explain that, because the only other option is you had advance knowledge, and I'd dearly love to know who told you."

"I saw them out of the corner of my eye," said Neroon. "I cannot fully explain it. A good warrior can sense an adversary without seeing them."

"That much I know," said Marcus. "That's how I found Ka Phor following me."

Neroon was taken aback. "I suppose I ought not be surprised you are good enough for that," he said. "You were holding out better than I thought you would against the Drazi when I arrived on scene, given your ribs and your generally feeble frame."

"Excuse me!" Marcus replied.

"As we say in Fik, you are sticks that walk, Anla'shok," said Neroon wryly, "there's nothing to you."

"I prefer the term naturally slender," he replied, into his tea.
"Now I received training in this course of action from Sech Faliri of the Moon Shields, who was at one point instructor for the Anla'shok, but who left their service out of protest when your Commander Sinclair became Anla'shok Na," said Neroon. "So you could not have learnt it in your training."

Too right. "I didn't receive that training from her," said Marcus. "That was part Earthforce, part intuition. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you learn to rely on your luck and you hone it into a skill, then it becomes like a sense. The years alive gave me that. - But you were knocked out before you even really saw me fight."

"I've seen you fight," Neroon murmured.

"In any case, you're deflecting. We're still no closer to the truth of the matter of how you knew the Shadows would be there," Marcus pointed out. "I want to remind you that for the record, I don't fully believe you." He snorted. "That you sensed the Shadows. That you followed me instead of going where I told you to because you had a suspicion. That all seems awfully convenient!"

"Ah," said Neroon, holding up a finger, "as you said once to me: it's not a conspiracy. Merely coincidence."

"Nice try. Unfortunately, in my experience it's more likely that you received information that there would be Shadows there. The only person you could have received that information from is a Shadow agent." Neroon glared, anticipating what Marcus would say next. Might as well quit beating around the bush. "Are you working with such a person?" he asked. "Because if so, not only is this entire mission scrapped, but I would seriously question the integrity of the Warrior Caste as a whole." He pushed away his empty mug and folded his lanky arms across his skinny chest.

"Assuming you let me live, the Religious Caste would be the first to know that the Warrior Caste has been - to any extent, no matter how little - working with the Shadows instead of combatting them as it honourably did the last time they were around!"

"Anla'shok, I work with no one but you," said Neroon defensively. "Beside that first call, I have not even contacted Entil'Zha Delenn. You have the honour of my word as Star Rider Caste Elder on that."

"Yeah, for whatever that's worth," muttered Marcus.

"And as former Satai. I would swear by the Grey Council. I shall swear it in Valen's name." Neroon folded his arms over his chest. It looked much more bulky and threatening. Marcus tensed. "I know that means something to you."

"Then who have you been calling?" snapped Marcus. "I want an answer."

Neroon drained his tea. Quit stalling, thought Marcus. "Anytime a Warrior Caste member is off-world, they are to log their activities and movements. Those are our ways," Neroon explained. "We are not the Religious Caste - we do not go off-world on whimsy. I ... didn't, while I was on Babylon 5. That is what Delenn is doing for me, incidentally. Her favour for me. She is backtracking to say I was there at her request, since both Satai Rathenn and I were present for Sinclair's induction ceremony, and she wanted the same auspices as per her Religious intuition. So she will claim. Thus do I maintain my honour, instead of what it really was." His lips twisted as he reflected. "Which was infiltrating and then skulking around your blasted station, trying to prevent the ceremony from taking place and letting a foolish Human nearly kill himself to stop me."

"So there's no honour fallout from the fight itself?" Marcus found that hard to believe. "I would have thought they'd want that stain scrubbed clean!"
"Not in the Religious Caste, nor the Worker Caste," said Neroon. "Both of those were quite happy I did not kill you, even though it meant great personal dishonour. In the case of the Religious Caste, especially because it meant great personal dishonour. The Religious Caste do love their sacrifices. If what my sources in the other castes tell me is true, I have reason to believe my own personal standing has in fact improved in their eyes. As for the Warrior Caste ... they are best left to me, where I have a substantial amount of influence." Marcus rolled his eyes. Yet more tight-lipped Warrior Caste nonsense. He'd specifically told Neroon he wanted none of this. "As a matter of fact, any ordinary officer should be reporting to their superior," added Neroon. "But I am no ordinary officer."

"Oh, no, of course not," said Marcus, "Special Alyt Neroon from his Special Forces Star Riders, the most Special Clan from the most Special Caste gets his Special Treatment."

Neroon glared. "Right now, this special treatment is one of the few things that stops the Warrior Caste from turning on its own - or worse, the priests and workers!" he said. "So yes. It is special treatment. And that's a weapon I shall happily wield. Instead of reporting my movements to the Shai Alyt, I have the benefit of reporting them to a lower-ranked member of my own clan. Before those reported movements are sent to the Shai Alyt for his record, I and three of the Clan Mothers - of my choosing, might I add - must sign off on them. Thus do I exert control over that information."

"Then why was the number you dialed concealed?"

"Because if I dial openly without appropriate security firewalls, the Shai Alyt can discover the identity of the lower-ranked member of my own clan to whom I have been reporting my movements, and can make preparations to view that information for himself before I send it to him in my final report." Neroon continued, somewhat evasively, "His haste has ... complicated things in the past."

"Is there any possibility that the Star Rider you're contacting is a Shadow agent?" asked Marcus. "I mean it. Any at all?"

"There's no possibility! They're - they're hardly out of training," said Neroon. "They have never been off-world. They have never spoken to anyone who has, besides myself. So I do not know what to tell you but that there was a bad feeling about it and that this entire plan of yours reeked of rashness at the expense of success so I thought -" Neroon cut himself off and sighed. "But it doesn't matter, you won't learn," he muttered.

"No, no, please, let's all hear your criticisms!" said Marcus. "What does the great military genius Neroon think?"

"I thought this plan of yours was nonsense from the beginning!" Neroon snapped. "Smoking out your Drazi agent like cornered prey. Going off on your own to do it, with your ribs -"

"They're much better now, thanks ever so much for asking," Marcus spat back.

"You could have died," Neroon said.

"Hah," said Marcus. "Didn't know you cared."

"I don't know why I do either," shouted Neroon, throwing up his hands, "I don't know why I bother since you so foolishly squander your livelihood! Do you have any idea how stupid that was, to sacrifice yourself like that?"

"That's what Rangers do!" yelled Marcus. "And moreover that's what the Warrior Caste does! Or is supposed to do - meanwhile, you've been sitting on your hands for years now!"

"There would be no reason, you would have died without finishing your mission," Neroon retorted.
"Die while you carry it out, that's one thing. Die without achieving anything? Oh yes, that's very well! You would have died uselessly and the Entil'Zha would have had to send someone else in your stead, and furthermore! Furthermore, do you really think I could have avoided all suspicion? I already tried to kill you once! They'll say what's to stop this bloodthirsty Warrior from doing it again? So that I can vault myself into a position of greater influence in my own caste by gaining the Shai Alyt's favour in finishing the job I started! If you die, that complicates matters for me, don't you realise that? Do you think I don't know what they say about me?"

"How could I?" said Marcus. "I know nothing about Minbari politics."

"Exactly! You know nothing about it but you interlope and pretend like you do when you are completely lost and out of your element. Leave the Minbari politics to me."

"Then you leave the Ranger mission to me!"

"Fine!"

"Fine! Then you can tell me exactly where in the Warrior Caste is the information leak to the agents of the Shadows, because I already know there is one," Marcus said. "Part of my job is figuring out where the information flows and how it gets to them. Now, I know it's in your caste. I need to know where."

"Is this why you brought me along?" asked Neroon bitterly. "Because Delenn thinks I can be your turncoat Warrior spy for you Rangers?"

"No!" Yes. "You were brought along because you gave me such a beating I could barely hold my own against a single bloody Drazi!"

"Oh, of course! I had forgotten! You brought me so that when you were uselessly slain -"

"It's not useless!" Marcus shouted.

"Don't get mouthy with me," said Neroon, "it's yourself who deserves the ire and all of the blame."

"And here we go with what people deserve," muttered Marcus.

"You're sorry you survived!" Neroon thundered.

Marcus shut up, stunned into silence.

How dare he.

There was a tense silence after Neroon's words. Even Neroon seemed to realise he'd crossed a line, but either he couldn't stop himself, or he didn't care to, and he continued in a dangerous murmur. "I've seen it before, in people like you. I've seen it before in myself. Or do you think I've lost no one? You're sad you're the last one standing, so you think it doesn't matter and you can go off and make it a clean sweep. Is that it? Hm? Smarten up," he hissed. "I just have to look at you to see the measure of you. I'll wager your mora'dum was about other people's deaths - I'm right, aren't I?"
"You don't know anything about me," snarled Marcus.

"Indeed I don't, because you prate on about inanities instead of opening your mouth for what's relevant," spat Neroon.

"Everything I do - everything - is so that it'll mean something!" Marcus found himself hollering.

"Ah," said Neroon. "I understand, now. So your mora'dum was about your failure resulting in other people's needless, useless, meaningless deaths."

Marcus didn't even think, he simply reacted, and within a split second he was standing, with his pike in hand.

Neroon was faster. He leapt to his feet, extended his pike before Marcus could and with a whip of a stroke had sent Marcus' still-collapsed pike careening into the corner of the balcony. "Don't play with me, Cole," he growled, low and throaty.

"Who's playing? You've selected your words to maim," said Marcus.

"I told you I knew exactly how much a weapon they were," Neroon replied. Then he looked at the pike as though perceiving it for the first time. He collapsed it and put it back in its holster. He sat back down heavily at the table. He took up the mug of tea; finding it empty, he set it back down again. "I don't intend to harm you," he insisted. He gestured to Marcus' empty hand. "I would not have harmed you."

"No, you don't get to say that after everything you just said!" snapped Marcus. "And the way that you said it. You knew what you were doing! In the war you killed fifty thousand of us. Well! Go on! What's one more, eh?"

"You'd be surprised," said Neroon, abashed.

"Try me," he retorted. He turned and stalked off, kicking his knocked-over chair as he went, to pick up his pike. "Nothing about you surprises me anymore."

After a long silence, Neroon said, "We fight for life. If you won't fight for your own, I need to know about it, so that I can fight for yours too. That is what the Entil'Zha has charged me to do."

Marcus refused to look back, staring over the balcony at the city. It calmed him, somewhat. Mostly it was helpful not to have Neroon's highly punchable face in his sights. "You're overlooking something if you think what I've done here wasn't calculated," he shot back.

"I beg to differ! What possible calculation was there in simply smoking out your prey from its hiding hole?" asked Neroon. "I expect tactics from you!"

"You're getting them, if you'd bother opening your mind to what I call tactics."

"What you call tactics I call a dangerously lucky break. If I hadn't disobeyed you..." Neroon had wandered over to the balcony and was leaning on it next to him. Marcus would have to make it plainer that this hedging at friendliness did not constitute an apology.

"And what would you have done? Wait around for Ka Phor to contact you?"

Neroon did not really have an answer. "He certainly knows we're hunting him now," he said.

"And he'll be scared shitless," said Marcus. "Which means he'll make mistakes. We'll follow the
trail.” He turned to face Neroon, who had the decency to look sorry, even if he wasn't really. "Mistakes and lies. You don't believe in either of them but I can't stress how useful they've been. That's what I'm trying to track."

Neroon seemed to accept this. "Supposing he's left the planet," he said.

"He can't have, he'd have to log it with customs."

"And he logged all his previous movements, did he?"

Good point, thought Marcus. "But to have deleted the movements he would have needed a higher level clearance than he has."

"Gorrom," supplied Neroon.

"Mm. I thought Ka Phor might have bullied him into acting again," said Marcus.

Then there was silence. "Very well," said Neroon at last. "What's your next idea?"

Marcus laughed derisively. "You mean you don't have your own ideas? That you'd like to interject?"

"This is your mission, Anla'shok," said Neroon. "I am simply your defender."

No doubt Neroon would criticise every plan Marcus could conjure up. "We go back to Gorrom, ask him about what Ka Phor's been making him do," said Marcus. "Get his full disclosure."

But instead of criticising, Neroon said only, "Very good," and nodded.

"Lunch first," said Marcus. "It's about that time. We've been shouting at each other all morning and I'm famished."

"Anla'shok," began Neroon.

"Don't," he snapped. "Anyway, you were right." About how well ferreting out Ka Phor had gone? Perhaps not. About Marcus? He was bang on, and Marcus was incensed Neroon was able to glean so much of him from so relatively little. How dare he read me like a book.

"I was cruel," Neroon replied.

"Yeah," said Marcus. He pushed off from the balcony. "That too." He walked back to the room, prepared to fetch his shoes so they could leave for the day - it was already getting too warm - when a quiet utterance from Neroon gave him pause.

"You see, this is why," said Neroon, "you won the denn'shah."

Marcus stopped. He turned, and fixed Neroon with a cautious glare. "I don't think the beating you gave me qualifies as me winning," he said. "So when you say I won -"

"I meant it truly," said Neroon, with all the simplicity of a weather report.

"You beat me bloody and unconscious."

"Yes."

"And you could've killed me. I fail how to see where, exactly, I won!"
"The death was mine, I told you that when you were lying in the medical ward on Babylon 5."
Neroon grimaced. "The death of my convictions."

"Think I was still unconscious for that bit," said Marcus. "What convictions were these, exactly?"

"About Humans," said Neroon. "You must understand, having fought you, I saw exactly how little honour there is in your species. How little there can be. To let go of my experiences and my instincts shaped by them - that was not easy."

He straightened, leaving his stance against the balcony, and approached Marcus slowly, step by step, like a hunting lion. Marcus was beginning to doubt Neroon intended to be so intimidating. It just came to him naturally.

"In fact, I may never, not fully," Neroon continued. "But ... your people are to be our allies, now. Or something like allies - in any case, we fight on the same side. We all contribute to the Anla'shok. Even though I may not like it. Even though Minbari Warriors swear never to ally with the honourless. We do not give up our oaths. There must, then, be some sort of honour in you. And I think perhaps there is." Neroon had approached Marcus and stood, a foot away, studying his face with a curiosity. "No, I don't think," he said, "I know. That is what I saw. That's what stayed my hand from a killing blow. The dishonour remains, but there is - at least in significant enough portions - honour. Therefore, I have to trust, or hope, that the honour wins out."

Marcus was silent.

"Do I offend?" asked Neroon softly.

He sighed. "Not really," he said, upon reflection. "That's an insightful thing you say." Marcus thought of the homeworld he'd never visited and its new president and his reign of terror. He thought of the lawlessness of the Psi Corps. He thought of the many, many crimes of Earthforce. And then he thought of Babylon 5. "There is a lot I don't like about us. There's a lot I don't like about me. Sometimes it seems like... there's not much we can choose to do to keep the dreck down. Sometimes we make a mess of things, and it gets a lot worse before it gets better. Sometimes even we can do nothing about it but hold out hope. I place honour in that hope. I hope you do too." Throughout this Neroon had remained quiet, watching him. "Why? Did you mean to offend me?" he asked.

"No," said Neroon.

"Would you have been at all sorry if you had?" asked Marcus.

A brief smirk played on the corner of Neroon's mouth. "No," he admitted.

"Yeah, 'course not," muttered Marcus. He reached out and set his hand on Neroon's shoulder. Neroon stared at the hand but didn't throw him off, waiting until Marcus removed it himself with an awkward pat. Neroon continued to eye it, flicking his glance down in nervous twitches, as though readying himself and anticipating Marcus' further touch. "Come on, then. Before the heat hits."

"This is not easy for me," said Neroon. "Because of who you are. Because of who I am. And... I am sorry. But I am trying."

Well. Wasn't that nice. "You could try harder," Marcus said, slightly mollified by an actual apology.

Neroon looked nearly forlorn. "That's easy for you to say. Humans are more used to it than Minbari."

Then get used to it, he thought snappishly. The Minbari (all Castes, but certainly the Warriors) had
been entrenched in their ways for far too long. It was high time they started to adapt. But why bother? He'd tolerate Neroon's company for a few more days, possibly another week, and then they'd part ways. No, you picked your battles, and this one wasn't worth Marcus' fight.

Chapter End Notes

I've been really excited for this fight for awhile now :D It's Back To Bickering, My Friends

This chapter's a tidge early (so you know how I said I couldn't promise any kinda update schedule? I've incidentally been sticking to Fridays) so I'm skipping off this Friday's update and try and get more written to better establish a backlog. Please forgive me, and wish me luck!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Just so you're aware, you should absolutely picture the fight scene in this chapter as nature intended; i.e., being set to Mamma Mia. That's truly the only way to picture fight scenes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They returned to the pub where Marcus had met Janella Xortl. "Is this a public house?" asked Neroon.

"Are you a Puritan magistrate? You're literally the only person I've ever met who would call it that," said Marcus, "and yes. Don't get your robes in a twist - it's not all that bad."

"My robes are perfectly fine," said Neroon, smoothing them down anyway to restore their former splendour. That they were - he'd done a good job stitching up the neckline. "I am just - acclimatising." Poorly, and slowly, thought Marcus.

He was looking around with some distaste. "Not to your liking? I'll bet you've never been in a proper pub before." Marcus paused. "This isn't it, by the way," he added. "This is too upscale for the Drazi. No one would think of breaking a table over someone's head in here. No, this is the mahogany wood-panelling equivalent of a pub." Neroon looked blank. "That doesn't mean anything to you, does it," realised Marcus. "Planet full of teetotallers. At any rate, the first time I got an in to Gorrom's office, it was here. I'm hoping it works out for me again."

They took a table and ordered some lunch, and about ten minutes after it arrived, Janella Xortl entered and took a seat at the bar, by the open rolling overhead door. It must have been her usual spot, because no sooner had she sat down had the bartender pulled a tap of something dark blue and viscous. He added a little pink straw to the glass and slid it down the bar her way, and she waved her thanks.

Marcus, who had finished his sandwich well in advance, watched out of the corner of his eye until she had nearly finished the drink. "'Scuse me," he said, "that's my cue." Neroon hardly looked up from his soup.

But when he slid into the seat beside Janella, she turned away. "I'm not contagious, I promise," said Marcus cheerily.

"I am the one who is sick," Janella replied, "sick and tired of being used. The Finance Minister wasn't happy about last time."

"I only chatted him up," he said. "He can't have been too mad!" He frowned. Ka Phor must have gotten to Gorrom sooner than he'd anticipated, and shit had evidently rolled downhill to Janella. "Let me buy you another, as apology?" he asked.

"I'll buy my own, thanks," she replied coolly. "Your friend can buy me drinks anytime he wants, though."
"My -?" Marcus turned back to Neroon, who wasn't even looking at them. "You mean the Minbari?"
His tone was too incredulous to be flattering, but it wasn't like Neroon was eavesdropping.

Janella shrugged. "The bones are a novelty," she said. "I bet it makes a nice grip for when his face is between my legs." She laughed long and loud at Marcus' dumbstruck expression.

Thus did Marcus return to Neroon and sit down heavily. "So, this is new," he began. "She won't give me the time of day, but she'll clearly give it to you."

"What," said Neroon.

"My thoughts exactly! All kinds of unfair, if you ask me, and there's really no accounting for taste," said Marcus wryly, "but do you think you could take over this part of the job?"

Neroon quietly finished his meal and set down the utensils with a sharp clink. "I am not enthused at the idea of lying to her," he said. "Or indeed to anyone."

"Harmless bit of flirting," Marcus said. "No lies."

"You want me to lead her on," Neroon replied.

"You're not leading her on!" he said. "You're buying her drinks and letting her talk to you, that's all. Is that a Minbari courting ritual I haven't heard of?"

Neroon paused, thinking, and his lips pursed. "It is admittedly not," he said. "Then? Have at it. Get anything that'll get us into the Justice Centrum to speak to Gorrom. Just don't tell her who you really are. And don't tell her who I really am."

"I had gathered that much," drawled Neroon. "I'm a novice, not an imbecile."

"Now, you be nice to Goody Janella," said Marcus. Neroon flipped him off.

But Neroon wound up - inadvertently, or unintentionally - being very good at chatting up a lady Drazi. By the body language, Janella seemed attracted (would wonders ever cease) and Neroon was attentive to her conversation. Janella smiled - Neroon returned it. He was even being kind. A far cry from the mercilessness he'd shown not two hours prior, and Marcus found himself not a little resentful. She wouldn't like him so much if she knew how sharp that tongue could be. Actually, she was Drazi - maybe she would.

Whatever her interest - the bones are a novelty, really, she was as piss-poor a liar as Neroon, for what would a Drazi want with a Minbari - she was flirting with him. There were a few points that Marcus could identify that Neroon could not. There was no way Neroon knew what Drazi flirtation looked like, for if he did, he surely wouldn't be playing right into her tricks, which he was. Janella leaned forward over the bar. Neroon leaned forward in response. She pressed her lower lip up against the top to make it look more plush. He smiled - he even made it look relaxed. The frills of scales on her neck and cheekbones flared out. Neroon had definitely noticed that, because he dropped his gaze to them in a manner that almost looked coy.

The scales thing meant she was aroused. There was no way Neroon had picked up on that. He could not possibly know. This was a dance he could not have known the steps to, but somehow he was faking it really well.

"<Xortal steals all the nice ones>," said a voice behind him. Marcus looked back to find their waiter with their bill. He paid, clinking his credit chip against the waiter's hand-held device, as the waiter
began collecting the empty plates. "<Some people call her a maneater, but I say, the girl likes what
she likes, let her have her fun. Anyway, you can't be too upset.>"

"<Me, never! Not upset!>" said Marcus. "<Also, he - not nice.>"

"<You're watching them pretty hard>," the waiter added. "<And you keep glaring. Looks like
jealousy to me.>" Marcus was scrambling for the right words to reply but the waiter plodded on. "<It
was awful good of you to hook up your friend when you struck out. I hope you told him she's got
claws. She only takes people for a night.>" The waiter studied Marcus again. "<On second thought,
maybe not so good of you after all.>"


"<Oh, certainly>," the waiter replied. "<At least as well as she's handling him, eh?>"

Marcus turned around to see Janella practically in Neroon's lap. Neroon wasn't pushing her off.

Marcus would never listen to Lennier again. 'Do not touch me in that fashion'? What a load of tosh!
Neroon's face was guarded and impassive but if he minded Janella's touch on his thigh - good Lord -
then Marcus was sure he'd have knocked her hand aside, not ... slip his hands around her waist.

This is sickening, thought Marcus, and turned away.

"<Ah>," said the waiter. "<He's noticed you stopped watching them.>"

"<Well, sorry for him>," said Marcus tartly, "<if I watch longer, maybe turn into pillar of salt.>"

"<I think you're already pretty salty>," the waiter replied.

Up yours, thought Marcus.

Neroon returned moments later, after the waiter had already left. He stood next to Marcus' chair.
"There's a back entrance," he said. "She says she'll meet us there in thirty minutes, once she's had
something to eat. I recommended her the soup. Judging from your facial expressions, your meal
seems to have given you indigestion."

"You should know that I'm carefully cataloguing every nasty thing you are saying to me, and there
shall one day be retribution," said Marcus. Then he processed the actual meat of the material Neroon
had said, instead of its sarcasm marinade. "Hang on. She'll meet us both there?"

"That is," said Neroon. "She said she'd meet me there. But since she's feeling kind, she'll let you
watch." Naturally, thought Marcus. "The back entrance is a little tucked away and mostly out of
sight. She said it was perfect for - I didn't catch the term, khrolarrat?"

Christ. "You're not doing that with her."

Neroon snorted. "What are you, my guardian?"

"No," said Marcus, "you're supposed to be mine!" No point in telling him what it meant, Neroon's
teasing suggested he already had an inkling. "Anyway, how is that going to help us?"

"Because," Neroon replied, "we shall already be inside the Justice Centrum by then." He leaned in -
a little too close for Marcus' taste - and Marcus only realised after Neroon had slid something towards
him on the table that the proximity was merely to block Janella's view. The something was Janella's
keycard.
"That was on her waist," Neroon added. "And she was sufficiently distracted, and judging by the suspected meaning of khrolarrat, the keycard likely contains access for the door."

"I don't believe this," said Marcus. He tucked the keycard up his sleeve. "I can't tell if I'm proud or aghast. You know, I think it's both."

"You're welcome," said Neroon haughtily.

"Well, let her down easy," said Marcus.

Neroon shrugged, flippant. "Let her join the club."

"What." He tried to picture Neroon as the type to leave a string of broken hearts in his wake and utterly failed. Neroon was simply too ... Neroon.

"Of people I've let down," Neroon continued. "What did you think I meant?"

"No. I refuse to play guessing games with you," said Marcus.

Then Neroon bent next to Marcus' ear, uncomfortably close, and murmured, "I wouldn't be too upset. She spotted us together the instant she arrived here. I don't think she was attracted to me at all, merely playing me for information, because she knows enough about the Anla'shok that they're a Minbari organisation. She was simply wrong about which of us was a member."

Which meant that someone told Janella about the Anla'shok, which meant she couldn't be trusted not to be associated, however indirectly, with Ka Phor. Well, suppose Marcus should have anticipated that, given that she was associated with Gorrom. And Marcus was trying to conjure up a reason why Janella would want to know more about the Rangers - a reason that didn't involve her ferreting information to be delivered to either Ka Phor or Gorrom - and he was coming up empty.

But Gorrom knew about the Rangers - maybe Gorrom had put her on the case.

Or maybe she was involved at a deeper, more sinister level.

"We should leave before she realises her card's been palmed," said Marcus. "Use the lavatory, and exit through there. I'll wait thirty seconds, then follow."

Neroon left immediately. After waiting a spell, Marcus followed, and found him waiting outside the pub. "Justice Centrum," said Marcus, pointing it out a hundred metres down the road.

They scanned Janella's pass and left it outside. Perhaps Janella would be by and think she'd dropped it when she arrived. Perhaps she didn't expect a Minbari to steal from her. Perhaps Marcus didn't care, because she was somehow involved and it wasn't on the side against the Shadows. Neroon pushed the door open, expecting a guard that didn't show. "The security here is highly lax," he said.

"Drazi," explained Marcus. "A pass to open a door is relative security for them."

He took the first stairwell he found up two floors, then he fled down the hall to the right door. "This way," he told Neroon, and directed him in to Gorrom's office.

Neroon frowned as he stepped through. "Are you certain this is the correct room?"

Marcus followed him into a very different office than the one he had just been in, not a week ago. Devoid of anything were the bookshelves that lined the walls, and the furniture - the massive desk, the many plush armchairs - was all gone. Even the light fixtures were missing, and the open
windows lacked any curtains - the only light in the room. The rugs had been lifted, and in three places the floorboards were uneven, as though someone had opened them up and set them back in haste. The only thing that remained was the wall-mounted computer. Marcus strode over to it for a closer inspection. The sides were clawed at, as if by some tool, but to no avail, as the frame of the computer remained embedded in the wall.

"This is absurd," Marcus said softly.

"I take it not all Drazi places of work are this sparse," said Neroon.

"No," he said. "It wasn't like this a week ago."

"So you had thought that Gorrom was being blackmailed," said Neroon. "Was the fellow you fought capable of this level of threat?"

"I really didn't think so," said Marcus. "He's run. Well, check around - see if he's left any clues as to where -"

"Ah," interrupted Neroon.

"You know, anything that might tip us off to where he's got to," Marcus added. "Scraps of paper. Maybe a travel stub." Meanwhile, Marcus busied himself with the computer.

"That wasn't my concern, Mister Cole," said Neroon.

That was the first time Neroon had called him this. Most usually it was Anla'shok, said dryly with a tone of eye roll. It made Marcus turn back -

To find a line of twenty Drazi in the room, some with blades at the ready, blocking their exit. The one nearest the door closed it with a firm click.

Hired men.

"Don't suppose you lot would be so kind as to tell us where Gorrom's got to," asked Marcus.

The Drazi did not react.


One of the Drazi bared his teeth in a grimace, exposing pointy-looking incisors.

"Of course, we could continue to question these ...fine folk," said Neroon, backing up slowly until he was next to Marcus, "perhaps after we have given them some encouragement to speak." Once with Marcus, he squatted low enough to retrieve the denn'bok strapped to his thigh. The Drazi watched him do this, leering as he lifted his robe. Marcus felt his ire simmer.

"You know," said Marcus, "I think you're finally catching on to how this game is played. Watch the blades."

"Poisoned," said Neroon.

"Yes, actually! How did you -"

"Not an imbecile," Neroon snapped. "Trust your instincts. I'll trust mine. We'll meet in the middle."

Marcus removed his denn'bok as well. They extended the pikes, and the Drazi charged.
The thing about fighting so many at once was that you couldn't let yourself get boxed in, and Neroon had done precisely that by backing up to Marcus' position by the wall with the computer. But that gave the Drazi more distance to cross, which meant those with longer legs and longer strides separated from others who fell behind. The other thing about fighting a line of armed guards was to make sure you weren't fighting many at the same time, to try and force your enemies to stagger their attacks as best you could.

Plus which, Neroon plunged headlong much faster than Marcus could, and probably faster than he himself should, given his injuries. Most of the Drazi went for the terrifying looking Minbari, their blades sharp and ready.

Three came at Marcus immediately. He kicked out to the nearest in the gut - the other two got the pike, one end to one face, the other to his ribs. Two more flew in - one swung out with his blade. Marcus skirted aside and the blade caught another Drazi in the cheek. Another blade - Marcus ducked - then launched up, jabbing with the pike, and caught him in the throat, and the Drazi flew back, gasping for breath. Marcus kicked out - caught another - swung down with the pike - threw one to the ground - twirled the pike in circles around him - caught two more - and it was like a dance, the back and forth, as only two Drazi were ever coming for him at any one instant, and the rest were winded and catching breath or on the ground.

The only advantage in fighting a line of armed guards was if you took them out so quickly that the others had to climb the ones who had fallen to get at you, as Marcus caught three Drazi doing out of the corner of his eye, while he dispensed with two more, twirling his pike over his head as he spun about, and whacking both upside the head. Three Drazi - three blades - three quick strokes of the pike in a Z-formation - no more Drazi.

Between Marcus' swings, he could see Neroon's far fancier twirls and turns as he spun, pike in hand, using the force of the turn to ram it even harder into whoever's body was waiting - leaping up and slamming the pike on the downswing so hard it flattened his unlucky opponents.

Marcus swung his pike up and caught a Drazi under the arms, then booted him away with a swift kick.

Neroon sprang up off one fallen Drazi to whack another, then twirled the pike around his arm, flung it behind his back, caught it deftly and swung down, striking a Drazi along the jaw.

Marcus twisted about-face, kneed his pike upwards, and threw it uppercut into a Drazi chin.

Neroon leaned his pike vertically and vaulted himself up to kick two Drazi in the face, landed, spun the pike around his neck and caught it, then hit three more - someone's ribs - someone's gut - someone's else's ribs - so fast it blurred.

What a show-off.

More often than not, Marcus noticed, Neroon wasn't using the brace of his body to lever a harder swing. He was just that forceful. His obliques must be ridiculous, thought Marcus. No wonder he was so bloody heavy. If it wasn't the bone density, it was the muscle.

They were for a time on opposite corners of the room, whirling the pikes around to keep the Drazi and their blades at a radius, but Neroon broke his way through, wedging himself closer to Marcus, dropping Drazi as he did. "You're fading," he said, as he thrust the pike forward into a Drazi throat. "I can see the fatigue in your muscles."

"Haven't you got more important things to keep your attention," said Marcus. He skidded forward
and elbowed a Drazi in the nose, then thrust the pike behind and caught another in the thigh.

"You don't deny it," said Neroon. He whirled the pike around and parried a blade from behind his back, sending it flying away. Another jab at that Drazi's wrist broke it - he wouldn't be picking anything else up.

"Said it before -" Marcus struck a Drazi across the face - "and I'll say it again -" he knee'd another in the solar plexus - "you broke my ribs, mate."

Marcus heard only Neroon's dark, low chuckle before he appeared in Marcus' space, dancing along with him and twirling the pike in time.

And if this was the dance then the symphony was their shared synced breaths, the whirr of their pikes - inches from each other's ears, never hitting an ally - the swish of Neroon's robes as he stepped, forward, back, again - punctuated by the grunts of the Drazi they bested and the clang of pike on sword, one after another after another. Marcus could hear Neroon behind him - he could sense him, and if he extended the mindfulness of his proprioception a little more, he felt he knew exactly where Neroon's muscles were at all times.

It hadn't been like this in training. This was a well-oiled machine, how they fit together, and when Neroon began using Marcus' personal space to plan his strikes, and Marcus used Neroon's, darting around each other, darting over each other's legs, arms, and pikes - it felt thrillingly natural.

Honestly, spooning him for warmth had been less intimate.

Gradually the flock of enemies thinned until five remained, then three, then two. The rest were unconscious or near it, groaning from the floor. "Alright," said Marcus. "Shall we call it done?"

Neroon struck down his opponent so hard they flew three feet and lay there, crumpled against the wall. "Now we're done," he said, harried.

"Are you one of those blokes that always has to have the last word in?" asked Marcus. "Because I will make that difficult for you."

But Neroon didn't take the bait. "I trained for years to be half that good," he spat instead, a frenzied anger in his eyes. "You had, what, three months?"

"Look, you're still better," said Marcus. "Should think you'd be happy I'm not a liability," he added. "Maybe even proud of your pathetic Human charge."

Neroon didn't reply, curling his lips nastily. He gets so vexed when I'm right, thought Marcus. And another thing: Marcus wasn't the only one who had noticed how well they fought. As though dovetailed. Maybe that was what had him so huffy.

The Drazi at Marcus' feet groaned, and he supposed that was enough bickering with Neroon. Marcus knelt to look the Drazi in the eyes, and Neroon put his pike at the Drazi's throat - eerily reminiscent of the way he'd held it in front of Marcus at the conclusion of the denn'shah. "I assume you were paid," said Neroon, and his tone made it clear what he thought of mercenaries, generally. "I doubt, however, that whatever price bought you was enough to buy your silence, so you will tell this blasted Human what he needs to know, or you won't talk again."

The Drazi grunted. "It's possible he doesn't understand you," said Marcus. A government agent might speak English - a hired man wouldn't. "<I have questions. You have answers>," Marcus said in Drazi. "<Who you work for?>"
"Oh, please. Mine was significantly more eloquent," muttered Neroon.

"I would've said wordy," said Marcus.

"<Half paid in advance, more paid later>," croaked the Drazi. "<I want the rest.>"

"<You talk, you don't get money>," said Marcus, "<you don't talk, you don't get money. But you talk - you live.>" He put his knee in the centre of the Drazi's chest and pressed down, watching the Drazi wince. "<Yes?>"

"<I'll say nothing>," said the Drazi.

Marcus relayed this to Neroon. "I'm impressed at his honour," Neroon decided.

Marcus scowled. "There's nothing honourable about it! I'll bet he really needs the credits." Bit strange that there was another payment.

"Don't worry," said Neroon blandly, "less impressed than I was at you."

"I'm not jealous," said Marcus.

Neroon said nothing and smirked. Then with a single swift jab of the pike, he knocked the man out cold. "The one he's lying atop has just regained consciousness," he said. He toed the unconscious Drazi off and kicked him aside to roll him away. Then he put the pike at this new Drazi's throat.

"<Can't say!>" said the Drazi beneath, holding up his hands. "<Won't say!>"

"<Why you can't say?>"

"<We were hired, yes, that much is clear - our hire has connections, friends - awful friends! But also has lots of money. Skillfully have we fought today - we want the money!>"

"<Yes, we before meet these friends>," said Marcus. "<You maybe tell me something? Who awful friends?>"

But the Drazi shook his head, gibbering, "<Can't say, won't say.>"

_Friends_ had Marcus thinking. "<Green or purple?>" he asked.

The Drazi ceased his muttering. "<Why - I fight green, of course>," he said, as though offended there could be any other option.

"<Labour or centre party?>"

"<Labour!>"

"<Thrazda?>"

The Drazi nearly spit. "<Kri Maru!>"

"<You spear-throw?>" asked Marcus.

"<Never! Archery!>"

"<And if I say, go Zherres ->"

"<I say go fuck yourself! Team Iron Nrokh'tag!>"
"Hmm. *Maybe* don't tell me to go fuck myself when my friend has a pike at your throat," said Marcus softly.

"He didn't say that," said Neroon.

"He did."

Neroon tutted. "Insolent. Did you get what you needed out of him?"

"I did."

"Good," sneered Neroon, and knocked him out with a single jab.

Marcus got to his feet and collapsed his pike. "You hadn't had to do that," he said.

"That's your opinion," said Neroon.

"We ought to leave now before anyone else notices what's happened here," says Marcus, "and tries to stop us. Or worse, thinks it's a party, and tries to join in."

Neroon collapsed his pike and tucked it away in the holster he kept beneath his robes. Underneath them he wore what looked like black knee-length leggings, but his calves were bare. Marcus wasn't quite sure why he noticed this. The colour, he decided. Milk-white against something so dark. "We have not discovered any new information about Gorrom."

"Actually, we did," said Marcus. "And that's the problem. You know how I told you that affiliations and groups were central to rivalries in Drazi society?"

"Yes. So?"

Marcus slipped out of Gorrom's office - the hallway was by some miracle of chance empty - and headed down the stairs. "So these men fighting together must have been of the same groups," he explained, as Neroon followed. "And they wouldn't've been hirable by anyone who wasn't of the same groups. You could make a case for hobbies and sports teams, but I'd think the Shadak team at least has to be the same. The one I asked wasn't any of Ka Phor's affiliations. Those were all Gorrom's affiliations."

"Then Gorrom hired those men to take us out," suggested Neroon.

"Ka Phor could have browbeaten Gorrom into doing it," argued Marcus. "It's possible Ka Phor was so convincing that Gorrom lied to them. Told them he was hiring them himself, even though he'd be lying to his own greens on the order of a purple. That's uncharacteristic. It's possible he cleared out so quick because Ka Phor got to him. It's possible he arranged for that call to be deleted from our apartment on Ka Phor's orders. It's possible everything he's done has been because of Ka Phor's influence."

"But it is also possible, and indeed a simpler solution," said Neroon, "that there are two agents of these Shadows."

"Ka Phor has absolutely no standing in Drazi society at the moment," reasoned Marcus. "He's been out of work a year. Meanwhile, Gorrom is Finance Minister. I can't see how he'd have any ability to influence Gorrom at all." He grimaced. "Unless what he has over Gorrom is very damning. But when I spoke to Janella, she only mentioned the issue with the aides, and I thought that had been cleared up." Their best bet would be working Ka Phor against Gorrom: two men of disjoint sets of affiliations? It'd be a cinch to pit them against each other.
They exited the Centrum to bright, oppressive sunlight. Someone was already waiting for them.

Or, thought Marcus, perhaps it was not Gorrom at all, but someone who worked for him.

"I'd like a word, Ranger," said Janella Xortl soberly.

It grabbed both Neroon's and Marcus' attention. "So you're both from this Ranger organisation," she murmured, looking between the two of them. "I wondered. I didn't think the Minbari would let the Humans anywhere near them."

"Neither did I, once upon a time," muttered Neroon. He did not correct Janella on her assumption.

"You weren't too quiet up there," Janella said. "We could all hear you from the hallway. You're lucky I'm the only one in our department who speaks English." Coincidence, or conspiracy, thought Marcus, mistrustful. "So I have a proposition for you: I'm required to attend a work function the day after tomorrow at the conference hall uptown, quadrant forty-three by fifty-nine. Li Gorrom will be there," she continued. "I'm allowed a guest. That's your best bet to get to Li Gorrom. You clearly didn't get to have your chat just now."

"That's rather generous of you," said Marcus.

"Oh, you're not going to be the guest. He is," she replied, gesturing to Neroon. Marcus glowered. "Hey, I meant what I said about the bones."

"Must I?" said Neroon, scowling. "I despise grandiose affairs."

In that case, thought Marcus, he absolutely must. "Dinner and dancing, so bring nicer robes," Janella said. She smirked. "Hope you know how to treat a lady."

"Gorrom's already met me," Marcus realised. "If he sees me there, he'll dash."

"He might," said Janella. "But he was certain you were working alone, and he's never met Mikrine here - though I'm sure he'll have worked it out that you're fun in a fight by tomorrow night, should he meet up with any of those men upstairs. I can ensure he's busy enough not to have the time to speak to them."

Most generous. "Supposing we do this," said Marcus, "what do you want in return?" Because of course she must want something in return.

"I want out of whatever Gorrom is wrapped up in," said Janella. "I didn't anticipate any of this. I'm just a temp worker. I'm happy to follow orders, but if the Finance Minister has attracted the attention of people outside the Freehold - like the Humans, and the Minbari - those are enemies I don't want to make. I got my orders, sure, but if this is what they cost, then screw my orders." She was concerned, and her concern seemed genuine.

Bully for her - Gorrom had seemed genuine too. "So you'd sell out your master, as it were?" asked Marcus. "To save your own scales."

"Hey, he's up to something shifty," said Janella. "And if he's going to go that route he can go it alone. I won't forfeit my career over some temp job that lands me in heat with the flesh and bones."
She realised she'd said something slightly pejorative. "Sorry," she added, sheepish. "Just an expression, you know. I don't mean anything by it."

"He's not alone," said Marcus. "Gorrom, I mean. He might have friends in very high places. Does that change anything?"
"Well, I've never met these friends," said Janella. "The only one who's come to see him was this young purple guy - surprised the Finance Minister even gave him the time of day; purple, you know? - and every time that one's been by, Li Gorrom's upset for hours later." Sounded like Ka Phor. Marcus kept his face very even, betraying nothing about his knowledge on Ka Phor, and hoped Neroon had managed the same. "Listen," she said. "I've got an appointment now with someone, other side of the Centrum."

"I doubt we shall be allowed back into the Centrum," said Neroon wryly. "Seeing as how we picked an altercation with twenty hired men inside it and disrupted business."

"Weekday entertainment," said Janella. "They should thank you for it."

"Before we go any further," said Marcus. "I want to know - green or purple?"

"Well, green," she said, "obviously."

"Labour or centre?"

"I'm an opportunist voter." Janella shrugged. "Labour - for the moment."

"Thrazda or Kri Maru?"

"Thrazda," she replied. "But I only go to church on Chu'dag."

"Any sports?"

"I'm a decent hand with axes," she said. "Haven't been to classes in years."

"Archery or spears?" Marcus asked. Janella shook her head. "Zherres or Iron Nrokh'tag?"

She scowled. "Neither, Phrantas for the cup all the way. They won three years ago. It was class." She waited. "Well? No more questions?"

"None for now," said Marcus. Those weren't all Ka Phor's affiliations, and they weren't all Gorrom's either. If she were being truthful about them. The better English a Drazi spoke, the less you ought to trust them, Marcus decided. That had been his experience thus far. But to lie about one's affiliations was really not done. He could be sure she was truthful about that, if not all of her motives.

"So you'll trust me?"

"I didn't say that," he replied.

Janella wasn't thrilled but took it as acquiescence. "Where can I find you?"

Marcus and Neroon exchanged a glance. "Do you know Li Mrakto?" asked Neroon. "The chef? South corner of quadrant fourteen by thirty-nine. I am taking classes with her. I'll -" he sighed and muttered, "I'll be there tomorrow, I suppose."

"Excellent," said Janella. "I'll call mid-afternoon."

Neroon waited for the door to the Justice Centrum to close firmly behind her before asking, "What did she mean by what she said about the bones?"

"You really don't want to know," Marcus muttered. "Come on. Back to the apartment - we'll speak more freely."
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience! (and your comments and kudos ❤️❤️) see you next week!
"I have been thinking," announced Neroon, upon their return home.

"Break out the bubbly," crowed Marcus. Neroon gave him a wry half-smile. "Well, what conclusion have you reached?"

"Nothing good," he said bitterly. "Allow me to place a call first. It has been a few days, I ought to check in."

Marcus prepared to vacate the room for the balcony but Neroon stopped him with a wave of his hand. "Simply stand to the side," he said, as he dialled through his link device for a voice call.

"You still don't trust me," said Marcus.

"It is not you I don't trust," Neroon replied.

The link device made a click-sound that told them someone had picked up. "<Ventrell of the Star Riders reporting>," Marcus heard, in a thick Fik accent. Ventrell sounded quite young.

"<Yes>," replied Neroon. "<This is son of Mikrine of the Starship Crafters, logging movements.>" Neroon's Fik was also accented, thought Marcus. The same kind of dialect he'd used days ago, when he offhandedly quoted a proverb. Marcus didn't know enough about Fik dialects to be able to place the location. Not Tuzanor.

"<It's - it's been a few days, sir>," said Ventrell.

"<My apologies. I was injured>," Neroon explained. "<Movements are as follows ...>"

And Marcus overheard Neroon give a quick but detailed summary of where he had been. He left nothing out and was very precise, except for the time they spent in the mountains, where there weren't exactly quadrants like in Zhoshesh Dorallo. "<This concludes a report of my movements>," he said. Then he paused. "<Have you got all that, child?>"

Neroon sounded almost kind, paternal. Child, thought Marcus, wondering how old Ventrell really was. "<Yes, sir!>" chirped Ventrell.

"<There is one other thing>," Neroon added. "<I received a call from an obscured number three days ago. Was this you?>"

"<No, sir>," said Ventrell. "<You instructed me not to communicate. So I receive only. I don't send. Those were my orders. I have obeyed them!>"

"<And were you not concerned when days passed and I did not contribute details of my movements?>"

"<It is not my place to have concern>," said Ventrell. "<And you are an Alyt! Ah. I mean. I did not say that. You are - who you are - so you are responsible for your own actions. I thought either that you had not moved, or that you were on a more covert mission. You yourself told me not to contact you under any circumstances.>>
Neroon nodded, though Ventrell was unable to see it. "<Yes, but should an emergency have arisen I would of course understand. Has there been anything?>"

"<No, sir>," replied Ventrell. "<Everything has been quiet here. Oh - that is ... three days ago, a riot broke out in Klolem between some Worker Caste guild and the local Fire Wings unit. No casualties. Three workers still in hospital. Workers are not used to tamok'lan.>" You don't say, thought Marcus.

"<I see>," said Neroon. "<And what did the Shai Alyt have to say about that?>"

"<He hasn't made a statement>," said Ventrell. "<I think he's busy with other matters.>

"<I see>," said Neroon again, more tightly. "<Thank you for the information. Is that all?>"

"<Yes, sir. I- I could compile a formal report!>" offered Ventrell, excited and eager.

"<That will not be necessary. Thank you.>"

"<May the stars guide you home, sir>," said Ventrell.

"<May they direct me well>," Neroon replied, and disconnected.

"Interesting," mused Neroon. He turned to Marcus. "What do you make of it?"

Marcus was surprised he was being asked for an opinion, as though Neroon really cared. But Neroon stood, waiting, and it didn't look like a joke. "Well, I caught the part about the riot," he said. Neroon nodded, rolling his hand in a gesture like yes, and? "I'm not sure," he decided. "It'd depend. How old are these Fire Wings? Kids, you know. Being kids."

"Patrolling units are composed of graduates five cycles out of military training," Neroon explained. "They are hardly children. They are expected to have restraint. Fire Wings can occasionally be lax in their discipline - antics within the caste is standard fare, but ..."

"But not against the workers," finished Marcus.

"No," said Neroon, "not in my experience."

He dialled Delenn from the computer, putting her on screen, and beckoned Marcus forward.

Delenn looked surprised to see them. "I had not expected an update," she said.

Neroon straightened his shoulders, puffing out his chest, and lifted his head. "It is we who require information from you, Entil'Zha," he said, imperious. Who is we, thought Marcus. "Has the Shai Alyt been in contact with you?"

"He has tried," said Delenn. "A number of times. I have been busy. We keep missing each other."

"Are you making much of an effort to hit the target?" asked Marcus.

"For his sake," said Delenn wryly, "no. In any case. To my knowledge, he is at the moment in Drogani. Ten hours' time difference - his daylight is my moonlight."

Marcus glanced at Neroon, who was frowning. "What?"

"Nothing," said Neroon. He snapped back to attention. "Of course, he is a Wind Sword. That is their main base of operations. It is sensible for him to be there."
"Indeed," said Delenn, watching Neroon with a cautious, curious expression.

"A few more questions. You did not contact me?"

"I have little reason," Delenn drawled, "and littler desire. No. I did not contact you, Neroon."

"And you've told no one about this mission," said Neroon.

Delenn straightened, souring. "It is Anla'shok business," she said tightly. "I have told some of the Anla'shok. That is my right."

"You told them that you had enlisted assistance from a serving Warrior Caste officer?"

"That, I have not divulged to anyone," Delenn snapped.

"And who of the Anla'shok -"

"Not the people I know of whom you speak," she said, interrupting. "I do not tell them anything I would not be willing to make public knowledge."

A security leak in the Rangers, Marcus wondered, alarmed. How? But it was clear the Entil'Zha was already well-briefed on it.

"Although from them, I have heard a most interesting rumour," Delenn added. She let a beat of silence elapse before declaring, "That you're dead, Neroon."

Neroon blanched. "Well," he said, gruffly. "Well. As you can see, such rumours are unfounded. So you needn't do anything so foolish as pray for my soul."

"Indeed not, by Valen's grace," said Delenn, with a deep nod. "I shall pass on word to the appropriate channels. Perhaps it will make it back to your Caste, some of whom seem very concerned over your demise. If that is all, I will disconnect now." And she did so without a further word.

Interesting. Marcus felt there was, with every word Neroon exchanged, something to be picked apart. He'd start with the obvious. "So, is there something wrong with the Shai Alyt being in Drogani?"

"Of course not," Neroon snapped.

"But you think he should be halfway around the world, in Klolem," said Marcus, "running damage control with the Worker Caste."

Marcus had been expecting a glare but there was surprise in Neroon's eyes; evidently, Marcus had taken the words right out of his mind. "I did not say that," Neroon said.

"You didn't have to," said Marcus. "Anyway, I would have thought the Star Rider you were talking to would have told you about this rumour about your untimely demise."

Neroon took a deep, long breath, after which he gave Marcus a slow, searching look. He said nothing. Then he left for the balcony, where he filled the kettle and set it on the stove to boil for tea. Marcus watched him as he waited there, perched on the balcony railing, with that famed ramrod-straight military posture, a stark figure against the Drazi skyline. The kettle whistled its completion minutes later, and he made two cups of the bland Drazi tea, then returned to Marcus, to whom he handed one of the cups.
Then he turned and closed the doors to the balcony.

This trapped them inside the small bedroom, where there was no room for furniture besides the bed, which took up the majority of the room, barring a foot of floor space around it. Neroon sat down at the headboard, against the wall, and Marcus followed suit in the centre. The bed was not big enough for two men of their stature to sleep on. It was also not really big enough for them to sit on without being too close. Their knees touched, but Neroon didn't seem to mind, so Marcus didn't say anything about it. Truthfully, the contact was a little calming. He'd never seen Neroon act quite like this before, and that was what stopped him from speaking up to ask what was the matter - Marcus had never been patient.

"Voices carry," explained Neroon. "As to this rumour, Ventrell would have told me about it, if he knew anything about it. He is somewhat isolated."

So information was leaking where it shouldn't be, and was withheld where it shouldn't be.

"Someone knows you fought a Shadow," suggested Marcus.

"That explains the reason for the call that was deleted by Gorrom," Neroon added. "Someone wanted to know if it was true. When I did not immediately reply, they assumed the inevitable."

"Now, hold on," said Marcus. "We need to know three things. First - who was in the apartment. Second - who was it who called your link. And third - who deleted the log of that call. We don't know it was Gorrom."

Neroon fiddled with the handle of the teacup as he thought. "Only someone with Gorrom's security clearance had access and ability to delete the log," he said. "It must have been him."

"I agree, but he hasn't any motive that I can see," said Marcus. "Why not also delete the log from the time your chip was viewed? That gave us important information: now we know that someone knows you're not really Mikrine of the Starship Crafters."

"If Gorrom had the ability to delete such a log, and expressly didn't," reasoned Neroon, "it is possible that is argument for Ka Phor having been the one to search the apartment. He contacted Li Mrakto and obtained information on Mikrine as well as the location of this apartment. He arrives here, breaks in, views the identity chip - there is a log of that action. Only Gorrom can delete such a thing, but Gorrom and Ka Phor have diametrically opposing affiliations. Then they have ample reason to greatly dislike each other, at least by Drazi societal standards, which I don't entirely understand. Thus Gorrom purposefully does not remove the evidence, tying Ka Phor to his illegal breaking and entering activities."

For someone who didn't ordinarily deal in deception, that was brilliant reasoning. Marcus wouldn't be telling him that. "In fact," he said instead, "keeping the chip log fingers Ka Phor very neatly. Perfect scapegoat. And Ka Phor's no innocent, anyway. But that still doesn't explain why Gorrom removed the call log. The one from whoever dialled your link."

"About that," said Neroon. He began to fiddle with the teacup handle again. A nervous habit, Marcus realised.

He glared. "More surprises?" he asked.

"In regards to the origin of the call, it has to have been an off-world source, because of how I set up the apartment computer as a conduit interface," Neroon explained. "What you call my 'link device' - in Fik, hylerr - contains an algorithm to scramble my location so that the recipient cannot know
where I am calling from. Any conduit interface in the connection - used either to boost the signal, or reroute it through a jumpgate to contact someone across the galaxy - scrambles information about my location, and the location of all conduit interfaces. Effectively, the person who receives my calls has no idea where in the galaxy I am. Now, I had explicitly granted permission to the apartment computer to log my code and location for when I dial out - that was for your direct benefit so that you would know I was in contact with someone on Minbar. If I wanted to conceal that from you, I could have."

"Why not simply tell me?" said Marcus. "Would've avoided all this."

"Because then I would have had to explain to you far more about why I have to log my movements in the first place, which relates to caste and clan permissions. And you're ... an outsider," Neroon finished.

Marcus rolled his eyes. "You could have just told me you were contacting your superior officer. I would've understood that."

"No," said Neroon, and he huffed, impatient, "the entire point of all this is that I am not contacting my superior officer. Set that aside for the moment. The way the hy'lerr is connected means the provenance of the call must be off-world. No one else would contact my hy'lerr who is not Minbari. Only Minbari know the number. Furthermore, the fact that the sender's number is obscured suggests someone used a hy'lerr with such an algorithm to dial mine. This algorithm is of Minbari design, and to my knowledge we did not sell it."

"Alright," said Marcus. "So it must be from Minbar, which means one of two people: either it's Delenn, or it's Ventrell."

"Incorrect," said Neroon. "The call could be one of three people. But Delenn would not obscure her call - that excludes her. As for Ventrell, I have explicitly instructed him not to contact me. He would obey. That excludes him. And we just contacted both of these individuals and asked them directly whether they contacted me, and they expressly denied it," he added, for Marcus had been about to interject that instructions didn't guarantee obeisance. "The last possibility," Neroon concluded, "is that it is my superior officer."

The Shai Alyt. But how would he know anything about a Shadow attack when he wasn't getting involved in the matter? "Because someone's discovered there's a Minbari Warrior in the Freehold where he shouldn't be," figured Marcus.

"That could indeed be one of the reasons he's calling," said Neroon. "The issue is that the call was placed before the identity chip was examined. How then could the Shai Alyt know I was in the Freehold to demand an explanation about my whereabouts, before the person who searched our apartment - likely Ka Phor - could know and inform him? At that time, he had no reason to call."

"He doesn't even know you're here?" asked Marcus.

"He doesn't even know I'm off-world," said Neroon. "As far as the Shai Alyt is concerned, I am away on personal business. That is what I told him. The only one who does know, who is not Entil'Zha Delenn, is Ventrell, to whom I have been dictating my position and activity logs. Ventrell is well-hidden for this reason. Should the Shai Alyt find him, he finds me. That is why it surprises me that Ventrell knew of the riot in Klolem but not of the rumours of my having died. Either the Shai Alyt does not want it widely known that one of his high-ranking officers is suspected dead, or he only briefly thought this and has failed to secure the fallout of the rumour. Given that he has failed to secure the fallout of the riot, I suspect the latter."
"In any case," Neroon continued, "to call my link when I am on Minbar is the same process to call it whenever I am anywhere else. There is nothing about the placement of the call itself that identifies my location. I could be in Tinarel, I could be in Tuzanor, I could be among the Norsai, I could be on Babylon 5. There is no way to tell. The only way he could track me is through my logging reports. But I have not been submitting these with my usual administrative assistant, so the conclusion he should reach is that I have not left Minbar."

"I see," said Marcus. "Why else might your superior officer call?"

Neroon paused to think. "If there has been an emergency," he said. "If he or an underling of his should call me, it would be highly unorthodox. Permissible only if I were greatly needed to return."

"Would the Worker Caste riot that the Fire Wings patrol couldn't contain constitute an emergency?" What other kind of emergency might there be on Minbar?

"I would not ordinarily think so," said Neroon. "But I would never have expected a frictious skirmish to escalate into a riot, either. Suffice it to say that the Shai Alyt complicates the relationships of the Warrior Caste to the other two castes. And if something more serious has happened in the wake of the riot, which would necessitate his return to Drogani, which he is trying to keep quiet from the other castes -" Neroon broke off and shook his head, looking anxious. "I do not know. I cannot imagine the scope of 'emergency'. The last time there was an emergency was the disbandment of the Grey Council. Before that, the death of the former Shai Alyt."

"If it were a significant emergency like those," argued Marcus, "you would have received more than one call."

Neroon considered this carefully. "That is true," he said at last. "And the Entil'Zha would have mentioned such an event. She did not mention the riot. That is of some reassurance. I told the Shai Alyt I would be away and out of contact. He would not contact me for something of little consequence - he has other advisors. But if he contacted me for something of great consequence, he would have done so repeatedly, not just the once. He would not have ceased dialling until I picked up."

"On the upside," said Marcus, "since he called you before the person who broke into the apartment - if it is Ka Phor - knew who you were, he can't be calling to complain about you being in the Freehold."

"Unless he received that information from someone else," said Neroon softly.

"But think about it," said Marcus. "From whom? Li Mrakto knows only Mikrine. Everyone else here knows only Mikrine. Even Janella - only Mikrine! And, actually, she only met you today. I obviously told no one - why would I, that would jeopardise my own mission. Not even the Anla'shok I called about your condition. I said only that you were a Minbari male, nothing more."

And then Marcus remembered his conversations with Iriell. "But she may have guessed that you were Warrior Caste," he said.

"How?"

"That was - it wasn't my intention," Marcus stammered, "I stumbled over something I shouldn't have -"

"Out with it, Anla'shok," warned Neroon.

Marcus took a deep breath in. "Because I called again after your second seizure, and she said that it
could be related to either a telepathic latency, or ...

There was a beat of silence.

"Oh," said Neroon.

"Quite," said Marcus. "I covered it up - I did lie to her, I said that it must have been the case that you were a latent telepath and hadn't told me. Because the alternative was that she assumed you had one of the related conditions." Neroon was silent. "The neurodegenerative ones. Which ... you don't - right? Only I may not have been entirely convincing, because I was distracted -"

"Because you realised what my mother is doing in a temple," said Neroon. "Which was information included in the file you were given about me." He closed his eyes and turned away, his jaw clenched tight.

"I'm sorry," said Marcus genuinely, "I didn't mean to pry, that wasn't my intention."

The most awkward, terrible silence reigned in the room. Oh god, he hates me, thought Marcus.

"It is not exactly a secret thing on Minbar," said Neroon at last. "Her condition and others like it. That I, as her son, may also have it. But it's not for outsiders."

"Look, I'll never tell a soul, I swear it," Marcus promised. "I shouldn't have known."

"I shouldn't have picked a fight with a Shadow and lost so badly I was unconscious four days," said Neroon regretfully. "That's the whole reason you know what you know."

"I - but you were right," said Marcus. "About that, too, the reason you even fought that Shadow was my fault - I -"

"Oh, stop blaming yourself," snapped Neroon. "You do that too much." He sighed. "Well. You're cleverer than I thought. That was my fault, underestimating you. In any case. Even if she suspected you were with a Warrior Caste member. Her realisation came during your second call, which post-dates the incoming call from Minbar. And as a Minbari member of the Anla'shok, we can trust her not to lie. That is - what caste was she previously?"

"Worker," said Marcus. "But that doesn't matter."

Neroon grimaced. "It might," he said. "It is difficult to serve two masters."

"The Rangers follow the Entil'Zha!"

"And the Shai Alyt should reinforce that," agreed Neroon. "Instead, he has been encouraging the return of the Anla'shok who were former Warrior Caste, if not by outright leaving, then by sharing the information that they gather."

Marcus gaped. "That's -"

"Illegal, by our laws," said Neroon. "Yes, I know. Not all formerly Warrior Caste serving Anla'shok do. Those who do are already known to the Entil'Zha." So that's what Delenn had meant about caste loyalties. Had Neroon been the one to tell her about this? Secretly, Marcus hoped so. As much as Neroon had no desire to be Delenn's Warrior spy, as he'd so eloquently put it, Marcus wanted it desperately to have been him.

Because it'd prove wrong every terrible thing Marcus had thought about him, when Neroon was
unconscious and Marcus had thought him a Shadow agent.

Neroon took a long, deep breath. "Listen. Earlier," he said. "After our engagement with the Drazi. You called me your friend." He leaned forward and narrowed his eyes as he peered at Marcus. "Is that what we are?"

Marcus thought of a few choice things to say to this. We've spent a week now in each other's company, and I don't have it in me to hate someone that long, maybe. Or possibly, I carried you when you'd fallen. We were two together against a mob and I trusted you at my back and I fought for you at yours. Or even the ludicrous, We've slept in the same bloody bed. You made me food. Several times! And you didn't even poison it!

Or perhaps, Sometimes I look at you and I wonder if this is really having an effect, because you ask a question like that when I've caught you looking at me like you're no longer thinking 'pathetic Human', like there isn't loathing in your eyes anymore, there's recognition, there's interest, there's surprised praise and pride if not actual respect. There's something that I thought was friendship. How is it you have to ask? How don't you know it already?

He settled on a jocular, "Well, I don't fight like that with people I barely know," and grinned.

Neroon was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again the atmosphere seemed to have shifted to something clandestine and momentous. Neroon had a way with his presence, thought Marcus, he knew how to use it.

"Remember that you are to virtually all Minbari an outsider," Neroon began. "Saying this is ... not easy for me. I do not say it lightly, for I do not tell outsiders of our secrets." Well. Announcement of the century, thought Marcus wryly.

"So I do not tell an outsider," he added, looking Marcus in the eye. "I shall tell instead a friend."

Oh.

Marcus had never been more aware of the pounding of his heartbeat, in the strange silence that reigned as Neroon named him friend. It was awe, it was profound shock, it was the most flattering thing anyone had ever said to him. To say he was touched wasn't adequate. He'd set out to trick Neroon out of his secrets through his own pride and instead he'd turned it into friendship. This is the best failure of my life, Marcus thought; and at the same time he cursed himself for his own glib answer about their connection, when it was deeper than that and he knew it and it looked like Neroon knew it too. But only one of them had been brave enough to admit it aloud, and it hadn't been Marcus.

"Not only have I not been checking in with the Shai Alyt," began Neroon, "I have not even been checking in as Neroon of the Star Riders. You gave me the idea," he confessed. "As you heard earlier, I have rather been checking in as son of Mikrine of the Starship Crafters. That is the truth, and it further allows Ventrell to get out of direct questioning from the Shai Alyt, because my true parentage is only widely known among the Star Riders."

Marcus gasped. "You're a love child?"

"I - what is that? No. Whatever it is." Neroon frowned. "I suspected I would have to tell you eventually... My father was born to the Worker Caste. He died a Star Rider in the Warrior Caste. Everything I have said is true, but intentionally misleading."

Ah, yes. The famous Minbari 'technically it's true' lie. Marcus couldn't help a grin.
"The reason I have these special permissions in checking in is because I am too valuable an ally for the Shai Alyt," Neroon added. "And we both know this, he and I."

"I imagine he doesn't much like that," said Marcus.

"You've never even met him," replied Neroon.

"I'm not wrong, though, am I."

Neroon smiled tightly. "You are not. Part of that problem is that the current Shai Alyt is of the Wind Swords clan. There are some clan politics at play. Star Riders have a tendency to overstate their own importance and standing."

"Hang on, I need to sit for this shocking news," drawled Marcus. Neroon quirked an eyebrow.

"Come on, mate, that's not exactly a revelation." This pulled a derisive but genuine laugh from Neroon.

"Wind Swords resent Star Riders," he continued. "Wind Swords are the youngest clan. This is not without its own benefit, but they tend to be perceived as rash - hasty - eager to prove themselves at the expense of anything."

"Nationalistic in their clannish love?" suggested Marcus.

"I would say rather overzealous," said Neroon. "It is no surprise that they contribute some of the most fervently religious warriors. That is their way of currying favour with the Religious Caste when the rest of the Warrior Caste disdains them." He shrugged. "Or perhaps they are true believers in our faith."

"And the Shai Alyt?"

"Is not one of those," said Neroon. "The Shai Alyt has been willing to use the favour of the Religious Caste in the past in such a manner. But now he too spurns them. He has on several occasions declared that he follows his own spiritual path of warlike righteousness."

Curious way to put it. "And what do you think of that?"

Neroon swallowed tightly and gave Marcus a guarded look. "I think it a highly precarious position," he said.

"You don't think he has the skill to wield the tools he's forged," supplied Marcus.

"Metaphorically speaking - as I shall not malign my commanding officer to anyone - one cannot heedlessly over-stoke embers when one is surrounded by crisp underbrush. You'll end up with a forest fire."

"That's very poetic," said Marcus.

"Thank you," replied Neroon. "Of course, the forest does not dry out overnight. It is a plan long in the making that I have kept close to him." Keep your friends close, your enemies closer. "As a result, I am now too important for him to risk vexing, both because of my rank and because of who I am."

"And who are you," Marcus mused.

"I," said Neroon, "am of a noble and ancient Star Rider family - we predate Valen by nine centuries - grandson of two Clan Mothers. I sit on the Council of Caste Elders. I was former Satai. I was aide to
Shai Alyt Branmer. And I was his intended successor. On my word alone does Shai Alyt Shakiri command any respect in the Star Riders - especially given that he is a Wind Sword. And given the importance of Star Riders in the Warrior Caste, Star Rider support leads to Moon Shields and Night Walkers support. The only remaining wildcard is the Fire Wings." Neroon sat back. "And even there I may have a piece to play. Without Shakiri realising it until too late, I have set up my influence that I became his contact link for nearly the entire Warrior Caste. Much now hinges on my support." He preened, regal. "And that's entirely my design."

"And you've been doing this since he became the Shai Alyt, two years ago?"

"No. I have been doing this since the end of the war with your people, on the orders of Shai Alyt Branmer," said Neroon. "This plan predates Babylon 5. There have of course been perturbations - Shakiri became Shai Alyt, not I; War Master Jha'dur was slain without testimony of her actions, nearly ten cycles under the Wind Swords - but every move and countermove has been schemed."

Christ, thought Marcus. Neroon played a long bloody game.

It was electrifying to think about, this slow, methodical execution of power, and the only thing that overshadowed how impressed Marcus was at the careful, long-distance machinery of it all, was the massive, profound feeling of trust that Neroon must have had in him to have told him even a fraction of this.

He blinked, awestruck, and as he stared at Neroon with new eyes, something fell into place. This is incredible, Marcus thought. He's incredible. We need him on our side.

If he wasn't overstating his own importance - as he himself admitted Star Riders often did.

"Then you've known the current war leader for years," he said softly.

"I am now in the unique position that he would not dare abuse my trust," Neroon replied. "Though he might question my honour, particularly in the wake of the denn'shah."

"But you trust him," said Marcus.

"No. I did not say that," reminded Neroon.

"But you trust his decisions?"

"I did not say that, either."

"But -"

Marcus cut himself off.

But why do you support a man who refuses to get into war when it's his job? Is it because you refuse to get into war?

Have you been the one encouraging the war leader of the Warrior Caste against action all along?

No.

Marcus couldn't say that.

If he asked Neroon why he allied with such a man - for didn't Warriors take oaths not to ally with the honourless? - he'd shut down. Marcus couldn't force him to malign his superior officer. He shouldn't overtly encourage his acting against him. Not yet. Even though the Shai Alyt was who stood against
the Warrior Caste fighting in the war against the Shadows.

I have to play this carefully, thought Marcus.

If Neroon really had as much influence as he claimed, then winning him would win the Warrior Caste. And it was difficult to doubt him, watching him sit like that, straight-backed and noble. He looked the part of a competent war leader himself, and Marcus felt his nerves stand on end to think about it, his skin galvanised. He could have been Shai Alyt. Maybe it would have been better.

There was so much power radiating in him. (And here he was, in Marcus' bed, their knees touching.) Who wouldn't follow him? As Delenn herself had said: if the Star Riders joined, at least one other clan might.

No, it couldn't have all been Neroon's pride, primping himself up like that, because Delenn had admitted it too, and she didn't exactly seek to flatter his ego. They disliked each other, that was certain, but they respected each other. This was why she wanted him, and not just any Star Rider.

It wasn't faith at all, that she had in Neroon, Marcus realised. It might just have been hope.

Ah, but to Delenn, they were the same thing, in the end. Two sides of the same coin.

There was only one thing for it. Marcus absolutely had to convince him this war was necessary. It couldn't possibly need much more doing! Neroon had already seen the Shadows, fought them. Let him see what the Shadows had done to the Drazi, sundering them by groups, exploiting their culture to do it. Distracting them into complacency by petty squabbles so they never united to fight the more obvious, greater enemy, their Ambassador too occupied with home worries to attend to a real threat from abroad. Let him put together that they could do it to the Minbari, too. And Neroon would act. He'd have to act. Because someone, thought Marcus, had to put out the forest fire, and Neroon was sitting on a lake.

"But what?" asked Neroon.

"But explain how it is your father is Warrior Caste," said Marcus instead. "His name really is Mikrine, right?"

"Oh, of course," said Neroon. He seemed surprised at the levity of the question. Had he, too, been expecting Marcus to ask the obvious? Was he gratified or dismayed that Marcus didn't? They'd have to rip off that plaster someday, Marcus knew. Not today.

"My father died a Star Rider, of the Warrior Caste," explained Neroon, "but he was born into the Worker Caste, and he had newly joined the Starship Crafters guild when he met my mother. Not long after they met, he declared that he followed the calling of his heart and joined the Warrior Caste." He shrugged. "Everything else is history. He was a warrior twenty cycles by the time I was even born."

"And your mother?"

"Star Rider by birth, naturally. Which means that if she were to court outside the clan, then any male mate that she would take would become a Star Rider by - cho'fel'aia - that is difficult to translate..."

"Right of the mate?" guessed Marcus, translating it literally.

"Close enough," said Neroon. "Indeed, for her to court outside the clan was preferred, although to court outside the caste -"
Neroon broke off at this point. It was one thing to give away the secrets of his plans in the caste as they related to their joint mission. It was perhaps another to give away such personal details.

But Marcus was so hungry for more. Anything to keep him talking, he thought. "That's so beautiful," he blurted. "That's like a fairy tale."

"Fairy tale?"

"Like - in old stories. They were star-crossed lovers," Marcus said, and he couldn't help a bashful grin. "That's terribly romantic."

Neroon smiled too, possibly encouraged by Marcus' frankness. "They loved each other almost a disgusting amount," he confessed. "Even if their progeny made them question it from time to time."

"You gave your parents hell, did you," said Marcus. "Somehow I expect something like that."

Neroon gave him a long, silent look, then said, "We certainly did."

He lifted a brow. This was new. "We?"

"My sister and I."

"I knew it," said Marcus, and Neroon's smile grew. "I bloody knew it. Called it days ago."

Neroon burst out laughing. "You look at me like I impart upon you the precious secrets of the universe!" he said. "Like this is some divine enlightenment!"

"This is fascinating," said Marcus. "Tell me whatever you will. I'm here for it." That sounded like begging. Was he being too obvious? Sod it, he was begging. Would that keep Neroon talking? "Only they didn't mention her in your file."

"Technically, not untrue," said Neroon. "My file showcases my allegiances. My sister ..." He sobered. "Allow me to first explain," he said. "Being the oldest and most traditional of the clans, Star Riders keeps the ways from countless years before Valen. That includes things like cho'fel'aia - which you might call materight. That is a domain specifically of those who have power in the clan, and in Star Riders, in keeping with tradition, that's -"

"Matrilineal," said Marcus. "Of course. Because of the way Fik handles female pronouns and honorifics."

"It is all there in the grammar if one knows where and how to look," replied Neroon. Another sign that Star Riders held significant rank in the caste at large: it was their dialect that had contributed to the standard Warrior tongue. "Not all clans keep to this. For example, if I took a Wind Sword mate - I would never do this," he insisted hastily, as though the mere idea gave him serious misgivings - "then Star Riders would expect me to defer to her right, as a Star Rider man should do when courting a woman of another clan. That is one of the reasons Star Rider men do not court women of other castes or clans. You'll lose the man. But in a similar manner, Wind Swords would expect her to defer to my right, as they no longer recognise matrilineal power. The reason for all of this is, if we begat children, it would be a complicated procedure to determine to which clan the family as a unit should belong."

"So it's something like custody, then," found Marcus. "Star Riders recognises the mother's clan; Wind Swords the father. They've got different societal rules."

"Precisely," said Neroon. "Now in Fire Wings, they do not perceive cho'fel'aia in the same way. It is
something discussed and negotiated, it is optional. In Star Riders, it is most certainly not, it is simply understood.

"Your sister married a Fire Wing," said Marcus, as understanding dawned.

Neroon gave a grim smile. "And she should have insisted upon her rights as a Star Rider, but she did not. She abandoned our clan. And that is why she was not mentioned in the file. My sister is a Star Rider as my father was a Worker - by technicality of birth only."

"But this is useful," said Marcus, "because that's your in to the last remaining clan that isn't Wind Swords, isn't it?"

Neroon did not look so enthused. "Upon further reflection, it was hasty to have claimed that," he said. "I have not spoken with her much since her decision."

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "How much is not much?" he asked.

"Hardly at all," said Neroon. "I know she has a son - she was very upset about it, it seems some things never change, but it was her partner who carried the birth."

It took Marcus far too long to work it out, during which Neroon began to grin, hiding it poorly. "OH," he squeaked at last, "she married a woman. Right, yes, that's - of course. I understand. Obviously. Ha ha!" Why can't I shut up, he thought.

"Don't hurt yourself with these leaps of logic," Neroon said dryly. There was teasing in his eyes, though.

"Yes, I just -" Marcus huffed. "Really wish you'd be clear about these things from the get-go instead of allowing me to make embarrassing inferences on the partial information you give."

Neroon threw him an impish grin. "Why spoil my fun?"

"You bastard," he said, "you're taking the piss." Well, allegiance or no, she must have been the missing piece he mentioned. "You should probably talk to her once in awhile," Marcus said. He'd talk to Will if given half the chance.

He watched Neroon awkwardly straighten, realigning his posture, the way Marcus used to do when people told him he ought to track Will down. And then it struck him and he thought, my god, I can't believe we're so similar.

"A Star Rider in her position," said Neroon instead, musing. "She had everything. She was female, she was of a good family, my mother had extremely high standing ... she could have been a Clan Mother in a matter of cycles. And her partner would have married into Star Riders at an elevated position because - well, women are always liked in Star Riders. Shazad had everything, and she threw it all away to begin anew in the Fire Wings."

"It was her choice," said Marcus.

"It was a poor choice," blurted Neroon. "The only reason she could have done it is - she hated us. To start over at the bottom rung of the ladder was preferable than to remain with Star Riders."

"Or maybe she must have really loved that Fire Wing," added Marcus. "Well, think about it! She has all this power - why leave? Surely it makes more sense to keep it and bring another into the fold."

Neroon remained silent.
"You gave her an earful about it, didn't you," realised Marcus. This was starting to sound painfully familiar. Marcus had had no idea he and Neroon were this alike, and it was beginning to seriously unnerve him.

"I was one of the reasons she left," admitted Neroon. "I was cruel to her, when I found out that she was courting a Fire Wing and considering leaving." Having been on the receiving end of Neroon's cruelty, Marcus felt he could sympathise. "I thought if I shamed her into it, she'd stay and do the honourable thing." He shook his head. "She stole away in the middle of the night."

"You've never loved anyone like that," observed Marcus. "How could you know what that pull is like?"

"Well, neither have you!" Neroon shot back, defensive.

"But we weren't talking about me," said Marcus.

="We were not talking about me either!" Neroon protested.

Marcus held up a finger, pointing out, "Actually, we were - you made it about you when you said you were one of the reasons she left. What makes you think you had such a big thing to do with it? That it was all your fault? Maybe she was just head over heels in love. Or, she disliked the confines of your clan for her own, independent reasons."

"She told me it was my fault," said Neroon. "She can be quite blunt."

"Ah," said Marcus. "Well. In that case."

"She said the same thing you did," he said. "That I could not understand, because I've never had anyone like that." Neroon shrugged. "She was correct."

"Why didn't you ever try?" asked Marcus. "I thought you said it was the honourable thing, and, well, you're all about honour."

"It is," said Neroon, "I did try. I tried for cycles." He sighed, shaking his head. "It's... fruitless. There are many reasons why these courtships always failed. In common, none of them were like what my parents had. It wasn't enough, to do the honourable thing... something was always missing..."

Neroon struggled to define it, toying with his empty tea mug, idly tracing out the curve of the handle with his fingertips. "One should be proud of their mate, and that should be reciprocal," he decided in the end. "They should be someone who was worth it. They should be... it should not be something you have to do. For honour. It would be something you wanted to do. I must not have wanted it. And I cannot help feeling that - one would know, wouldn't they? You would see them, and you could immediately know: yes, I'll cast everything aside for them."

These things didn't always have to be sacrifices. But what would Marcus know about it? He did, however, know something about something you had to do versus something you wanted to do. Hasina, from Arisia, was kind - she was smart - she clearly liked Marcus, clearly found him attractive, and he was quite fond of her, but that wasn't enough and the thought of dating her had been like the thought of going through the motions. One more item to cross off from Marcus' responsibility checklist. That couldn't be all there was to it, could it?

It wasn't enough, to do the honourable thing. Something was always missing. You'd see them, and you'd immediately know.

"They weren't special enough for you," suggested Marcus. He thought about Susan. If anyone was
special - majestic, powerful, a figurehead - it was her. It wasn't love at first sight - Marcus didn't
believe in that any more than he did in religion - but it was something. She'd struck a chord. "I can
relate," he decided. "It takes someone very special. Sometimes you find them - sometimes you
don't." His smile disappeared. Of course, just because she'd struck a chord didn't make him
entitled to win her. He suspected he knew if he tried, he might fail. And maybe that was why he was
trying Lennier's respectful-love-from-afar method instead. Presuming it worked. Marcus wasn't
convinced it did. "Sometimes you find them and they still won't be yours." He looked up, hopeful.
"But your sister's like that with her wife?"

"I would not know," said Neroon. "I did not attend the ceremony."

"Oh, Neroon," said Marcus.

"Don't admonish me," he growled, "it is nothing I have not heard from everyone else. Anyway, we
were always fighting." Upon reflection, he said, "I suppose it comes with the territory. Siblings."

"Which of you is the elder?" I swear, thought Marcus, if he says it's him...

"I am," said Neroon. Another blasted similarity. "By twenty-three minutes," he added.

Marcus took a moment to put it together.

"You're a twin?" he thundered. Neroon doubled over with mirth, cackling loud. "I can't believe you
keep doing this," he says. "You awful prat. Are there any more revelations?"

This kicked Neroon into a new fit of laughter. "No," he wheezed out, "that's enough enlightenment
for you to handle tonight. We wouldn't want to trigger your ascension or anything."

Christ, thought Marcus.

And yet this explained so much. His competition. Never talking to his sister. Not supporting her
choice. Not seeing why she'd do it - thinking she threw responsibility away - honourable Neroon,
always doing the right thing, even if it tasted like cardboard in the mouth. His own desperate grabs
for power and rank in Star Riders, and in the Warrior Caste. His ambition. The way he plotted. The
way he thought. Why he gave up, sour-grapes, on the one thing she had that didn't come naturally to
him.

This explained everything. All of who Neroon was came back to this: a bossy brother who was
consistently passed over for his twin sister. I'll bet, thought Marcus, his honourable Warrior mother,
with her all-important clan connections, favoured her, and he's never really gotten over that, either.

Like I've never really gotten over that everyone gave Will a free ride, and I had to work. Damn him,
we are of a pair.

"Thank you for telling me all of this," said Marcus. He could not find words important enough to tell
Neroon what it meant to him, that Neroon trusted him. Neroon must trust him. It was obvious.

"Anla'shok, I have not laughed so hard in cycles," he said. "I'm certain I shall regret this tomorrow
when I realise how much I've told you about our customs, about - but - ah, just for the moment -"

"Look, mate," said Marcus, "it's been a rough week. And if you don't want to talk anymore, I won't
press, we can even forget this happened, whatever you like. Although I think between the two of us,
we needed this. And - and you said we were friends. Maybe you don't know what that means to
Humans - what that means to me - but you should know I won't tell a soul about anything you told
me. If you want I'll even bind it with my own - all the terrible things I've done in my family." He
sobered. "There's more than a few."

"I did not tell you everything I did so that I could dig out your secrets," said Neroon.

"Then why did you?" he asked.

Neroon had no easy answer and refused to meet his eyes.

Maybe because he was so cruel earlier. Maybe because they fought like they did together. *Maybe because he likes me. Maybe because I've become special to him.* Neroon had never told a Human any of this, Marcus knew.

Maybe... he had not even told another Minbari.

A slow flutter began in Marcus' belly that he suppressed and refused to encourage. No, he thought, certainly it was only because that was how Neroon acted with his close friends. If he even had any. Could one have close friends when one was so high up on the hierarchy in the Warrior Caste, when you had to watch your back because you harboured suspicions about your superior officer?

"Well, it doesn't matter why," said Marcus. "Just know that I trust you as much as you trust me."

There was something undefinable and uncertain in Neroon's gaze, and Marcus wondered whether he'd said something he shouldn't. That didn't matter either. He said it; he'd meant it. "If I could ask one favour, though?"

"You can ask," said Neroon. "Whether I grant it is another matter."

"Stop calling me Anla'shok and call me by my name already," said Marcus.

Neroon was quiet. Then his lips curled up in the faintest almost-smile. "Very well, Marcus," he said.

Chapter End Notes

Here, have a boatload of my Neroon family/caste/clan headcanons. And hey, look at that, finally on a first-name basis, and it only took 50k! Maybe in the next 30k they'll do something truly risque like hold hands.

My apologies for the lateness of this upload! Family emergency :)
It looked like it would be a quiet night in. Neroon placed another few calls to one Alyt and three Alyt-nalis in the Moon Shields and one Alyt in the Night Walkers. If Alyt was roughly equivalent to General, Alyt-nali was a more complex group which could mean anything from Captain to Colonel depending on effective experience level, yet ultimately remaining on the same rank. The Moon Shield Alyt, Pralhat, and the Night Walker Alyt, Talimer - both women - masked their surprise that Neroon was alive but confirmed that they had heard of the rumour. Alyt Talimer further confirmed there was no particular event - nothing in Drogani, nothing in the rest of the homeworld - that appeared to necessitate the Shai Alyt's immediate attention, though in the wake of the riot in the border town Klolem, tensions had risen throughout that entire province, including in the capital city of Vogar. Vogar was experiencing their third day of mild unrest with Worker demonstrations from which the Warriors (Fire Wings, being their provincial territory) were trying to keep peace while maintaining a healthy, non-engaging and non-inflammatory distance. "The first wise thing they've done," remarked Neroon acidly.

The Alyt-nalis did not appear to have heard the rumour at all.

Once the sun drifted closer to the horizon, hanging low and heavy, a great orange spectre sinking north-east (the magnetic field on Zhabar was bizarre), Neroon fired up the cooking pit to make them something Li Mrakto called frhit. This took over an hour to prepare, which Neroon said was ideal because each of the steps were minimal effort and did not require him standing guard, so he could remain in the shade of the room instead of hanging around an open flame in direct sunlight. By the time it was ready, it was cool enough outside to eat something warm.

Frhit was a thick dal-like stew made of three kinds of pulses, dry-fried to a roasted sweetness, simmered in a layer of aromatic spices, with a cream-soft texture that tingled inexplicably on the tongue. It was absolutely delicious. Marcus remembered eating something like it when he was ten, but it didn't taste nearly as good as it did now. On Babylon 5, he had eaten out a lot. During Ranger training, they had a strict low-calorie diet of porridge, fruit, and custard. Before that, it was either space-compatible fare - the instant kind with a scientifically-regulated vitamin balance to endure living in a mining colony for extended periods of time - or Earthforce's individual rations (cardboard-flavoured and salted to perfection, or some parametrisation thereof). Marcus had seldom eaten quite so well in his life.

"Hm. Not as good as Li Mrakto's," said Neroon, judging.

"I think it's brilliant," blurted Marcus, and Neroon smiled, pleased despite an isolationist superior pride.

Sometime after dinner, the computer pinged. They had a new message from Janella, who had forwarded Neroon the invitation to tomorrow's event. She must have found his contact information the same way Ka Phor found Marcus', he thought: through Li Mrakto. Neroon didn't mind Marcus replying to a mail intended to him (Janella had been very clear in the address) so Marcus sent back a query. The computer pinged three minutes later. No, she wrote, I found you where you registered when you arrived, through the customs authority, like normal people. He could hear the eye-roll.

This was another reason why Ka Phor should not have been able to influence Gorrom. Ka Phor couldn't even look up a person at the customs authority. He'd had to skulk around, asking people.
until he found his Minbari target's daily location at Li Mrakto's, then fish out the information from her. He must have something really good on Gorrom. Evidence, possibly, but of what?

Marcus stayed awake another two hours reading what he could about Ka Phor's former guild, Dorno Station, and the Centauri Lord Refa. It took some digging, because the travel logs outbound from the port at Zhoshesh Dorallo had been deleted. But someone had logged exits from the port - two were signed by Gorrom, matching the times that Gorrom had said he'd met Refa on Dorno Station. There were seven later unsigned exits, that coincided with the Stock Traders guild meetings, also on Dorno Station.

It took less digging to uncover deleted logs at Dorno Station that showed Refa had visited seven further times. All those events coincided with the Stock Traders guild meetings and the seven unsigned port exits from Zhoshesh Dorallo. Dorno Station, unlike Zhabar itself, did not have a customs authority, and did not appear to keep as good records, or as strong security over the records.

Thus: Gorrom left Zhabar, via the port authority at Zhoshesh Dorallo, to meet with Refa twice on Dorno Station; and someone else left in the same way to meet with Refa in the same place a further seven times.

Now, Refa had presumably been in and out of Centauri space as well, but Marcus had access only to Drazi records. Babylon 5 records, too, if he called up Garibaldi. Refa appeared to be of some nobility - what, then, was a Centauri of his status doing with so many trips? Back and forth to the Centauri Republic would be one thing, but didn't he have people to take care of errands for him? Certainly the Ambassador Mollari didn't make that many trips around the galaxy. And why were the Drazi letting him in all the time? Marcus double-checked the authority to see who signed off on it.

Marcus wasn't surprised to find who was behind the deletions: Finance Ministry permissions. Nine meetings in total on Dorno Station, dated before - and after - the attack on Zagros VII. Which meant that, during a period after which the Centauri had begun open aggression against other governments including the Drazi, when Gorrom had said he wasn't meeting with Centauri anymore - he either met Refa himself or covered up Ka Phor's meetings. Either way, he'd lied about his involvement.

When Marcus woke the next morning, he realised he'd forgotten to tell Neroon it was alright to join him. Was it alright? No, the bed was too bloody small, but it was warmer through the cool night with him there, if a little awkward. And horizontal bed or not, it had to be better than where Neroon was, which was once again on the floor, propped up on the pillows. As Marcus awoke, so did Neroon. He sat up and tilted his neck from side to side, cracking it loudly.

Nearly half-nine already. There wasn't much time for breakfast, and it was already too hot for tea. Neroon dressed once more in the golden Worker Caste robe and grumbled, "I'll let you know if Janella calls," on his way out the door to meet Li Mrakto.

Not a morning person, Marcus figured.

Marcus took the time to send some messages in regards to Janella's event, and did some reading on Janella herself. He couldn't find anything incriminating about her. He did not trust her now - he never really had, but he needed to make sure they hadn't picked up a third Shadow agent. The unsigned exits from Zhoshesh Dorallo could be her, too.

She hadn't lied about her affiliations - at least there was that. She looked young, but she wasn't - in fact, she was a little older than she should be for a temp worker. Marcus would have thought she'd have a steady career by now, but it was just a chain of temp work on file and not much else. That
was assuming she wanted a family - maybe she didn't, but that'd make her something of an outlier among what Marcus knew of Drazi women. It wasn't Marcus' place to question it, but it gave him pause all the same.

She also, he noticed, had security clearance and thus Finance Ministry permissions to handle log deletions.

On his way out for lunch, he picked up a Drazi robe that looked the closest possible to nice clothing that one might wear out at an event. It was even black with silvery accents - Neroon would be elated to be back in his colours - and it looked like it would fit him. Marcus picked up three more plainer robes, charcoal with a chestnut detail, to have something non-Ranger to wear to the party. (Marcus did not have an invitation, but that was not going to stop him.) He swung by Li Mrakto's, bringing the clothing along as an excuse to stop in for lunch.

Neroon was not happy to see him. But Neroon didn't look happy, period. "Time to play dress-up," said Marcus cheerily, waving the robe in his face.

"I shall shred your rags on my damned crest," Neroon barked. "Can you not let me rest for two sacred minutes. Why is everything so blasted hot in here." He tore the robe from Marcus' hands and marched off into an adjoining room without another word.

It really was hot. Even in the apartment it had been hot. Marcus had found this out when he left early in the morning to do his shopping, for the streets were the same temperature but growing warmer by the minute, and Li Mrakto's place was boiling.

Li Mrakto was equally upset, but that was because at the last minute she had been tasked to provide food for a government social function. Incidentally the same one at the conference hall uptown, quadrant forty-three by fifty-nine, that Janella and Gorrom would be attending. The original caterer, Li Mrakto said, had fallen through. "Oh dear," said Marcus blandly, when she told him, "that's such a pity," as though he was not the one who had intercepted messages, fired the original caterer, and recommended Li Mrakto by name. He asked if there were anything he could do to help, like deliver equipment the day before, or serve the day of, and she took him up on this offer and granted him her authority. Exactly as Marcus had hoped.

Marcus therefore did not deserve the mouth-watering roast sharnas meat she gave him for lunch, but when he tried to refuse, she pressed it upon him all the more, since Humans could eat it and Minbari could not. "<Such a skinny boy>," she said.

"<You and Li Dro Lrkta>," he joked.

Li Mrakto clucked her tongue in the way he’d seen stern Drazi matriarchs do. "<Mikrine should feed you better. I would feed a mate.>"

"<Not mates>," said Marcus. It was not the first time he told her this.

"<He's a nice man, you know>," replied Li Mrakto. "<For one of his kind.>"

*He absolutely is not* was quickest to Marcus' tongue, but then he remembered the soft smile Neroon gave him yesterday as he shared secrets, the way he'd said Marcus' name, the way warmth had settled in Marcus' chest. "<Perhaps>," he said instead. "<He can be. When he wants.>"

Li Mrakto saw much but did not speak at length. "<You didn't expect to find what you did>," she said, uncannily insightful.

"<No>," he replied, believing that she meant the possible friendship that existed between them, "<I
"<Well, then he should feed you better>," she said.

Neroon exited the other room, once more in his Worker Caste robes. "It's a little tight across the chest," he admitted, "but it will do. I have noticed the Drazi seem to favour robes that are form-fitting for high occasions." He threw it at Marcus and if Marcus' reflexes weren't so good, it'd've landed in his stew.

"You're welcome," called Marcus. "I'll just bring this home for you, then, shall I? Would you like it pressed? I live to serve, you know!"

"Oh, don't pretend you really didn't come here for a free meal," Neroon retorted.

"Of course not! I came to see a friend," Marcus said. Neroon rolled his eyes and turned back to working the bellows on the fire pit.

"<You two are worse than my brood>," muttered Li Mrakto.

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As part of his new-found cover - caterer - he used Li Mrakto's van to transport some of the equipment they would need to the hall where the event would be held. Tables and firepits, mostly, along with serving cutlery.

The conference hall at quadrant forty-three by fifty-nine was on the top-level floor of a massive skyscraper - one of many in this neighbourhood. The garage crew was happy to let him in and accompany him on the lift to show him to the penthouse. So far, minimal security. Marcus was pleased.

He took three hours to scout the place out, on the pretence of setting up firepits and tables. As he made his way around the rooms, he got a feel for exits, entrances, windows. He spoke to the workers some; they were friendly folk, and they seemed kind, though whether they'd be kind enough to look the other way as he broke in the next evening was anyone's guess. But he asked for the washroom and they directed him to the south wing bathroom which they proudly said was the nicest one, as it had a suite and featured a balcony looking onto the street (fifty-nine floors below).

Across the street, he noticed another skyscraper, taller still than the present one, which the workers said was a simple office building. Was every place in this quadrant fifty floors tall, he wondered. The chill in his bones was almost a relief in the afternoon heat.

He drove the van back to Li Mrakto's and parked next to a rather ugly-looking scooter (as though a Vespa and a chopper had made deranged progeny which they then cannibalised for the external bodywork before ruthlessly abandoning in a rubbish tip). There he found the steam billowing out of the windows and overheard Li Mrakto yelling from inside - along with Neroon's shouted answer - someone had burnt something. A stew. Or a hand. Marcus winced. Best not to engage, really! He turned around for home.

Neroon arrived perhaps two hours later, and Marcus buzzed him up. "It's no cooler in this infernal apartment," growled Neroon. He headed for the bathroom to drench himself in water.

"There's something for you when you're done," called Marcus.

"I'm not hungry," Neroon yelled. Marcus overheard the sound of rushing water as Neroon hit the tap open. "I'm too hot to think of food. I do not know how you can. I hope you already ate, for I shall
not fire up that pit tonight - and there are no leftovers for you because I was making food all day for this absurd affair."

"Oh, don't worry about me, I stopped off and bought sandwiches," said Marcus. He began to feel a little guilty. "You know, I was mostly joking about you having to make me food all the time, though I'll admit you're exceedingly talented -"

Neroon exited the bathroom, barefoot, dressed only in a worn black tank tucked into those loose black knee-length leggings. An overlapping buttoned panel fastening at the waist, Marcus noticed, like a double-breasted coat in belt form.

Those leggings again...

That's Minbari underwear, Marcus finally recognised. He shut up and averted his gaze, fixing it on the Dorallo Daily he was ostensibly reading as Neroon joined him on the balcony. "Anyway, check the cooler," Marcus mumbled, his eyes on his lap.

Neroon did. "What's this?"

"It's ice cream. Well. It's not actually cream, or even dairy -" but Neroon had already pressed the container to the side of his neck and closed his eyes in obvious relief. "You're meant to eat it," Marcus drawled.

"In a moment," sighed Neroon, and craned his neck back.

Standing in his underwear, touching his neck like that, in broad daylight, thought Marcus, watching him slyly out of the corner of his eye. A Minbari. After years of their reservedness and their propriety and their rituals, their neck-high robes, their staid ways. And all it took was overheating and they became nearly normal. Unthinkable. Marcus fixed his glance quickly back on the Daily before he could be caught watching.

*His neck must be particularly sensitive.* An invasive thought. He wrote it off.

The tub of ice cream disappeared steadily over the next hour, so Marcus assumed it was a hit. They sat together waiting for evening to fall and discussed a plan to get Marcus in. "I thought I'd go in with Li Mrakto and pretend to be a caterer," Marcus said.

"Won't work," said Neroon. "Staff must possess a security pass with clearance level 2, which I am told requires time to apply for and is difficult to ... otherwise manufacture. The remaining building guards will be exchanged for a private security team hired by the Finance Minister himself."

Passes? Clearance level? Personal guards? This was a lot of security for the Drazi, thought Marcus. That was strange. "How do you know?"

"Janella came by," said Neroon. "She told me. As a 'lucky' guest, this criterion shall be waived for me, but it won't for Li Mrakto and her staff. They already possess passes, but only enough for her and her existing team - there are no spares. And anyway, there is little requirement for the staff to remain during the event. Janella has also made it clear that I'm to be on my best behaviour, because she has leveraged her job to vouch for me." He grimaced, uncomfortable. "I think Li Mrakto thinks we are courting," he added. "She makes these references to mates."

"Yeah, she does think that," said Marcus, imperturbed. He grinned. "Does it really bother you so much?"

"I could not court an alien," Neroon said. "The notion is absurd. Granted, I will admit Janella is well-
placed in her network with interesting opinions but -"

"Oh," said Marcus.

"What?"

"Yeah. The - ah. The Drazi are like that. Plan B, then," said Marcus quickly. He revealed having poked around at the conference hall, and flipped the Daily to the back to sketch out a rough floor plan.

The proposed plan: Neroon would, at an appointed time, find the south wing lavatory, with its wide open window and modest-size balcony. Across the street, Marcus would be waiting three floors above in the office building, which was a simple enough affair to walk into. According to the computer, three floors above in the office building was the wing where Zheresht Province Heritage Trust was stationed, which was a public-accessible level. Furthermore, it was a boring enough government department that all of those who worked in it could be counted upon to go home early. So, if Marcus could acquire a little rope, he could secure it on one end, and then, with Neroon’s crystal knife to weight the other end, throw the knife across to Neroon, who could secure the other side to form a tightrope. Then Marcus could zipline across. Shouldn't be too difficult, with Neroon waiting on the other end to spot him.

He could not wait overnight, because the building would be monitored for life-signs. He could not arrive slightly earlier than the building's guards, for the personal guards would be opening the building that day and would notice someone loitering around until dusk. He could not drop down from the rooftop, nor could he infiltrate a lower floor, because the guards were throughout the building and the party was held on the highest floor with rooftop access. Security would be higher for this event than usual. This was all Janella's information. Marcus had not informed her that he would be party-crashing so that Neroon wouldn't be the one talking to Gorrom, but she appeared to have assumed that anyway.

As Neroon pointed out, people might notice an extra Human attendee among a party full of Drazi. But as Marcus pointed out, a single Minbari would probably turn more heads - Marcus hoped Neroon was prepared for that, but he must have been because he'd been turning heads since they arrived. Still, once they got past the security at the front doors (by bypassing it completely), there would be nothing to tip off other party-goers that Marcus hadn't been invited of his own merit. Only Janella would know, and conditional on Neroon's good behaviour, she wouldn't tell.

"Sounds like you've an answer for every question," decided Neroon.

"I'm mostly winging it," he admitted.

"Hm," said Neroon. "It's not bad. I thought this would be like dragging a weight around. Unfortunately, you're an asset. Cleverer than I thought."

Marcus blinked. "Well, why stay that sharp tongue of yours on my account?"

It dawned suddenly on Neroon what he'd said. "I did not mean it like that." He groaned. "I am blaming this blasted heat," he said.

"Par for the course," said Marcus. "Come now. You're used to it and you just ate a whole quart of ice cream." As reluctant as Neroon sounded - perhaps because of it - the words warmed Marcus. "So this is how I win you over, is it?" he said, "With my mind?"

Neroon smirked but said nothing. Only in the reigning silence did something about the feeling of the
phrase win you over begin to feel strange in Marcus' mouth. Well, he didn't mean it like that. "Look," said Marcus, "you said you expected tactics. And you love to pick fights. No - don't argue with me," for judging by Neroon's face he was about to do exactly that. "It's not exactly the safest way to get in. My ribs are doing better, but I'm not keen on parkour and a bit of free climbing. It's risky. Do you see anything better?"

"All of this," said Neroon, gesturing expansively at the pieced-together floorplan, "is logical enough. I cannot but agree with it. If we had more time I would suggest we visit in advance and better secure the rope -"

"But if we had that kind of time, we'd get me a security clearance to be on Li Mrakto's team." Marcus huffed. "We'll just have to trust Janella."

"Do you think we can?"

"Do you think we can trust Gorrom?"

Neroon snorted. "Not in the least. But I think that she wants to help us more than she wants to help him. She seems to have recognised the precariousness of her position."

"Hm," said Marcus, thinking, studying Neroon. "I don't think she gives a whit about helping us," he said at last.

"Whyever not?"

Marcus glared. "You look almost hurt," he noted. "Careful. She's just as capable of lying to you as any other Drazi." Which was to say, not very, but it was the principle of the thing!

"I know that," said Neroon tartly.

Women are always liked in Star Riders, remembered Marcus. Maybe even alien women, despite his automatic reaction to an alien mate. If Janella wasn't as trustworthy as Neroon believed, she could take advantage of that. That sat ill with Marcus, and he told himself it was because thinking of Neroon being hoodwinked gave him a bad taste in the mouth, and not because Neroon was warming to Janella far faster than he'd warmed to Marcus. "You're right that she's finally caught on to the danger she's in," Marcus agreed. "What that says about Gorrom, I wouldn't venture to guess. But there's some tetchy influences in the groups. The fact that she admits to us of being tempted away from allegiances like her own - against Gorrom - is ... it's strange. For Drazi."

"One doesn't leave a group without impunity?" guessed Neroon, struggling to understand. "Sounds clan-like."

"More than a clan, less than a cult," explained Marcus. "You're not really allowed to leave. Purple doesn't like green deserters." Opportunist voters weren't well-liked either. "That's why it gives me doubts that Janella would act against Gorrom. Either she's lying, or she's seen the writing on the wall and she's willing to be flexible."

Neroon thought a moment. "If what you say is true," he said, "she could not have such strong suspicions without significant evidence. If she has seen the writing on the wall as you say it, we should like to read it too."

That was another good point. "Be nice to know what it is that makes her so sure," said Marcus.

"I shall ask tomorrow," Neroon said.
"Yeah, about that. Don't outright ask. Don't piss her off - we've already had more than enough chances with her. She will get sick of us eventually."

Neroon frowned, mock-offended. "I'll have you know I can be subtle," he said.

Marcus scoffed. "Let me know when you start."

"On second thought, perhaps I ought to leave the talking to you," he replied, teasing, "since your smart mouth never stops in the first place."

"They didn't teach us stoic silent warrior in the Anla'shok." Marcus reconsidered. "And if your wicked tongue is any consideration, they didn't in the Star Riders either."

"If I were told, cycles ago, I would one day be almost voluntarily consorting with a Human, and not despising every waking moment, I wouldn't have believed it," said Neroon.

"Yes, but you've spent most of these waking moments asleep," retorted Marcus.

Neroon lost it and laughed first. Once again, his deep, genuine laughter sparked Marcus' own. "Does that mean I win?" Marcus asked.

Slowly, Neroon's laughter died off. As it did, Marcus caught his eyes, glinting merrily in the feeble light from the room - dusk had fallen - so dark they could be black. Marcus tore his gaze away, suddenly not finding any of it funny in the least. "Don't push your luck," said Neroon, taunting in a low, dangerous sing-song, that had no business being as sultry as it was.

I missed this, Marcus found himself thinking. I missed his voice when he couldn't bloody talk. I missed his eyes when they were shut closed four days. I missed his laughter, I missed his wit, even when his barbs are directed my way. (Why did he have to be so clever. Nobody told Marcus he'd be funny.) I missed this without even knowing what I was missing.

I've let him under my skin, he realised, with an icy clench in his gut.

My god, he wondered, am I really that fond of him? Is that what this feeling is? Because it was more than friends, it was shock and appall met with wonder and surprise, and Marcus had had friends before in his life - that was nothing to be so struck by. But none of the friends he'd made were Minbari Warrior Caste. None had been his bitter enemies who had hunted his kind to near extinction, whose great ships Marcus saw in his nightmares.

The intelligence Marcus had once passed had killed his people. He wasn't losing sleep over that. (Neither was Neroon for his actions, for that matter.) But what would Marcus have done if he'd known that, apart from their terrible actions in the war, they could be like this?

Will had known. Will had known all along. Will had been fascinated with the Minbari since learning of them. But Will hadn't had to fight them.

A silence had fallen. At last Neroon broke it by asking softly, "Why did you join the Anla'shok?"

"It's in my file," said Marcus. "The Shadows attacked my colony. I was presented, quite literally, with the cause at hand. I suppose it seemed like a good idea at the time."

From the way Neroon was scrutinising him, Marcus could tell he wasn't being believed. It was about as true as any average truth out of the average Minbari mouth, which was to say: only technically. "And did you know you'd be such a natural?" Neroon added.
Marcus faux-gasped. "Why, Alyt," he said, "a compliment, from you?"

Neroon shrugged. "If it helps your feeble Human mind to think of it as one," he said, with a wry grin. "If you absolutely must. But don't advertise it."

"Mum's the word," said Marcus.

Another beat of silence. "Among our people, to be Anla'shok - indeed, to be a warrior of any kind, even the fighting priests - is to be called to serve," said Neroon.

"All your people serve," said Marcus. "That's the culture."

Neroon conceded this with a tilt of his head that was somewhere between a bow and a nod and yet neither. "Those who fight serve differently," he said. "It's more than an occupation. And you know this. In fact, if Sech Durhan had sensed any doubt in you, we would not be here."

You know what I mean, so quit stalling, Neroon didn't say, but Marcus could hear, and it was true enough.

"More's the pity for you," said Marcus. "I'm sure you'd much rather be back on Minbar. Fair bit cooler there, isn't it?"

"Don't remind me," Neroon muttered, scowling. He sat back. "Well, you don't have to answer," he decided, waving off his query. "Some - silly bout of curiosity on my part, ignore it. It doesn't matter - "

"My brother was the Ranger first," blurted Marcus.

Neroon did not remark on Marcus' outburst, too surprised that there had been one. "Older?" he asked.

"Younger." Marcus watched as a flash of irritation passed over Neroon's face. Why must we be so similar. He wondered if Neroon was asking that too. He wasn't dumb. He must have caught on by now. Marcus should have said nothing.

"Is it a common thing for Humans to follow their younger siblings into battle?" asked Neroon.

"I didn't," said Marcus. "He came to our colony to tell me. To warn me. To try and recruit me." He sighed. "You're not the only one who thought I'd be a natural. It was similar enough to what I did during the war. But I didn't follow him, then."

"So you joined later, out of some sentiment?"

Yes. No. Marcus narrowed his eyes and bit out a truth he'd not yet told anyone. "There were times I thought I hated him," he said.

Neroon's brow furrowed in a frown for a split second before he guarded his features back into passivity. Another similarity. He said nothing.

"We were - eight years apart," said Marcus. "We weren't close, when I was growing up. He was the baby of the family, and I very soon had duties."

They weren't duties anybody else forced on you, he thought.

But they were. If you don't feel you're allowed to say no, that's coercion. Could I not have had a life, all my own, for just two years?
And give up everybody else's sacrifices? So they'd've died for nothing?

Marcus closed his eyes, and for the moment, gave in to his impulses, and stoked the bellows, prodding the embers of his rage into flame. The flame was honest, and Neroon valued honesty, and somehow Marcus doubted he was easily burnt.

"When my brother was younger," he began, "he was ... well. He was always idealistic. And easily taken advantage of. Son of a CEO, so he was relatively well-off, which meant he was an easy target. And he had anything he wanted. We were sheltered. And he was coddled.

"When he was eighteen, after the war he'd never fought, he got into this religious group. I should note it came from within the family - many of my relatives got sucked into that business as well. Prayed to all sorts of what they called neo-saints - people they liked - figures from the twentieth century, I'm not even sure they ever really existed, or if they did, it's not like they say they did. Well, Will got involved, and he tried to get me involved - tried to recruit me - and I was so ... so bloody upset at him, for pissing away money into a cult, for doing whatever he liked, instead of being what I was: responsible, respectable. Instead of helping out where he was needed. Dad had found it hard to rebuild the company following the war. It wasn't easy. He needed help, and I was there, and Will wasn't. Flitting here and there to the whim of the day. And then Dad fell ill, and he never really got better, and I felt like there were so many more expectations on me.

"So I snitched. I placed a call to a cult deprogrammer, and they came within a week and whisked Will off to a rehabilitation clinic operating out of Mars Colony. Closest colony to our Homeworld," he explained, in case Neroon had no familiarity with it. - But of course, Neroon would have passed by Mars Colony on his way to the Battle of the Line, where he gleefully and proudly helped decimate Earth's remaining fleet on his government's quest for genocide. Yes, Marcus thought, he really was angry now.

"Will thought for years that it was Mum or Dad who'd done it. He didn't come home, for he was so very mad at them - even when he saw the truth of it, realised it was all bunk, saw how he was swindled, that cult only wanted his money, was a load of brainwashing garbage. But he didn't forgive them for years. It broke Mum's heart that he never returned, but he was legally an adult and permitted to do what he liked."

"An adult at eighteen cycles?" asked Neroon. "Minbari do not graduate military training until twenty."

"Well, age of majority, enough to move out, old enough to vote." Actually, it was eighteen _years_, not cycles. One cycle was one and a third Earth year, so eighteen years was thirteen and a half cycles on Minbar. "We age differently than you do," Marcus reminded him. He wondered exactly how old Neroon was. He looked older than Delenn, especially when he was being serious, and yet despite Delenn's youthful looks she was the equivalent of nearly sixty Earth years.

"Anyway, I caused all that friction, and - and I never told him. I've never told anyone, so." He laughed, derisive and bitter. "Hey. A secret for a secret, right? Like I told you yesterday."

"Marcus," said Neroon, and something about the gentle way he spoke his name forced out yet a few more words out of Marcus' breathless lungs.

"Dad died," spat Marcus, his voice thick, "and Will who hadn't seen or spoken to him finally came home for the first time in years for his funeral and only then did he start making amends with Mum. I meant to tell him, but he kept talking about how he'd been _sooo_ many different _places_, how much of the _galaxy_ he'd seen, how _wondrous_ the _universe_ was, and I was sore at him all over again. How dare he be so free, when I had all this work to do, because I'd had to scum up enough honour for the
both of us and I guess it meant I had all the work, too. And maybe part of me had been happy to have the attention. To be the good boy, to be the honourable, respectable one. He had what I'd always secretly craved and I didn't even crave it until he had it, so I made myself something he craved in return. So I never told him, either, I just swallowed my rage and let it fuel what there already was, from the war.

"You see, he was too young for it, but I wasn't, and I'm sorry to say it but all that anger made me a better spy, and it's one of the reasons I might've survived when a lot of people I served with didn't. If I'm a natural as a Ranger, that's why. I wish I could say that I'm sorry for hiding all of that." Marcus shook his head. "But I'm not and I'd do it all over again, exactly the same."

"You're still angry," said Neroon. "You've always been angry."

"No," snapped Marcus.

Yes. Yes, he was.

He took a deep breath in, and exhaled it slowly, the way Sech Turval taught him. It didn't really help, but it made him appear more normal and composed. So he thought. When he opened his eyes, Neroon was studying him knowingly, seeing right through it. His dark eyes burned holes in Marcus' defences like it was child's play. Marcus wanted to backhand him for it. Neroon was relaxed, lounging in the armchair in his underwear, but Marcus was the one who felt exposed. "Look, anger and bitterness have served me well," Marcus protested. "To the point that it's a little difficult to let go of them, sometimes."

"Anger makes a poor master," said Neroon. A pithy aphorism they probably taught all Warrior Caste brats.

"I was always the master," said Marcus hotly. But then he reflected. "No, maybe I wasn't."

"One can do the right thing, if for the wrong reasons," supposed Neroon.

"Mm. That's why I joined the Rangers," said Marcus. "The right thing to do. The wrong reasons. I'm here for the cause. I'm here against the Shadows, because someone needs to do it." And if others wouldn't - like the Warrior Caste, or the Drazi - Marcus supposed he'd scrum up enough honour for them. Just like before. "And I'm here for revenge - I'm here because I hate myself, because my mistakes and my foolishness got everyone on my colony killed, including my brother. I'm here because I promised him I'd take up his work. I'm here because I will never talk to him again, and there's no amount of anger that can replace the loneliness. Anger can't do that."

Now he began to hit home, to hit Neroon. He mustn't lash out like this. Neroon wasn't dumb, he'd already caught the parallels. *You should probably call your sister.* Message received, loud and clear - Neroon was stricken.

"Well, it can't, can it," said Marcus. He softened his voice. It took mindful effort. "I read once, 'the anger in your heart warms you now, but will leave you cold in your grave'."

Neroon looked away. "That's very wise," he whispered.

"Yeah. Advice I'm still not good at taking." Marcus slapped his hands palm down on the table, not so loud they would make the crockery jump, but enough to be decisive. "Right," he said, "that's enough heavy talk for tonight."

"Agreed," said Neroon, grateful. There was some silence, which again Neroon broke first. (Look at that, thought Marcus, he's learning how to converse, just like a real ordinary social person.) "What
was the most embarrassing thing Sech Durhan ever said to you?"

Marcus grinned. "Really? That's what you want to ask?"

"I've plenty questions worse," said Neroon, "but many are too momentous and this conversation is buckling under the weight strain already." He'd plenty questions, had he? thought Marcus, who hadn't thought Neroon all that interested or himself all that interesting, but Neroon barged forward. "I shall go first, and I preface this by saying that I have never been a particularly talented dancer - there was an old... classmate of mine, Hedronn, who was much, much better -"

"But you fight so elegantly!" exclaimed Marcus. "How can you say dancing's not your forte when you move like that?"

Marcus realised he'd said something a bit too frank when Neroon stopped and stared, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Slowly, gloating, he said, "Why, Anla'shok, a compliment, from you?"

"Oh, go off," said Marcus. He could feel himself flushing from the warmth on his cheeks. Luckily it was too dark. "You were saying?"

"Sech Durhan said much the same thing. He took me aside to talk about my abysmal performance in nil'bok'cha - I would have been thirteen cycles - and he says, listen. Why are you so impressively bad at this. What is holding you back."

"I haven't got an answer. I stammer about for a minute and he isn't really interested in my excuses. He offers to get me a tutor, if I'm that set on it. And I ask him who this tutor would be, and he says naturally, it would be Hedronn of the Moon Shields, he is the best in your year, and I'm -" Neroon paused for a moment and laughed derisively. "For awhile later, Hedronn and I were friends, or something like it, but at first we were bitter rivals, and we had an intense competition. At this point in my life I don't even want to hear the name Hedronn of the Moon Shields. I am finished with Hedronn of the Moon Shields. But nil'bok'cha - the sword dance - is the least spiritual of the grounding and focus activities. It requires excellent kinesthetic control channelled by your focus."

"Like meditation," said Marcus.

"I thought it better," said Neroon. "It doesn't require a trance, and the alternative was chant meditation or dor'thur'orel. We were obliged to take at least one." Dor'thur'orel, knew Marcus, was something like yoga - breathing techniques, focusing on awakening energies, combined with intense prayer. He couldn't picture Neroon doing it.

"So. There we are, I am ... throwing a childish tantrum about how Hedronn is so special because he's a Moon Shield and so is Durhan and meanwhile I'm just some Star Rider on training exchange and he disparages me, you cannot play the clan card, it's because he's that good at nil'bok'cha and you know it and you could stand to learn a thing or two from him if you weren't so stubborn, and I say point blank that I categorically refuse to have anything to do with him, and I demand that Sech Durhan find me another tutor.

"And he says finally, too loudly, when will it dawn upon you that there's more to your studies than besting Hedronn of the Moon Shields!

"By this point, a crowd has already gathered, and front and foremost is -"

Marcus could guess. "Hedronn of the Moon Shields."

"Laughing his fool head off because that haughty little Star Rider whom he hates, who has bested him in many of the military activities, has failed at achieving one simple, obvious epiphany." Neroon
shook his head, almost fond. "I dropped nil'bok'cha classes that afternoon. I never went back."

"What'd you take instead?

"Chant meditation," laughed Neroon, "and I was even worse than nil'bok'cha. I passed only on the strength and quality of my voice. Sech Clonenn thought it a pleasing offering to the universe, or something like that. But it was that or dor'thorel and Sech Mireval would have been able to tell I didn't mean a word of the prayer portion."

"You're not that religious?" Was that so great a surprise? Neroon had never acted fervent.

Neroon's mirth faded abruptly to a shy, uncertain smile. "I am ... virtually non-believing," he admitted. "I don't believe in much of our Religious doctrine." He said, more quietly, "It would be more accurate to say I don't believe in any of it."

None of it? "Is that a secret?"

"Not as such," said Neroon, uncomfortable, "but other Minbari prefer not to hear of my heretical beliefs. The only one who never minded was the former Shai Alyt, Branmer. I think he enjoyed the academic debate and maybe a conversion challenge. It is somewhat disgraceful for a Warrior. The whole point behind not minding dying, is that it is not death, when one's soul returns to the universe." Even Neroon's drawl showed he didn't place much stock in it.

Great, thought Marcus. And we're both atheists, too.

"I don't know that I believe in souls," Neroon added. "I thought I did, but after the war... if I did, it might help explain why we surrendered. But it didn't. So. What more is there but consciousness?"

That made some sad sense. No wonder Neroon hated humans. Not because he thought their Minbari souls had been stolen by dishonourable aliens - which is what Delenn had told Marcus he'd said to her once - but because he didn't have any conclusive end to the war besides the Religious Caste simply having said so for the sake of beliefs he didn't even share.

"How would I feel," murmured Marcus, "if I was told to kill on the behalf of someone else's beliefs. So that's why you hate Humans?"


"Well, you started it." But he was somehow glad Neroon had said something. It was dangerously easy to slip into serious matters with Neroon, and this wasn't going to be the last time, he knew. I hope it isn't, he thought, I like this depth, this frankness.

"The most embarrassing thing Sech Durhan ever said to me," said Marcus, thinking aloud.

"So! When I began with the Ranger training it was easy making friends with the Humans, and much less easy making friends with the Minbari. One of the first and only Minbari friends I made was this Worker Caste fellow, Inesval. I was really keen on not losing his friendship, because the Minbari didn't exactly mesh well with the Humans and it was pretty much vice versa. Fast forward to later months. It was advanced steps with the pike and Durhan had asked us to show some steps to younger trainees - this was an all-Human group, and they didn't speak good enough Fik yet.

"Now I'm feeling pretty good about my pikework by this point. Inesval was not, and so I assumed what Durhan was doing was constructing two examples of what to do, what not to do. I, of course, was the example of what to do." Neroon was already smirking. "Ah ah - don't say it. And since I
was feeling pretty good about my abilities, and I had assumed Inesval wasn't, I let my mouth run away from me, trying to help Inesval feel better about his less than elegant pike machinations by putting down my meditation skills, which he excelled at. So I'd spent the whole time talking about one of the other Sechs - without mentioning him by name - who I didn't think liked me because I wasn't very good at meditations. I've never been very good at sitting still."

"I thought the keeping quiet part would be your greatest struggle," said Neroon.

"Oh, you're hilariously," said Marcus flatly. "So I'm chatting, Inesval is suffering, and Sech Durhan is the only one who can understand our conversation, and so at the end of it he looks right at me and says - in English, so that everyone in the room can understand - *Turval most certainly does not like you. I am not even certain why Inesval here does.* Which caught my attention long enough for Inesval to stab a blow right into my solar plexus, perfect form and everything.

"I was doubled over wheezing. Durhan had little sympathy and snapped, *Well, someone has to tell you the truth, you puffed-up popinjay.* And then he used the rest of the lecture on the importance of not letting one's guard down. Turns out I was what not to do."

"Savagery," said Neroon. "No wonder nothing I say can hurt you much."

"The truth always hurts more than the pike," said Marcus.

Neroon's smile faded, somewhat. "He did the very same thing to me when I was seventeen."

Marcus struggled to find something clever to reply, and couldn't. Brushing the comment off as Neroon's competitive side didn't get them out of the comparison. To suggest that their old pike Sech did it as a rule to many felt specious because Marcus knew, somehow, it was incorrect. Even Sech Durhan knew they were two aspects of the same person, and he'd laugh if he could see them now. Well. Good thing neither of them believed in souls. One might start thinking something dangerous.

He said instead, "Listen," for it had been hours since dinner, and the stars were out, "it's getting quite late."

"The bed, of course, is yours," said Neroon. 

*Just shut up and come to bed with me* was on the tip of Marcus' tongue. Oh no, he couldn't say that, even if Minbari didn't have the same sense of what it meant, and even if Marcus wouldn't mean it like that. "Well, there's room for you," he said.

"There really isn't," Neroon drawled.

"I really don't care," retorted Marcus. "I don't think it's good for either of us to be sleeping on the floor. I'd rather you get a good night's sleep and be less irritable as a result. Truly."

"I have been on splendid behaviour recently, despite this heat," said Neroon primly. He had *not*, but Marcus let his arch expression speak for him, which Neroon ignored. "I like to believe I am acclimatising."

"And you're going back to Li Mrakto's steam hut for all of tomorrow," said Marcus, "and then off to a fancy party. Have you acclimatised to that?"

"A fair point," Neroon replied. He looked out at the stars, staring up at them. "I shall join you in a minute," he said, somewhat dreamily.

"Don't stay up half the night being leery of a small bed," said Marcus. "Goodnight."
Sometime during the night, Marcus drifted awake when the mattress shifted and dipped next to him. He was too drowsy to make anything of it. Before Neroon could settle down next to him, Marcus had already slipped back into sleep.

In the morning he woke at the usual hour. Blearily, he looked over.

Had he dreamt it? There was nobody beside him. The covers were rumpled. It looked more like Neroon had slept on top of them. Marcus stretched out his hand to test them - still warm. There was a pile of pillows near the headboard, arranged to approximate an angle. 30 degrees at best, but maybe that was better than nothing.

The bathroom door opened. Marcus kept his eyes closed, pretending sleep, caught with his hand where Neroon had lain. Don't move, he thought, maybe he won't have seen.

The chemical smell pervaded the room before the bathroom door closed again, more quietly. After a moment Neroon carried on to the balcony and started water for tea.

His pulse was racing. Well, it was probably time to properly wake anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand we're back to bedsharing 8) we'll bicker more next chapter, I'm sure.

Thanks for reading!!! ❤❤
Chapter Notes

Some news: RL too hectic so I still haven't replied to previous comments yet (sorry!) and I won't be able to get to a computer until after the 12th (double sorry!!) so here's a longer chapter here, since I gotta skip next week's update. D: please accept my sincerest apologies!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Marcus had a mostly free day before he would join Janella and Neroon later that night, because it didn't take him all day to buy a long enough length of heavy strength, lightweight rope for that evening's excursion. Nor did it take him much time to pick out a set of Drazi daggers, which could not hold poison but were decorated to look like they could. (Also, they were pretty and on sale.) He was tempted to stop by Li Mrakto's but by now knew better - there would be food, but there would also be steam and screaming. Instead he bought lunch in the city.

Drazi did not really have a fixed midday meal. Most ate anywhere between two hours before, and four hours after the sun's zenith. Zhoshesh Dorallo was large enough and galactic enough to feature restaurants (enclosed areas with seating providing meals on crockery) and cafes (enclosed areas with seating providing beverages, small plates, and desserts) and taverns (enclosed areas with seating providing all of the above, plus alcohol).

But the best eating, the tastiest food, had always been from the food stands on the side streets. It was generally low cost, because each food stand only served one or two dishes. It wasn't terribly high-scale. Sometimes it didn't look very appetising - stews and stir-fries never really did. The stands had varying amounts of standards of cleanliness, but Grandmother's kitchen was never tasty because she was an obsessive cleaner, and this was every Drazi family recipe in full colour shining glory, in food stand form. One paid a deposit charge for utensils (refunded later when one relinquished them), and the food was served in photo-degradable takeaway boxes. It would never win the Centauri Royal Julina Prize for High Class Dining, but it was better in every way.

Marcus at age ten had gorged himself with delight, and then had regretted it for the next week. A common meatworm, had said the doctor, when he couldn't keep anything down for three days. He wouldn't've even been symptomatic if he hadn't been raised being shuffled from one mining colony to another. But he had, and living on recycled, germ-curated air with artificially-enriched food and mandatory light lamp exposure had done his immune system no good. No wonder Li Dro Lrkta had thought him skinny. He was given some medicine and it was back to processed ration meals.

Marcus at thirty-nine was a different beast. He gleefully sampled sticky ghrrholla dumplings drizzled in spiced shroot oil, mny egg stew with a voet seed-paste steam-bun, dras-hor-ai wrapped in sweet phrot leaf, kro'lruth-on-a-stick charred and rotisseried for hours, served in succulent Borrot sauce, and more, throwing himself into the mass of the crowd to yell his orders over everybody else. God, I love Zhabar, he thought. Zany, busy, joyous, full-of-life madness.

(Although Neroon's frhit was better.)

Come sundown, when he had finally worked up an appetite again, he packed the rope and dressed in one of his new Drazi suits: a dark grey, knee-length tunic robe belted with brass-studded brown
leather, over plain grey-checked trousers. Neroon was right, the tunic was tight across the chest, but it gave a regal bearing, which Marcus imagined pleased the Drazi who ordinarily wore these sorts of things. The tunic pockets had little silver-chain tassels on them. Fun to fiddle with, but ultimately distracting. Marcus ripped them off. If you're a cat, don't bell yourself.

He took the uptown tram to quadrant forty-three by fifty-nine, to the building that housed the Zherresht Province Heritage Trust. He entered, asked the administrative staff to see Li Frhomo (whose name Marcus had already previously searched for as a means to get in), and was directed to floor sixty-three.

A long ride up in the lift. Ought to have taken the stairs, thought Marcus, it'd've been faster.

Only a few people remained working at the Province Heritage Trust: three bowed scaled heads at dimly-lit desks. Luckily, none of them worked close to the wing's main entrance. Marcus picked the lock and crept in unseen, then ducked under an empty desk for some time until they left. Someone killed the lights, and only dusk remained.

He let a further ten minutes slip by. Under the cover of a firmer darkness, he reached the open balcony, where he secured the rope to four different balcony pillars, heaved the extra over the balcony, and waited for Neroon. Only a feeble wind, as high as the sixtieth floor. That was a bit of luck. Not that this part of Zhabar was notorious for wind - it wasn't - but storms did on the rare occasion occur, and a brisk wind at ground level meant a deadly one on a skyscraper balcony.

At last nine o'clock rolled around, and like clockwork, Neroon appeared on the balcony on the other side of the street, two floors below. Marcus caught his eye. He nodded and beckoned.

Marcus hefted the crystal knife, tied to the free end of the rope, took aim... one, two, he counted, and on three he threw. It hit the other side, the balcony ledge, but didn't stick - but Neroon was there in a flash and caught it before it tumbled below to the street. Ten minutes Neroon spent, bending from pillar to pillar, securing the rope, which became more and more taut as he worked until it was nearly tight-rope walkable. Finished. Marcus tested it by tugging; it seemed good. Neroon returned and tapped the rope as sign to come across.

The width of a three-lane road was between them. It was not far. If Neroon's side - or Marcus' side - were not secure... or if he fell... it was sixty floors down, he'd never survive.

They really should've forged an identity pass.

Here goes nothing, thought Marcus. He took out his denn'bok and hopped up on the side of the balcony, spinning to dangle his legs off the ledge.

Sixty stories up.

Scooters and vans and spinners drove around below; they looked like ants, specks milling about. The Drazi wandering the streets couldn't be seen. The food stands couldn't be seen. Marcus had never been afraid of heights, not really, but this was new.

"Alright," he said. He held the rope by one hand and the ledge with the other. He edged his way off, scooting down until his foot made contact with the storm drain, jutting out from the base of the balcony. Of every balcony, in fact. The drain was large, perhaps a foot's diameter, and reinforced enough that it could easily take his weight, no problem. Rain was rare in this part of Zhabar but when it rained, it rained hard. But it still impressed upon him that he was standing on a hollow cylinder of metal the length of his body, the width of his foot, with one hand on a rope and another on the ledge, and nothing else, aloft at this height.
Sixty stories.

Neroon, across, had an inscrutable expression on his face. Too far away to read.

"Alright," said Marcus again. "Count of three. Three - two -"

He impulsively let go, premature, and flung himself forward. Mid-air he extended the denn'bok, looped it around the rope, caught the other end to swing from it, and held on for dear life.

The other building and Neroon grew closer and closer until Marcus hit the ledge on the other side, slamming into it with the speed of the zipline. He grunted with the pain. Should've tied it a bit higher, he could've dropped off and rolled it, that would've hurt the ribs less. No matter. On the other side, safe now. He flung the pike onto the balcony and grabbed for the ledge with his hand, standing on this balcony's storm drain ledge.

But his hold wasn't good enough, and he tipped sideways off it.

For a moment Marcus was weightless. His heart lurched as he felt the moment where he slipped away from anything solid. He took in everything in a scant second - the wall of the balcony that his fingertips grazed, gripless - the whistle of air past his ears - Neroon, crowned by the light from the party behind him, his dark eyes wide and shocked.

A hand wrapped around his wrist, past the sleeve, clasped solid but firm. "No," growled Neroon. Only then did the realisation of falling to his death truly catch up to Marcus: when Marcus was dangling off a building, held in place only by a single Minbari grip. I don't want to die, he discovered, and the shock was so great it suppressed his panic. Instantly, Neroon's other hand was there and Marcus grabbed wildly for it. Then they were connected, with both hands, and Marcus was scrambling for the storm drain, which he caught on the heel of his boot.

"Come on," said Neroon. He leaned himself down over the side of the ledge, balancing his weight. He let Marcus' hands go only to reach for him under the arms, first one, then the other, and tightened his hold in a weird embrace around Marcus' chest. He grunted, heaving back, and pulled Marcus slowly up to the balcony ledge until Marcus could get a knee on it, and he didn't stop clutching him tight until Marcus was seated safely there.

"You can let go now," said Marcus gently, into the crook of Neroon's neck. "I'm secure." Thanks to you, he thought.

Slowly and with caution, Neroon did. He stepped back but not far enough to grant Marcus personal space, not far enough that Marcus couldn't feel the radiant warmth of his chest or his cheek, not far enough that his arms did not still encircle him, looser, but a firm, secure hold. His face was very close. Don't stare, thought Marcus to himself, but couldn't help it, keeping eye contact longer than was comfortable.

The realisation that they really were too close dawned on Neroon, and Marcus caught every facial expression as they went through the progression of shock to outrage to horror to ire. "Valen's crest, you're heavy," Neroon snapped. He looked Marcus up and down. Marcus distinctly remembered him doing this what seemed like forever ago, in the temple of Lith Shorell. Then, Neroon had clearly found him lacking. Now, he seemed nearly intrigued, poorly covering for his indignation. "A tiny frame like yours," he said, "I don't see where you keep the muscle, but you've clearly got it. The pain in my arms is testament to that."

Always a backhanded compliment. Neroon was angry at himself; Marcus was getting better at
reading him. He kept his hands firmly on the ledge as he swung his legs over and stood, safe at last, on the other side. "Yes, well," said Marcus, "you'll never have to do that again, and trust me, it was no picnic for me either!"

Now that he was safe on the firm ground of the balcony, he realised his ribs were killing him. Neroon's tight grip around his chest. Marcus chanced a breath. Not nearly as deep as it had gotten before it began to ache. Great. But it saved his life, so he mustn't complain.

"Right, then," said Marcus, brushing himself off. "Let that be the most excitement we have tonight -"

The door opened. The din from the party grew louder as a single Drazi walked through and ducked into the first stall. A woman, judging from the style of dress she was wearing. She didn't seem to have seen them.

Marcus backed himself into the wall, into the shadows. He knelt down, collapsed his pike, and put it back in his pocket.

The Drazi exited and made for the balcony where the steam-sinks were.

And the rope. And Marcus in the shadows.

Neroon saw it too. He quickly backed up onto the rope, lying over the ledge, and leaned upon it, covering it with his body. He threw Marcus a helpless, frantic glance. Marcus held his eyes and put a single finger over his lips.

"Hello," said the Drazi.

"Ah, good evening," said Neroon, pretending at casualness, and failing.

The Drazi looked him up and down, confused.

"Just enjoying the late twilight," said Neroon. He tried smiling. It was a grimace. "The stars are - ah. Stars. In the sky. And I am looking at them."

Marcus pinched the bridge of his nose. This is why, he thought, we leave the acting and lying to the dishonourable Human.

"<Yeah, I don't actually speak enough of your language>," said the Drazi. "<I was just trying to be polite. Not start a dialogue.>" Marvellous, thought Marcus, because Neroon was butchering small talk. She tutted, put her hands in the steam-sink, waited ten seconds for the cycle to finish, then flicked away the beads of condensation the steam vapour left behind.

Marcus waited for the door to shut behind her before he left the shadows. "Kill the rope," he instructed. One slice of Neroon's crystal knife and the rope was sailing away, back across the street.

"Are we going to collect that rope later?" asked Neroon.

"If we have time." Neroon folded his arms across his chest. "What? I'm already charging one whole Drazi spinner to the Anla'shok reimbursement accounts. What's a little length of rope?"

"The Entil'Zha will find some way to blame this on me," said Neroon.

"That's a problem for you." Again Neroon studied him curiously. "Oh, what now?"

"Your clothing," he said. "You look like a Drazi."
Marcus smoothed down his Drazi robes. A flattering silhouette, he'd thought. "And? So do you. You can't expect me to go to a shindig like this in my Ranger uniform," he said. "The Drazi wear is to fit in, as best I can."

"Because those locks of yours aren't a complete give-away," Neroon drawled.

It was a compliment to endear him to the Drazi hosts and reduce suspicion of being a gate-crasher, not to try and become one himself. Neroon wouldn't understand. "Never mind. Janella's out there?"

"Yes," said Neroon. "We arrived two hours ago. The most exciting part of the evening before your near-fall." They exited the bathroom; the Drazi guards flanking the doors saw them chatting amiably amongst themselves as they left, and thought nothing of it. "She drives like a madwoman," Neroon was saying. "Dangerously fast - no restraints, no helmets. Into a teeming crowd of people that barely scattered in time! I of course was more worried for her, since I am protected by my bone crest."

Marcus said nothing but hoped his look of disbelief was adequately conveyed as he thought of the four days Neroon spent comatose with a head wound. Yes. Impenetrable bone crest indeed.

They turned the corner to the main room and Marcus got his first glimpse at the large crowd. There were at least five other humans here. One was raven-haired like Marcus. Even better. "And Gorrom?" Marcus asked.

Neroon frowned. "How can you -" "They all look the same to you, don't they? Well, not to me." He smiled. "Anyway. I'll be off."

"I shall be with Janella," said Neroon.

Marcus caught up with Gorrom easily, darting through the crowd of Drazi, and slipped in behind a group clustered around a firepit. Gorrom did not appear to realise he was being followed until he walked past a hallway flanked by two guards.

Time to strike. Marcus sidled up next to Gorrom and took his arm, friendly but firm. "Ah!" he said, "why, Li Gorrom! I thought that was you. Perhaps we could have a bit of a chat, eh?"

Gorrom's expression was priceless. "How -"

"Come now, my friend," Marcus said cheerily, frogmarching him down the hallway past the guards, "I know your language skills are better than that." He stopped them at the end of the hallway, out of earshot of the crowd, spun Gorrom around, and shoved him against the wall. "So."

"About the men who were there," began Gorrom.

"Say no more," replied Marcus. "Wasn't even a problem."
"Was- really? Not a problem?" Gorrom gaped. "There were -"

"Not enough that it was too many for me," said Marcus. "Have I got your attention, then? Because I'd like to know what it is Ka Phor has on you."

"Ka Phor," repeated Gorrom, numbly. Marcus narrowed his eyes. Good - caught off-guard. Time to move in. An offer of help instead of an accusation, in the hopes that Gorrom would take him up on it, or to see how much Gorrom would say about Ka Phor's blackmailing ways.

"I've met him now once," said Marcus. "And I think you're right, mate, he's definitely got something to do with your aides. But he keeps being a thorn in your side, isn't he?"

"Y-yes!" said Gorrom. "Why, yes, he is. He's terrible. He asks favour after favour from me and I am powerless to refuse him!"

Marcus smiled. "What is it he's got on you? How can he blackmail you? As far as I can tell, he's a low-life guild exile, he's not even employed, he has no clearance to so much as check an address with the authorities. Meanwhile -" Marcus tapped Gorrom in the chest, a little too hard for friendly. "You're sitting pretty. First Minister for Labour. Minister-elect, if you play your cards right."

"I have much to lose; he has nothing to lose and much to gain," explained Gorrom. True enough, thought Marcus. "I told you what he said to me, that he slew the aides for me. It's because he hides out in the mountains." That did explain a few things. "I have tried to keep tabs on him, but he has no fixed address. But for him to be here makes no sense otherwise. That's how he got the bodies there in the first place!"

"I see," said Marcus. It didn't quite add up - how exactly did he get them there? where were they slain? And it was a little more elaborate a tale than Gorrom spun the first time. That usually meant a lie. But Marcus couldn't tell whether it was because he was being more forthright since he'd run out of other options to get away from Ka Phor. Again, Gorrom seemed genuine. Marcus grew ever more intrigued. "And what else?"

Gorrom wrung his hands together. "He has physical evidence, that suggests I was directly responsible for the death of the two aides," he said. "He has falsified this, somehow. But I am not certain that our forensics could detect the fabrication."

"You didn't tell me about that earlier," said Marcus.

"I didn't know about it earlier, he only just told me!"

Just? "So he's been to see you again?" Was he here?

"Yes," said Gorrom. "A day after we spoke! He said he came on the word of this Refa character." Gorrom wagged a long finger in Marcus' face. "They're in cahoots, you know! I am always having to delete his logs to Dorno Station where they meet. He wanted me to delete a call log from a Minbari."

"Refa did?"

"No, Ka Phor," said Gorrom. "But I shouldn't be surprised that Centauri is involved with the same friends Ka Phor mentions!" Neither would Marcus, for that was already suspected by the Rangers because of the incident at Zagros VII.

"Which Minbari," wondered Marcus.
Gorrom became suspicious. "And why do you want to know?"

"Well, you continue to be concerned about these Rangers. Perhaps it's one of them."

But Gorrom shook his head. "It didn't say," he said. It didn't say, heard Marcus, not he. Then Gorrom had accessed the log and found 'Caller unknown, sector unknown' in the logs. He must have known somehow that it was a Minbari. How? "I was just told to do it. So I did. And - and there was more, he wanted me to delete his trips to Dorrno Station. He is not supposed to attend the Stock Traders guild meetings, he is no longer in the guild. In fact - in fact, that's why I moved, because Ka Phor came, had more errands for me. So I had to have protection hired! I had to vacate my office!"

Gorrom was definitely lying now. "Yes, I noticed that," said Marcus archly.

"The men were for Ka Phor, should he have returned," said Gorrom, assuring him. "A simple mistake, you understand. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Right," said Marcus, "because I am so easily confused for a Drazi."

Gorrom huffed. "Alright, very well," he said, "I did have you looked into. I admit it! You came in with a Minbari - there's a flyer at the port authority under 'Mikrine' - I had it checked where you're staying. There's a Minbari listed as well." So much Gorrom had access to! What advantages there were to being so well-placed in Drazi society - Ka Phor had had to go up and down Zhoshesh Dorallo and shake down Li Mrakto for a fraction of that information. "I checked further with my Minbari contact: there's no Ranger named Mikrine, if that is his name."

"Well," said Marcus, "you could've just asked."

"Really! Then I will just ask - I should love to know what you were doing on Minbar for, what was it, five months? Roughly the time it takes for training a Ranger, isn't it?" Gorrom sneered. "My Minbari contact was very specific."

"The same thing there that I'm doing now," Marcus lied. "Setting up company. You know, the Minbari paid us very well for Q-40. I overcharged them," he added, and this wasn't a lie, "my own personal take on war restorations. They paid without complaint. Extremely lucrative business. So you see, I've no love for the Minbari, especially not their Warrior Caste."

"And that bonehead you've been seen around? This - Mikrine?"

"He's a Starship Crafter. Worker Caste. Them, I'll work with. We're associates," said Marcus, "nothing more."

Gorrom was not convinced. "The men said you fought with him admirably, using a Minbari weapon."

"Their ways nearly cost my species their lives," he replied. "There's clearly something to learn from them."

"Then you deny he is a member of these Rangers?"

Marcus had to laugh. Neroon, a Ranger? There was something about it that seemed ludicrous. Probably the part that meant Delenn would be his boss. "Look, if you want to know, go ask him yourself! Minbari don't lie."

"They never tell the whole truth, either," Gorrom said, scornful.
"Perhaps not. But if you ask him a direct question, you'll get a direct answer. A word of advice: that's how to deal with Minbari. You back them into a corner and you must be very precise with your words. If you leave any room for nuance, they'll take it."

Gorrom smiled like Marcus had done him a great favour, like Marcus was his ally. "Then you won't mind if I have a word with him right now."

Marcus grinned and extended a hand. "After you."

Being the only Minbari in the room (and the entire city), Neroon was not hard to find. Janella stood beside him, drinking something dark blue and viscous from a heavy glass goblet, resplendent in a dark green tunic overtop close-fitting trousers. A man's outfit, generally, but Drazi fashion was more lax in that regard. The tunic was high-necked with the chest bared, covered by an intricate silver chain net. Neroon was very studiously not looking at it, even though Drazi, unlike Humans or Minbari, were not mammalian and therefore the women did not have breasts to not look at in the first place.

"Mikrine," said Marcus, "I thought I'd present Li Kulmta Gorrom. He was curious -"

"They say you can't lie," blurted Gorrom, pointing a finger in Neroon's face. "Is that right?"

Neroon blinked. Cautiously he watched Marcus, then Janella, for a few seconds. Marcus could practically see the gears turning as he plotted out what to say. "That is what is commonly said of us," he replied evenly.

"So tell me, boy - Mikrine, was it?"

His eyes narrowed. "It was," he replied.

Gorrom glowered. "Are you a Ranger?"

"I'm not," he said.

Janella, beside him, gasped softly. "But you said -"

"You inferred it," said Neroon coolly. "I let you think it. I got the impression you wanted to talk to a Ranger; and meanwhile, I wanted to talk to you."

Smooth, thought Marcus. Janella looked from Neroon to Marcus to Gorrom, who was livid. "<You must understand, Li Gorrom>," she said in Drazi, "<you asked me - to stick close to the Ranger - and so I did!>"

"<Of course, dear girl, of course>," Gorrom replied. "<It's no matter. I can't have expected a simple temp to do the job of an experienced ministry assistant all that well. Maybe in your next employment you'll take a bit more care.>" Neroon was watching Marcus carefully, hoping for a translation. Janella was upset, Gorrom was malevolent, and Marcus was trying not to look like he understood what they were saying.

At last Janella said, "I don't like being used," and flung what was left of her drink, in Neroon's face. She whirled on her heel and flounced off, slipping away through the crowd.

Neroon wiped the blue splash from his lips and cheeks. "Pardon me," he muttered, and took off after Janella.

"Well! You've your answer," said Marcus. He turned to Gorrom.
But Gorrom wasn't listening. He growled, "I thought you said they can't lie," and wandered away, leaving Marcus alone.

To avoid drawing attention to himself, Marcus quickly found another group to hang around: this one almost entirely Human, who stuck together, standoffish, talking amongst themselves. None of them wore Nightwatch armbands, but only two wore Drazi clothing, and that was telling. The CEO of IPX, a general from Earthforce New Technologies (possibly doing double duty as the CEO's bodyguard), a few stock market analysts, and the CFO of a Mars-based consulting group on risk management, currently contracting with Edgars Industries. Marcus billed himself with the same excuse he'd been giving since he arrived on Zhabar: he was the CEO of a Quantum-40 mining company, looking to start up in the Freehold, trying to get the lay of the land as to financial feasibility.

Mr Risk Analysis and Management was most keen on chatting, but he was a boring chap, if kind enough (he wore Drazi clothing and unlike the remainder didn't complain about the food). Nevertheless Marcus tuned him out the moment he began going on about the risk analysis guild and its strange new leadership now under Gorrom, for whom he had a great liking, and who had invited him personally.

Over his shoulder, meanwhile, he watched Neroon and Janella. Evidently, they'd made up. They truly made a strange pair... Janella was good at acting hurt, if it was an act. Neroon appeared genuinely discomfited at the prospect of having hurt her, though he kept his distance. I wonder if he's pinning blame on me, thought Marcus. After all, Marcus was the one who had instructed him to lead her on in the first place. He watched as Neroon touched her shoulder gingerly and then dropped his hand to hold hers, as loosely as possible to pass for affection without compromising his own sensibilities. Janella gripped his hand in return and he looked even more discomfited, his eyes widening and that blueish pattern on the crown of his head darkening as he flushed.

Marcus felt irrationally annoyed. Neroon didn't even know her, why should he be so embarrassed? Anyway, it wasn't his job to hang around with Janella and be sweet on her! He was here to be Marcus' bodyguard - he was here for Marcus at Marcus' superior's request - he wasn't here to court Drazi. Not like he even would!

Foolish to watch after them. Neroon could handle himself, and anyway, Marcus didn't care.

He took further advantage of Mr Risk Analysis, who was plenty happy to chat about himself with little input from Marcus besides the occasional non-verbal acknowledgement, to reflect.

So Gorrom did want to talk to a Ranger, he thought. He'd put Janella on the task of finding one, and he was upset that Neroon wasn't who he thought he was. Was that what he thought was the lie? Or was it that Gorrom had spoken to Ka Phor, who had proof that an Alyt Neroon was staying in the apartment, not Mikrine?

If Gorrom had spoken to Ka Phor, he would not have given Ka Phor any information. It was possible Ka Phor wouldn't give him any in return.

No, the timing... The timing was key. Gorrom mentioned a visit from Ka Phor a day after they spoke. The same day Marcus and Neroon fought Ka Phor and his two Shadow friends. The visit - if it had truly taken place - was before Ka Phor would have checked the apartment, for he had not been able to track down the address until another two days had passed. But the call log had already been deleted by that time. Then according to Gorrom, Ka Phor visited him and told him to delete the log - and would not have known that the Minbari he had met was Neroon - and Ka Phor could not have told Gorrom this.
He could have told Gorrom that Marcus was the Ranger, however.

Or Gorrom could've pieced it together himself, for if he was the one who had deleted the messages, he would have seen the logs, that there had been calls to the Ranger base on Minbar, and that an Alyt Neroon (what a shame that he had kept that there for Marcus!) had logged calls.

Gorrom had also mentioned a Minbari contact. Whoever they were, they might not have known a Mikrine, but they certainly would know an Alyt Neroon of the Star Riders. If Neroon was correct in his estimation of his own importance, few people didn't know Alyt Neroon of the Star Riders. And if that Minbari contact were Warrior Caste, then the jig was certainly up, and Neroon would have to confess to his superior that he was off-world, in the Freehold, where a warrior shouldn't be.

"- because I really think he'd be a genuine asset to your company, Mister Cole!"

Marcus blinked. "Sorry, come again?"

Mr Risk Analysis was shoving a pleasant-faced Drazi with brownish-green scales towards him. "I'm just going to pop off to the bathroom," said Mr Risk Analysis, and left Marcus alone with the Drazi.

The Drazi took one look at Marcus. "Not in mood to talk business?" he guessed.

"Not really," Marcus replied. The Drazi grinned, nodding.

"They say you came with Minbari," said Marcus' new Drazi friend.

"Oh, Mikrine, yeah. You want me to introduce you?"

"No!" said the Drazi, very quickly. Too quickly. Marcus lifted an eyebrow. "No, no. Not because he - anything." The Drazi was almost shy. "Only - well. Really very handsome, by Drazi standards."


"Flesh, off-putting," continued the Drazi, "but crest - look almost like scales. His crest - very spiky. Like frilled scales! Most erotic! Flattering, to see him in Drazi robe!"

Oh my god, he thought.

"You know something of Minbari, yes?" said the Drazi. "Is he attractive for one of their kind?"

Marcus would never be over how non-xenophobic the Drazi were. If it was sentient, they'd either fight it or shag it. Maybe both, to account for foreplay.

"I ... suppose?" said Marcus gingerly. "If you like the bones and long robes look."

Marcus refused to even entertain the notion. Neroon, attractive for a Minbari. Sure, why not, Marcus wasn't Minbari, he couldn't judge.

Except that he could, because Inesval wouldn't shut up about his latest sweetheart past the fourth courtship ritual, so Marcus knew exactly what made a Minbari attractive. A magnificent crest, pale skin to make the blueish bits brighter, deep-set eyes or a wide forehead ridge or both, a commanding magnetic personality, a firm instinct for honour, a spark of intelligence, a good sense of humour.

Technically speaking, Neroon had all of that. Not really all that different from Humans, was it.

No, Marcus refused to think about this!
"You humans, so easily scandalised," said the Drazi, laughing. He turned away to attend to the nearest fire pit.

There was a sudden warmth at his shoulder. "We need to speak," came Neroon's low voice in Marcus' ear, far too close for comfort, smelling like Janelle's drink.

"Can you give me some bloody breathing room," Marcus muttered. Neroon huffed, affronted, but stepped back. "Fine. Take us out of here."

Neroon led them back to the washroom where Marcus had landed on the balcony, and took them into the shadows where Marcus had hid from the Drazi. There, illuminated only by the faint moonlight on Zhabar, Neroon's face was more angular, the shadows harsh and misshapen on his features, and his crest looked like demon's horns. The black robe was slimming on him, taut and smooth from shoulder to belly, and he had that military bearing back, his chest thrust out, his waist trim.

Was he attractive for a Minbari?

"Marcus, are you paying any attention?" Neroon snarled. He snapped his fingers in front of Marcus' eyes. "I've important information!"

He cleared his throat. "Erm. Yes. You were saying."

Neroon told him everything Janelle said, both before and after Gorrom's perceived betrayal - for Gorrom had told her to stick close to the Ranger, and she genuinely believed that was Neroon, and when it was discovered he wasn't, Gorrom would count it a failure - and that was three for three (the first being allowing Marcus to meet with Gorrom in Janelle's stead over a week ago, the second being not hiring men that could stop an adversary - that the adversary was Marcus and Neroon instead of Ka Phor didn't appear to matter to Gorrom).

Though, one thing that didn't add up was that Janelle thought both Neroon and Marcus were Rangers. Why, then, monitor Neroon and not Marcus? Had she made the decision that, the Rangers being a Minbari organisation, 'Mikrine' must have been running the show? Gorrom, on the other hand, seemed to buy Marcus' CEO excuse - for now. And why? Janelle must not have told him. But why would she keep that from him?

Gorrom had been on the adjudication committee to the Stock Traders Guild, Ka Phor's former guild. He could not have been on the committee without being part of the guild himself for at least ten years, which meant that he was expected to attend the meetings on Dormo Station. However, he left during the Zagros VII incident for the Risk Analysis Guild - so ostensibly no more meetings on the station. That guild met in Zhoshesh Dorallo, and Janelle could confirm that he had been attending those assiduously, since he made her type up his minutes.

He continued to be absent during the time the Stock Trader meetings should be, but there were no logs of this. "Which means they were deleted by someone - Gorrom has access to do this," said Neroon. "So does Janelle, but she says she didn't do it."

"And you believe her?" muttered Marcus.

"Why would she lie?"

To cover something up, he thought. "Go on," he said instead.

"She further mentions that Gorrom conducts lengthy discussions with at least one Minbari." Neroon frowned.
"Really," said Marcus. That Minbari contact of his. "Which one?"

"I should also like to find out," said Neroon darkly. "She has eavesdropped. During these conversations, Gorrom appears to speak of nothing more serious than jump gate access. So it could well be nothing. But anything connected to Gorrom gives me concern. If the Minbari do anything for him - even as little a favour as processing his travel through our gates - that is a favour they could accidentally and indirectly be doing for Ka Phor's associates."

"And that's a no-go on the honour scale for you, I'd imagine," said Marcus.

Neroon snorted. "Obviously. She also confessed to me that she was the one who formally contracted the Drazi who attacked us - not Gorrom. Gorrom had instructed her to do so."

"Then," he reasoned, "she already knew they were there when she was flirting with you."

"She was not."

"She was. She very much was." Neroon's mouth was agape and his expression on the barely-controlled side of apoplectic. He prepared to defend himself but Marcus held up a finger. "Don't argue with me. More important question: why, then, didn't she warn us? This casts aspersions against her."

"She was told to hire them against Ka Phor," said Neroon.

Which did corroborate the story Gorrom had told him. "And I take it that's her story and she's sticking to it?" he said.

"When she intercepted the mercenaries we fought, after we had fought them, they revealed to her that Gorrom had presented them further instruction against a possible Minbari and Human team. They saw us enter - they acted." Marcus said nothing, but his expression gave him away or Neroon was getting better at reading him. "I do not think she is lying!" he argued.

"No," said Marcus, angrily, "of course you don't, because women are liked in Star Riders and you trust her implicitly even when you shouldn't!"

"What is it you believe she has done? Do you have an actual accusation?"

"Her story doesn't add up," said Marcus. "If she had warned the men to go after Ka Phor, then they wouldn't've bothered with us. She could have handed them the money, and the men would have absconded without the kind of fight they put up. That's the way it works here. She retains status in her circles of influence if she's honest and open with the circles in which she is. The only commonality she had with those men was Green alliance in the last Shadak. And at the time she'd hired them, she'd already been in trouble once with her employer so she would have needed that influence! Now she needs it more than ever, she's in danger of losing her job! If she hired them on someone else's instructions, there is culturally nothing stopping her disclosing that to them. But she didn't."

"I disagree, it makes perfect sense - that explains why she is only telling us this now," said Neroon. "And why she became significantly more interested in us after we got past the fighters. Indeed, even the fighters said they wanted money. You yourself said it was unlikely that they would allow a contract to pay half up front, half later - they had already received money from Janella, what they wanted was the further money promised from Gorrom. I don't deny her having hidden things from us."

"There, you see? She's not been honest! Even you've caught that!"
"- because it is exactly what I would do with an outsider!" he finished. "I cannot blame her for being private about these matters and siding with Gorrom first, until after he went above her influence and added the detail for the mercenaries. It's her job, it's her life, we are the interlopers here! And you have come in acting like you know the lay of the land -"

"I do know the lay of the land," Marcus snapped.

"You do not think it perhaps insulting to her, to explain to her her own culture?"

"I'm not explaining it to her," said Marcus, "I'm explaining it to you."

"I understand far better than you think," retorted Neroon. "And might I add, very well for someone of my status and my history, who has been outside the Federation only a handful of times, aside from the war with your people!"

Right, the war! The war where he killed off a substantial part of Humanity! That war! "Well, congratulations," spat Marcus, "you've finally learnt rule one of dealing with aliens: try and put yourself in their shoes by finding some cultural common ground. Brilliant! Elementary stuff, that any Human child would be able to put together, but good on you, take twenty points for your house for doing what's obvious and expected!"

"Why are you angry with me?"

A silence. With Neroon's flat tone, it sounded less a question and more a declaration.

Marcus tried to calm himself. He wasn't angry. Aggravated, perhaps. Is he attractive for a Minbari. He could slap himself. He could slap Neroon. "Why is it you trust her over Gorrom?" he said.

"At this point, I have spoken far more with Janella than I have with Gorrom," said Neroon. "Why do you not trust her?"

"Because she's waited until she's desperate to start allying with us," said Marcus. "You don't find that suspicious?"

But so had Gorrom. Ah, but Gorrom was easy to manipulate. Janella was not.

"Again. We're outsiders to her," said Neroon. "Why should she trust us over her own Greens? Greens such as Gorrom himself."

Marcus frowned. "You have a point," he said.

Neroon gave a half-hearted shrug and sighed. "As do you," he confessed. "I do not know why I trust her over Gorrom... She strikes me as trustworthy where Gorrom is not. You may be right. That I prefer Janella only because I build rapport more easily with women."

"You prefer women?" suggested Marcus.

Neroon did not seem to understand the intended meaning. "They are the influencers in my clan," he said simply. "They are who holds the power."

"Nevertheless, we can't constantly be acting on your warrior gut instinct," said Marcus.

"But is it not true that Gorrom could have promised them extra financial incentive? After she had paid them the initial deposit? Could he not have done this without her knowing? As the fighters themselves alluded to! And if he had done this without informing her, is that not evidence of his
t treachery, and not hers?"

It was possible. And if it were the case, then Gorrom intended to be rid of them, specifically. That suggested that either his innocence were true, and he merely suspected that Marcus could be working with Ka Phor - though Ka Phor would never give Gorrom helpful clues - or he thought that Marcus was the Ranger and Gorrom was guiltier of a deeper involvement, and his innocence entirely feigned.

Gorrom had already learned that Mikrine wasn't a Ranger from his Minbari contact. It would depend if Gorrom knew Marcus was a Ranger - if Ka Phor had told him Marcus was the Ranger. If Ka Phor had not told him, he must have received that information from someone else, who was keeping track of the Rangers and their movements. And the only people who wanted to do that were Shadows.

"Gorrom knows of the Rangers," said Neroon, "and now he is likely to suspect Janella of being in league with them, even though she claimed to have investigated it for his benefit. He no longer trusts her."

If ever he did. "We should tread lightly, as she could lose her job," Marcus supplied.

"In fairness, she did not seem that upset about the prospect," said Neroon. "There is still more. We know Gorrom served on adjudication for the Stock Traders guild. In fact, his official tenure ended before Ka Phor failed his proof through combat, but was extended for community service in the wake of his exoneration from the Zagros VII incident. It is not entirely clear, but Janella has reason to believe, because she is familiar with the other four judges, that Gorrom was the one who gave him poor marks, thus bringing his point average to a failing grade. The other judges on adjudication were of various circles, some sympathetic to Ka Phor's - there was no clear boundary the way there was with Gorrom."

Then Ka Phor's job loss was because of Gorrom in the first place. "So it's revenge," said Marcus. "Ka Phor wants revenge on Gorrom."

Only Gorrom had seemed to think there was more to it than that... that he wanted more than his job back - that he wanted to utterly *ruin* Gorrom, that he was willing to work with Centauri and Shadows to do so.

"Thank you for this," said Marcus. "I need to get back to Gorrom for further answers before he leaves."

He left the bathroom, Neroon following. Either Gorrom, or Janella, or both of them, were working with the Shadows, and given Gorrom's prior involvement with the aides and Refa, it was starting to look damming. Where was Gorrom now ...

Speak - or think - of the devil. Marcus caught him turning down a guarded corner with someone who looked very familiar. A purple Drazi, dressed in a guard's uniform, complete with sword...

"He's here," breathed Marcus.

"Who's here?" asked Neroon.

"Get back to Janella. Act like nothing's wrong. And see if she would be persuaded to collect information and intelligence on both Ka Phor *and* Gorrom. I have a hunch." Before Neroon could ask any more questions, he had slipped off into the crowd.

Marcus ordered himself a glass of something blue from the bartender and crept up to the hallway, where he took position against the wall, leaning casually. Close enough to hear, not close enough to
be seen. The single guard posted there didn't seem to notice. He lifted the drink to his lips, feigned drinking, and focused his hearing.

"<Noticed that you were chatting with that Human>," said Ka Phor. Unmistakably his voice.

"<Cole, the CEO>," said Gorrom.

"<Don't play stupid! You know exactly who he is ->"

"<With no help from you! You've known for days that he was the Ranger all along, but you never said a word, did you? Thought I wouldn't put it together?>" Gorrom was angry.

"<My associates wanted information on that Minbari. That's the deal - you go after the Minbari, I go after the Human. Why should you get information I had to work for?>"

"<You couldn't manage the Human! You didn't even know the Minbari was here until you ran into him. And by the way, I don't appreciate having to clean up the fallout from that!>"

"<Fallout?>" Ka Phor seemed genuinely surprised.

"<Yes, fallout! Someone heard of the squabble and assumed the worst - that the warrior had perished - naturally, there were two associates ->"

"<Yet he slew one!>" Ka Phor protested. "<He could not have done so without ->"

"<The Rangers are trained>," Gorrom reminded.

"<Not like that, they're not. He's one of them - a Minbari warrior - which means we can use this to suppress his actions and force his hand, because I have ->"

"<You have proof of that, yes, very good. How nice for you.>" Gorrom was sarcastic, applauding slowly. "<I think you'll find your proof means nothing, because I've already sent that proof to our associates.>"

There came a gasp - probably Ka Phor's. "<Then once more you reap the reward of my hard work!>" he hissed.

"<Can I help it if they bestow me the favour you should have won but couldn't?>"

"<They should monitor you like they monitor me>," said Ka Phor, "<then they'd see how much a worm you are and know that you can't be trusted ->"

"<They do monitor me!>"

"<Oh, you think because they make you visit the station, so they can talk with you there, that's monitoring? They wouldn't leave me a moment's peace until the warrior slew one! And now the other has left for reinforcements!>" Ka Phor was frantic. "<I admit at first I appreciated the reprieve, but now I am not convinced they will return, so I am left alone and vulnerable! They are punishing me!>"

"<Mm. That's a problem for you>," sneered Gorrom.

"<I have further proof of your treachery!>" blurted Ka Phor.

"<Oh, that I had a hand in disposing of the aides?>" said Gorrom.
"<You told me to get rid of them - you can't take that back!>"

"<I technically never said kill them.>"

"<I technically didn't kill them! Though you keep implying to anyone who'll listen that I did, when your involvement is greater than you claim, as you well know.>"

Gorrom gave a bark of a laugh. "<You've tried that angle that once before, and I've got someone working on your data crystal of fabricated evidence ->"

"<No, I mean the work your aides did. What drew your attention to them in the first place.>" There was stunned silence. "<Ah! I see you remember now.>"

"<That was deleted>," Gorrom snapped.

"<Deleted like you deleted the log that that warrior was contacted?>"

"<You could not possibly have proof!>" Gorrom grew angrier by the second. "<Your fabrications were one thing ->"

"<Our associates have their ways! They have given me this proof as such as reward for my valued service to them.>" Ka Phor took his voice down to a low level and Marcus strained further to hear, inching closer to the hallway. "<You have regular contact with the Drazi Ambassador on Babylon 5 - and you take everything you learn from him about the Earther station and you pass it along to our associates, either directly on the station or through your Centauri friend, Refa.>"

"<I have had no contact with the Centauri since the Zagros VII incident!>" protested Gorrom.

"<Possibly, you're lying. But it doesn't matter - I notice you don't deny the first bit>," said Ka Phor. He whispered, and Marcus inched closer still, "<That you passed Drazi information from our ambassador to a party that has begun open attacks upon the league. It's treason, then. What you did. You know exactly what you're doing and it's selling out Ambassador Vizak and what is happening on Babylon 5 so that you will be First Minister.>"

"<You talk like you're ready to avenge someone's honour>," said Gorrom. "<Like I've insulted the moral worth of the Drazi.>"

"<No>," said Ka Phor nastily. "<I talk like I'm ready to have you do what I want. I'm going to tell you to buy and you're going to reply how many shares.>"

"<You're bluffing. Your associates couldn't have gotten hold of that material.>"

"<But can you take that chance?>"

Whatever Gorrom was about to reply was eclipsed by the guard near Marcus. "You join conversation, not hide," warned the guard.

"What conversation?" Marcus pretended. "Oh, them? I don't understand any Drazi."

But the guard glared at him and in a moment Marcus realised his mistake. "<Oh yes you do>," said the guard, "<because the last time you spoke it, you had your Minbari friend's pike at my throat in Li Gorrom's old office.>"

Both Ka Phor and Gorrom had noticed his presence, called to attention by the guard. "<He's heard too much>," muttered Ka Phor. Louder, he yelled, "He's not invited here! Gate-crasher!"
The guard's expression turned livid. "Gate crashing not allowed," he said. "Li Gorrom Finance Minister approve list. Not on list, not allowed." He cracked his knuckles and stepped towards Marcus.

"Well, he's not on the list either," said Marcus churlishly, pointing to Ka Phor. "Don't be fooled by the uniform!"

Three more guards had arrived, alerted by the shout and the one guard's behaviour.

Ka Phor - slipped down another hall and disappeared.

Gorrom looked at Marcus, at the guards advancing on him, then at Marcus again. Of the people there, only Gorrom could permit his being here after detection. But he flattened himself against the wall to save his own scales. "<Gentlemen, please, remove the gate crasher.>"

Marcus threw his drink in the oncoming guard's eyes and smashed the glass in another guard's face, but that still left two guards closing in. One leapt forward and swung out wide with his blade. Marcus ducked and rolled to the side, then got to his feet and tore down the hall after Ka Phor. Gorrom had standing - Gorrom wouldn't want to jeopardise that - Gorrom would stick around the Freehold. Ka Phor, on the other hand, Marcus had to catch.

At the end of the hall was an emergency exit, located next to a single-cab lift, flanked by two more guards. Inside the carriage stood Ka Phor, who grinned and wiggled his fingers goodbye as the lift door closed.

His advance had the two guards at the lift on edge. Two more behind him - two more behind them. Gorrom had vanished. Marcus took out his pike and extended it.

He thrust it backwards and twisted, aiming for the lantern jaw on the guard behind him. He heard the two in front of him unsheathe their swords. They advanced as he ran towards them - one got there first and swung high with the sword. Marcus ducked, knocked the arm up with his pike, then chopped down with his hand at the wrist. The sword clattered to the floor - he stepped on the blade and kicked it forward, out of reach of the guards.

A blunt jab with the pike in the forehead and a knee in the solar plexus had this Drazi crumpled on the ground. Marcus climbed on his back and launched off for height on the next one. He swung down with the pike and connected, and then kicked out - once in the knees, again in the gut, then a third time in the head to fall him.

No time for the Drazi behind him. He collapsed the pike, made for the stairwell, wrenched the door open and dashed past, taking the steps two at a time or foregoing them entirely to jump to the landing.

Sixty floors up. That was a lot of stairs.

But the lift had been so slow coming up. If he were fast - he might not lose so much time!

The Drazi above reached the doorway and burst through, pursuing on the stairs. Marcus was three floors down.

Again. Turn. Jump again. Turn. Another flight. Another landing. Marcus kept his sight focussed ahead - otherwise he'd grow dizzy -

At the next landing, the door on the level opened and something shoved him forward with a sharp winding blow in the back. He careened down a flight and landed at the end of it in a messy sprawl.
He looked back up. Three new Drazi, pounding the stairs, blades in hand.

Damn it, had Gorrom got security throughout the entire building? How much clout could he possibly have to warrant that?

He's involved, Marcus knew. He had to be, to have these *perks*.

Just no Shadows, he thought. Let there be no attacking Shadows. All those legs - they'd be dangerously speedy on stairs.

He kipped up to his feet and grabbed the closest Drazi by the chest. This one had a blade but no time to use it - Marcus twisted his weight unbalanced and kicked him down the next set of stairs, then slid via the banister, flying down to land beyond him.

Keep going, keep going - more stairs. Another landing. Had to put space between them. He hoped the one Drazi he'd thrown had them momentarily stuck having to climb over his body.

Another door opened, this one below him. Flanked, thought Marcus. He glanced at the shaft of the stairwell, judging. I could jump down, he thought, I could wait a few seconds then shoot out with the pike and hope I get lucky and it stops my fall.

Only two Drazi on this new landing. Marcus jumped, kicked up off the wall as he sailed past the stairs, expanded the pike mid-air and on the down-swing stabbed out. A Minbari fighting pike was not sharp enough to break skin but it clearly hurt like hell coming onto a Drazi eye because the guard collapsed, screaming. Marcus kicked this one into his friend's knees and the other one buckled forward, a knotted pile of limbs.

Keep going. More stairs. Can't let Ka Phor get away again.

Again, and again, more stairs, more landings, the odd team of two appearing now and then, which Marcus had to get past on short notice with as much of the advantage of stealth and surprise that he could maintain. The slowly-amassing crowd of Drazi above him grew louder from a rumble to a din. There were ten in pursuit, then there were twelve, then eighteen, and he kept adding to them.

The door opened again and he struck out with the pike -

His adversary was too fast and dodged, a blur of black and - cream-white?

"What are you *doing*?" said Neroon. Oh, what a sight for sore eyes! "So much for keeping cover!"

"No time to explain," said Marcus. "Too many above." Neroon took a split second to assess the situation and in that time Marcus had bounded ahead to the next landing.

Neroon was quick on his heels. "You've angered at least thirty Drazi, now," he said, between tackling the stairs and turning to the next landing. "You expected to do all that yourself?"

"No time!" Marcus cried. "I'll explain later!"

"What use am I to you if not by your side?" Neroon said.

"I didn't need you!" shouted Marcus.

Fourteen more flights to go.

"This is like the mountains all over again," Neroon muttered, keeping pace. "A good thing Janella found me a secondary stairwell and I could catch up to you - what if his Shadow *associates* had been
there? Hmm?"

"But they weren't," said Marcus.

"But you don't know that!"

Marcus felt a little abashed. "You're right," he said, "I got lucky."

Another landing. Eight floors. Seven. The din grew closer from above.

"No," said Neroon, "you are correct - you didn't need me. Rather impressive. You took on six on your own at the party - that's not bad."

"Yes, well, I might've picked up something from you," he admitted.

Four floors. "Hah! I knew you were watching," Neroon crowed.

Three floors. "I wasn't watching!" said Marcus, who was. "There was nothing to watch!"

Finally, the ground floor. They burst through the door, dashed for the main exit and got outside to the road -

*Just* as Ka Phor sped off with the Drazi spinner.

"Oh, for -" Marcus threw his hands up, panting. "That's still *my* bloody spinner, mate!"

Beside him, Neroon darted around. There was a modest car park at the base of the building - mostly for two-wheeled vehicles. "That," he said, and snapped his fingers, pointing to one of them. It was the same downtrodden scooter Marcus had seen parked outside Li Mrakto's the other day. It looked literally days from disrepair. "Can you drive that?"


Neroon clapped him on the shoulder, uncharacteristically friendly. "Then get on."

He did, then spotted the starter mechanism. "I've got no -"

Neroon climbed on behind him, and handed him a keyring.

Marcus put it together. "This is Janella's, isn't it." He inserted the matching key into the ignition - it worked.

"I do not think she'll mind," said Neroon.

"First you palm her pass, now you nick her keys and steal her ride. You're a terrible date."

"Stop talking and pursue him already!"

Marcus backed them out of the car park. "You'll want to hang on," he warned, "I have to catch up to him."

"Yes," said Neroon, "of course," and he carefully placed his fingers at Marcus' hips like he'd touched Janella, apprehensive of touching any harder. "Quickly!"

Marcus floored it. He lost Neroon's grip in the heat of it until a pair of arms wrapped around his chest. They clung and squeezed with a warrior's absurd strength and did not let go. "Neroon," he
croaked, "please, not the ribs -"

"Sorry," Neroon gasped, and he shifted them to loop around Marcus' waist but did not let up on the strength of his embrace.

"Well, you did say quickly," said Marcus.

"Not this quickly!" yelled Neroon, in Marcus' ear. His twitching was putting Marcus off his much needed balance.

"Trust me," said Marcus. "I know how to drive this thing. I know what I'm doing. But you have to trust me."

Neroon took a deep breath - Marcus could feel the depth of it as his chest was pressed against Marcus' back from shoulder to groin - and made a sound not completely unlike a groan as he peeked out from Marcus' thick hair to see what was going on. Marcus could feel Neroon's breath on the back of his neck.

The main road was crowded with people - some also on two-wheeled vehicles, some on foot - and Marcus darted the scooter in between them, back and forth, weaving in and out, canting too far with too much weight on the vehicle. Neroon inched closer to Marcus, his thighs tensing, every time Marcus leaned the vehicle into a heavy tilt, and Marcus began to wonder if he'd be able to right them out of it. "I thought the Star Riders were a mounted force!" he shouted. "Don't you lot know how to ride a horse?"

"What is a horse?" Neroon spat. Then he cried, "Duck!"

In front was a low-hanging awning, coming up quickly -

"Different animal," Marcus called back. "Which you still owe me!"

"Stop arguing and move!" Neroon hollered.

- they ducked, barely in time.

"Look, we have gliders," Neroon replied, harried. "In any case, cavalry battle tactics have not been useful in centuries!"

"Well, this is just like that," said Marcus. He tilted them steeply to avoid a rickshaw-like wagon moving past them. Neroon clutched him closer. Three Drazi behind the wagon screamed with the speed. He righted the scooter and took his hand from the handlebars to pat the back of Neroon's, locked firmly around his midsection, trying for comforting. "Quit worrying, I know what to do."

"Get your hand back on the steering!" Neroon commanded. "You blasted fool of a Human!" He grabbed Marcus' hand, shoved it forward, wrapped Marcus' fingers around the handlebars and kept them clasped there with his hand.

"Alright, alright," said Marcus. "Don't panic -"

"I'm not panicking - TRUCK!" - which Marcus had already seen. Honestly, Neroon, he thought. He stepped on the accelerator to clear the distance a split second before the oncoming vehicle could broadside them. Loads of time!

The spinner was just ahead. He had to concentrate...
But at the same time he could not stop thinking about Neroon's fever-hot touch on his skin - Neroon's breath goosepimpling his flesh, Neroon's deep rumble of a voice thrumming through him, Neroon's hand on his, Neroon's arms in a tight grip around his waist, Neroon's chest solid at Marcus' back, Neroon's thighs snug against Marcus', behind him, around him, everywhere - how close he was.

*Is he attractive for a Minbari?*

No, he had to concentrate!

They took the exit to the motorway, following the spinner, and then it was fewer Drazi, only vehicles, and vehicles that were as fast as they were. "Hold on," Marcus reminded him, and Neroon replaced his grip around Marcus' midsection.

"Stop weaving in and out of traffic," Neroon complained.

"That's how this is done! That's how you ride a thing like this!"

The spinner was ahead - but it was faster, it had a head start - he spotted another spinner on the other side of the motorway in oncoming traffic and hadn't realised how *fast* spinners could be. "Come on, come on," Marcus murmured. "A little faster... come on ..."

"Must we?" said Neroon.

"Yes, we really must - we're losing him!"

They were approaching the boundary of the city, where the motorway gave way to a paved road, fewer lanes until only two with traffic lights, unfortunately - but they were lucky -

"That was a stop light," shouted Neroon.

"We cleared the intersection long before oncoming traffic would've hit," argued Marcus.

"You're a worse driver than Janella," Neroon muttered. "Aren't there any traffic laws here?"

"Welcome to the Freehold," he growled.

- but not lucky enough, and as the road became gravel and Janella's scooter rolled to a stop, Ka Phor and the spinner dipped past the boundary of the mountains. They'd never find him. Too far ahead - too dark.

"Blast," said Marcus.

"What now?" asked Neroon. He seemed to have forgotten that he was sitting entirely too close to Marcus. He breathed hard, and occasionally he leaned back with the night air cool enough that Marcus could feel the absence on his shoulder-blades. This was what made him shiver, it must have been.

"We return this to Janella," said Marcus. "And we see if we have a third Shadow agent, or if it's just Gorrom and Ka Phor we have to worry about."

"Well, drive a little more safely," said Neroon. "Minbari only have one heart."

Which Marcus could feel hammering wildly, with Neroon pressed against him. "Oh, please. We were fine."
"You nearly ran over fifteen Drazi!"

"I know," said Marcus. "It probably made their week."

--

A longer (and more awkward, for without anything to distract him from Neroon's proximity, it was all Marcus could think about) ride later returned them to the party. Janella met them outside the building. "I guess you didn't figure out how to disable the tracker. I was following your progress on my communications tablet. Wondering if you gentlemen would be so kind as to return me my property or if I'd have to retrieve it," she said. "So. Enjoy the joyride?"

"Not bad," said Marcus.

"Not at all," said Neroon.

Marcus rolled his eyes and swung his legs off the scooter. Neroon followed suit. "Party over already?" Marcus asked.

"No, the rest of it is upstairs," Janella snapped, "I got kicked out."

"Because your guest brought along a gate-crasher who picked a fight?" Neroon guessed.

"No," she said acidly, "because you got me fired and that's an employee-only party."

Fired? "They didn't give you the chance to prove yourself in combat?" asked Marcus. The way Ka Phor had done.

"Not for a temp job," said Janella.

"You yourself said you did not particularly want to work for him," added Neroon.


"Do you know where he went?"

She shook her head. "Offworld somewhere, I suspect - he took the port road. And if I were him - doing something I shouldn't be - I'd hide from you out of town for a few days and lie low. That's what he did the day you came to find him and fought the team of mercenaries."

"But he's been in Zhoshesh Dorallo otherwise?" asked Marcus. Janella nodded.

"I thought you said he did not often go offworld," said Neroon.

"The thing is," Janella replied, "as I told you, he deletes his own logs. Before I or anybody else can get to them. Where he went that day, and when he habitually goes, I've no idea. If I had to guess... I'd say to Dorno Station - he keeps going the same times as the meetings with the Stock Traders guild." She sighed. "Except that Gorrom is no longer in the Stock Traders guild. He left it for the more politically lucrative and powerful Risk Traders guild." She added, "Which would grant him power over the Shadak appointments and leverage on the economy of the Freehold."

From Neroon's surprised expression, Marcus suspected this was new information. Nothing he didn't already know, but she was being open and that was a good sign. "That's a significant amount of power," said Neroon.

"I don't think I like what he's going to do with it," Janella replied. "I didn't before, but now I really
don't." She pursed her lips, unhappy. "Doesn't matter now, it's someone else's job."

Interesting. Marcus turned to Neroon. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably not," he replied.

"We go to the port, take your flyer, follow him to Dorrno Station. Or at the very least find out what's so important there."

"Oh. In that case, yes, I was thinking what you were thinking," said Neroon. There passed a beat of silence. "That's slightly horrifying," he added.

"You'll manage," Marcus said wryly. "In the meantime - Janella -"

"Haven't you done enough?" she said.

"I was going to offer you that reference, actually!"

Janella narrowed her eyes. "From a shifty guy who goes around telling people he's a mining CEO only to pick fights and pike them in the face?" She laughed. "You could put that on a business card."

"Well, now, that isn't quite fair -"

"I distinctly recall," added Neroon, "you said we would not be going around the Freehold holding people at pike-point to get what we want. But that is precisely what we've done."

"While I love the tag-team spirit you two've got going on," huffed Marcus, "that reference wouldn't be from me! It'd be from Delenn of Minbar, Ambassador to Babylon 5 and Entil'Zha of the Anla'shok."

"And does Delenn know about this reference?" said Neroon archly.

"Don't think she'll mind," Marcus replied. He turned to Janella. "All you have to do is track Li Ka Phor. You said vehicles are trackable, right? That's how you tracked yours? Well, he's got my spinner - you do the rest. Someone did a favour for someone. Someone got him a pass."

"And if I do this for you," she said, "and that's an if - what do I get in return?"

Marcus didn't like the tone of what's in it for me. "We could get you any job you like on Babylon 5," he offered.

"On - that's an Earth Alliance station!"

"Actually, we broke away. Independent, now."

Janella was incredulous. "I'm no good at diplomacy!" she said.

"It's not so difficult!" Marcus grinned. "This is Mikrine's first crack at it too, and he's doing splendidly."

"I am?" Neroon glared. "Since when?"


"Mikrine," said Janella.
Marcus looked at Neroon, who looked back. "Yes?" Neroon said tentatively.

But Janella said nothing, cautiously staring them down and reflecting. Deciding something. She came to her conclusion and said, "When you return - if you return - I'll have your information. You know where to find me by now. And we should stop playing with each other. Marcus - you should also know that Gorrom already knows who you both are." Marcus frowned. "Yes. You too, Ranger. You went for Li Ka Phor, so Gorrom will think you suspect him, and you'll retain some advantage of surprise in following him to the station. Nevertheless, if he is on the station, he'll be ready for anything."

"Good," growled Neroon.


Chapter End Notes

anyway the Drazi are horny on main for the Warrior Caste and that is my headcanon hill on which I will die.
Another long chapter, a bit earlier since I skipped a week. I promise this is the last long one! But there was just no good way to break it up...

Janella made no promises about her secrecy, but Marcus decided that if she did tell anyone else that she knew exactly who they were - especially Neroon - it'd quickly get back to the Shai Alyt, and Neroon could expect another call. If no one called ... maybe they *could* trust her. The way she'd mentioned that had Marcus thinking. It sounded like a warning. If she had been the one to tell Gorrom who they were, she wouldn't have warned them like that, certainly?

They returned to the apartment so Marcus could contact Garibaldi. He wasn't expecting anyone at Babylon 5 to pick up, but Garibaldi accepted the call on the second ring. Neroon quickly dodged out of the way of the uplink. "Hello!" said Marcus cheerily, "isn't it awfully late over there?"

"No, check your watch, it's ten am. And it's a real slow day. What's up?"

"I was wondering if you could look someone up for me on your system."

"Hang on a sec, I'm almost at Security HQ." There was the sound of a door opening, its usual keycard-swipe chime, its hydraulic hiss, and Marcus found himself sorely missing the sights and sounds of Babylon 5. Garibaldi - Stephen - the Captain, Delenn, G'Kar - *Susan*. Susan, who he had not thought of in days.

Well, he was on duty and busy! That was to be expected.

"Alright," said Garibaldi at last, "what'd you want me to search?"

"There's a Centauri who's been in and out of Babylon 5," he said. "A Lord Antono Refa. Can you send me the times he checked in and checked out of the station?"

"Sure thing," Garibaldi replied. "It'll take a minute to run. If you give me a StellarCom terminal address, I can send it to you. And it'll take another minute to send. Diplomatic info like that needs at least medium-level encryption."

Marcus gave him their address. "Zhabar, huh," said Garibaldi. "What are you doing over there?"

"Oh, you know," said Marcus, evasive. "This and that."

Garibaldi wasn't convinced but let it drop. "Well, anything I need to know about?"

Like the fact that Ambassador Vizak had been compromised, and that everything they discussed - not only in the Council but also in meetings with the Army of Light that took assistance from the League worlds - where the League leaders switched off, but to which Vizak was party at least a portion of the time - that all of that was material potentially handed over to the Shadows? Yes. Garibaldi most definitely needed to know about that, if only to pass the message along to Delenn. But this wasn't a matter to discuss openly on a low-level security channel. "Yes, but let me send it
along in a moment," said Marcus. "That's all for now - ta."

In the meantime, he changed, taking his opportunity when Neroon ducked into the bathroom to undress and redress in his Ranger wear, and packed everything he had, weapons-wise. It wasn't much, only the pistol with its quarter charge, and the pretty Drazi daggers. He tossed Neroon's gloves at him as he exited. "You'll want those," he said. "And your boot-knife."

"While it may be too hot to wear the gloves comfortably," said Neroon, "I am inclined to agree." He unhooked the fastenings of the tight-fitting Drazi surcoat and let it sluice down his body, pooling around his ankles, and the silver bells at the pockets jingled as they hit the floor. Marcus quickly busied himself with the Drazi blades, shining them where they were already shiny.

He snuck peeks when Neroon's back was turned, feeling ashamed. But this was just for investigation! While Neroon kept the undergarments on as he redressed in the golden Worker Caste robes - lifting them above his head to slip them overtop, without messing with the finicky clasps at the neck - it left his thick arms and broad shoulders exposed.

Yes, alright, so he was fit, at least physically, what of it? Marcus meant nothing in admiring his musculature just as Neroon meant nothing in showing it off!

Minutes later the computer beeped with the message from Garibaldi. Marcus investigated. "Exactly as I thought," he said. Neroon stood by his side, reading over his shoulder. Far too close, but Marcus did not push him away. At least he was dressed again.

"On two - no, three - occasions," said Neroon, "this Centauri of yours registered at Babylon 5 at the same time that according to Gorrom, Ka Phor was meeting him on Dorrno Station."

"Mm. I think it's clear Ka Phor was not meeting anyone," decided Marcus. "Ka Phor hasn't been off the planet in over a year. Gorrom went, and Gorrom lied about going, and Gorrom lied about anybody meeting the Centauri, at least anytime after the Zagros VII incident. I don't think either Gorrom or Ka Phor have met Refa in quite some time, if ever they did." He looked at Neroon, sober and serious. "Gorrom's meeting someone else." Perhaps many someones. Many six-legged someones.

"Unlike Ka Phor," Neroon reasoned, "they do not accompany Gorrom around the planet. And - though Ka Phor was present at the party, they did not appear to accompany him then."

Which reminded him. "I didn't have the chance to tell you before we left the party," said Marcus, "as we left in haste -"

"Pursued by a team of Drazi with swords," Neroon clarified wryly.

Yes, that. "I overheard much of the conversation between Ka Phor and Gorrom. That's how I know he hasn't been off the planet in that time - he as much as said so himself. Ka Phor is the one who searched our apartment, and got proof of your identity. But before he did that, Gorrom deleted that message, as we thought. Of course, since he had access to the logs to be able to delete them in the first place, he could see all of the messages, including -"

"Including the ones I deliberately signed for your benefit," replied Neroon, understanding.

"Precisely. So both our covers are blown - and have been for some time, and - and I don't know why Gorrom's been letting us get away with it, to be honest. Perhaps it's as simple as Ka Phor's associates abandoned him, and Gorrom hasn't been back to the station to talk with his. Now, Ka Phor suggested using the information about you, but Gorrom deleted it to act against Ka Phor."
"But Ka Phor and Gorrom are both working for the Shadows."

"But they're incredibly competitive and pitted against one another," Marcus added. "If I had to guess, I'd wager this is what the Shadows had planned from the start: they got to Gorrom first, and then they selected a patsy with diametrically opposite groups and created a foil. Divide and conquer, dangle the desired goal over each, and let the two sides fight each other for the promised favour of the more powerful ally."

Neroon frowned. "The Drazi would do that?" he asked. "Squabble amongst each other to vault for ambition?" This time, Neroon was right - that wasn't usually their way. "I had thought them more familiar," he said. "More... honour-bound. They do not often lie, and they tend towards openness."

"Two very desperate men might do that," said Marcus. "In Ka Phor's case, he's been put in a hole and he needs to dig himself out. They made him desperate. In Gorrom's case, he's sitting happy on a pile of power but hasn't quite reached the position he wants. It's so close he can taste it. He's desperate, too. You see how they've exploited the existing frictions between the groups: distracting them with a bit of home troubles instead of doing what they ought to be doing - fighting the Shadows." He leveled Neroon with a cool gaze. "Perhaps that part is what sounds a bit familiar."

Neroon glared, and did not reply. Had Marcus struck a nerve? "There's one more thing," Marcus added. "You were right that Ka Phor's Shadow was not accompanying him. How did you know?"

"I have not spent enough time around them to be able to refine it," Neroon said. He lifted a shoulder in a helpless shrug and shook his head. "It's neither so sophisticated nor as complicated as you believe it to be. I told you, Sech Faliri of the Moon Shields taught us well. Anticipate an enemy, know their position. Not all of us were very good at this. Hedronn for example was miserable," and Neroon gave a soft, deprecating smirk, "whereas I was top of my class. That is another reason why I trusted Janella over Gorrom."

Janella wasn't out of the running yet. She was hiding something. "I can't believe you're relying on your warrior gut instinct," said Marcus. "What malarky."

"Is it so strange? You called yours luck!" said Neroon. "I call mine zhaden brel'dukha."

Marcus ran the translation in his head and rolled his eyes. "That means warrior's sense. See? Even you call it warrior gut instinct. Are you sure it's not a form of telepathy?"

Neroon twisted his lips. "No," he said only, and would say no more. He turned away.

"No, you're not sure, or no, it's not telepathy?"

"Marcus," said Neroon, a warning tone in his voice, "this is time we could be using to get to your flyer. It will take further time to reach the station. This matter is not important right now."

"Excuse you, but I disagree," Marcus retorted.

"Do you, or do you not trust me?"

Marcus shut his mouth abruptly, stung. "What kind of question - of course I trust you," he said. "I'm insulted you have to ask."

"Because you don't always act as though you do," said Neroon. He was calm in his voice but there was a fire in his eyes, and Marcus didn't feel like testing it. "You question my abilities. You question my judgement. And you mention a distraction with trouble at home instead of doing what they ought to be doing: fighting the Shadows. You're not talking about the Drazi." He gave a cold, derisive
chuckle. "And you're not nearly as subtle as you think in your hints."

"Neroon," said Marcus, "I would never suggest the Minbari have anyone like Gorrom, that's not what I meant." Though he had thought it, once, before he had Neroon's explanation about those calls. "I'm not saying the reason the castes are experiencing friction is Shadow-related the way it is in the Freehold - it's just a parallel I'm drawing in the outcome, not in the cause."

Neroon was already standing relatively close but he took two steps further, until he was inches from Marcus' face. He stared him shrewdly in the eyes, his jaw set. "And yet, no matter your intentions, message received. I have - with great and uncharacteristic patience - abided your insinuations of dishonour for quite some time. If you've something to say, say it to my face, and say it now."

Marcus said nothing. He didn't dare move, lest the thoughts swilling inside his mind about having suspected Neroon himself as a Shadow agent be too easily read on his face.

"Very well," said Neroon, and the spell of tension broke, but not the glacial mood. He picked up his gloves and put them on, slipping the Worker Caste robe's golden sleeves down over top. "Send your message, I shall be waiting in the flyer. You can lock up." Without another word, he left the apartment.

Definitely struck a nerve, Marcus thought.

Marcus sent his first encrypted message to Delenn: Drazi ambassador Vizak of League worlds compromised, extent unknown. Share little information in re: war council. To Garibaldi, he sent a second: Centauri Lord Refa confirm suspected agent of interest. Covert security and monitor closely if returns to Babylon 5.

He thought a moment, and also copied Ambassador Londo Mollari of the Centauri, who would need to be informed that a Centauri diplomat was being followed. Marcus thought further, and blind copied Citizen G'Kar of the Narn. Mollari wouldn't know what 'agent of interest' meant, but G'Kar would.

It was only then that Marcus put it together, as he was compiling two different messages and handling which one was sent to whom and how:

Not just the treason. Not just the aides. Both - simultaneously.

And that explained how Gorrom was involved.

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When Marcus arrived at the port, he found Neroon already there, waiting by the flyer. The Drazi keymaster stopped him as he passed. "<Human! Cole!>" he shouted. "<You said you wanted another room? With two beds, yes? There is one that opened on the other side of town, quadrant twelve by six-and-three-quarters.>"

Marcus looked at the keymaster, then at Neroon, then back at the keymaster. "<We adapted>," he said. "<We are fine.>"

They were not fine, Marcus was sleeping with a racist alien who hated him.

(Well. That was a bit of hyperbole, Neroon didn't hate him. Probably. And he'd been coping surprisingly well with the whole Freehold thing, so maybe he was working on his racism in his slow, stubborn, Neroon-like way.)
Marcus was definitely still sleeping with him, though.

But the other place would be across town, in the old city, farther from Li Mrakto, and it'd be so much effort to move - and up 'til now it really hadn't been all that bad - Neroon was a pleasant enough bedfellow, he was conscientious about space - he didn't snore, didn't smell...

He was comfortably warm and he really wasn't all that hard on the eyes. Alright, he was fit, in the I wouldn't kick him out of bed sort of way, which Marcus had first-hand knowledge of because he didn't kick him out of bed and had in fact invited him in -

"<Take a second set of keys, at least>," said the keymaster, and tossed him a key ring.

The first time Marcus had seen Neroon like this, waiting by his flyer, he was impatient, his arms folded, and he'd looked at Marcus like he was an insect he wasn't even allowed to swat. No doubt he was insulted he had to do something so disagreeable as follow a Human around an alien planet at the behest of someone he might respect but intensely disliked. Now he was standoffish, feigning nonchalance, didn't look at Marcus at all, and that was much worse. I'll apologise to him when we're done with this, Marcus told himself. "Heads up," he said aloud, tossing the keys at Neroon as he approached.

Neroon's attention snapped back in time to catch them. He did not remark, putting it together wordlessly, because the Drazi keymaster was still outside his kiosk and waving happily at them. Prestige, Marcus supposed. No one else in the city has a Minbari client. "Take us up," he said.

Neroon nodded once without a reply.

The Zhoshesh Dorallo port authority took ten minutes to clear and the only words Neroon spoke were to the authority officers. As they ascended in the flyer, the atmosphere gave way, becoming a thinner and thinner veil of colour until it had completely darkened. This Marcus had expected. But sometimes it seemed darker, like there was a great black cloud, and as they broke orbit and left the planet to travel further afield, the impressing darkness grew.

Marcus stole glances at Neroon from time to time, watching him slyly through peripheral vision. More than once it looked like Neroon might say something, but in the end chose not to. There was a rigidity to him - the last time they travelled in the flyer, he had that stiff, straight posture, his muscles frozen. Now he was more physically relaxed except for his eyes, but there was a hard set to them that wasn't there before. He kept them narrowed, squinting like he was straining to piece something together.

Or like he was concerned, realised Marcus. Like there was an enemy nearby. It lifted his spirits to think about it. Perhaps Neroon wasn't all that sore with him, just cautious.

If that skill of yours is telepathy-based, thought Marcus, and you're listening, answer me.

No reply.

Look, mate, I'm sorry for what I said, he thought again, I didn't mean it, and you're definitely doing this silent treatment nonsense on purpose because you know it'll get to me, which isn't even fair, and it sits surprisingly ill that you're so cross with me in the first place. (He was uncommonly emotionally open in his mind, he felt.)

No reply. (Just as well.)

My pet platypus enjoys bananas, he thought, quite good for an animal that doesn't possess teeth, but then I didn't say he ate them. Lovely in a flower vase!
Zhabar was the second of five planets in radial distance away from the sun, and an asteroid belt lay between planets four and five. Dorno Station orbited therein. This time of year, the station was not far from Zhabar itself, and they would be there in a little over an hour's flight time. There was little traffic - only maintenance to operate the station itself, which wasn't a great deal. Neroon's flyer was reading low energy on the station that would support only ten Drazi. A skeleton crew. Dorno orbited the frontiers of this system for precisely this purpose: set close to the Drazi jumpgate for boring inter-governmental meetings. Marcus supposed no Drazi wanted to hang around in a station where you couldn't have open air and balconies.

There was something that appeared beyond the station. Never concrete, just a diffuse region. Marcus looked directly at it and it seemed to fade away, dissolving. Watching it off to the side, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he could perceive long, lithe structures, fanning out from a central dark cluster.

That, he recognised.

"So it is not just 'some malarky'," said Neroon, very softly, "you see it too."

Marcus swallowed. "Yes," he replied.

"What is it?" he breathed.

For a moment, it solidified. A thick knot of jet black exoskeleton coalesced, from which twenty-odd tendrils outreached. As it drifted past, a noiseless shriek filled the air, which Marcus knew he perceived only with his mind and not his ears. It opened a jump point somehow - there was no orange trace of it entering hyperspace - and dissolved away. The stars behind it faded back into view.

"A warning," said Marcus. So Gorrom had reinforcements. "This could be difficult."

The asteroid belt was dense from far away and sparse up close, so quite easily they could see the station itself: a great floating behemoth of a doughnut, slowly spinning. From its wide toroidal centre extended two needle-thin arms, on either side. On each arm was a collection of solar arrays and filtration systems.

"No schedule, Minbari meeting," said the docking bay operator in halting English over the communications unit, once they came in range.

Marcus took the comms. "<I visit Drazi friend>," he said. "<Minbari friend give me ride.>"

"<The Minbari have friends?>" muttered the operator. "<Who are you visiting?>"


"<Stock Traders don't meet for another three weeks>," said the operator, suspicious. A sound of shuffling papers. "<Li Gorrom is here, though. - Very well. Park in Bay 3, meeting room D-16. Stand by for directions.>"

Twenty minutes to park, during which Marcus tried to memorise as much as possible of the map the operator had sent them and failed. Dorno Station was not large but it was labyrinthine in its hallways and stairwells. When they exited, they found a docking bay like any other docking bay, and Marcus had seen enough of those in his life not to be impressed. There was a lift on the inner-most side, outlined in bright yellow-and-black tape. Level D was three doors down, through a double-set of
doors that only seemed to open automatically and whose sensors were miscalibrated. Through a chamber with a flight of stairs leading up. Past another hallway through a great atrium, past a statue of a religious figure (Droshalla Queen Resplendent, he suspected) in a long billowing robe. Turn right, another hallway, another half-flight of stairs down. Another hallway left.

Marcus held out an arm to signal halt, which didn't work - Neroon ran straight into it. He flattened his hand against Neroon's chest to direct him back against the wall. Neroon held himself there for a moment as Marcus peered out, but his patience elapsed quickly and Marcus could feel Neroon's body pressed against his own where he had leaned forward to take his own look.

Sixteen steps away at the end of a short hall were two Drazi guards, standing outside. Gorrom must already be inside, waiting.

He pulled back and turned to Neroon. "Is there anyone in there with him now?"

"How do you mean?"

"Do your - thing!" He pointed to his head, even though it wasn't telepathic. "That enemies thing!"

"I don't... believe so?" Neroon glared. "I do not know. There is no significant danger I can detect, but of course not, because we can clearly take out those two idiots. You alone could do it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Marcus whispered. "Where's that gut instinct of yours when we need it..."

"You don't even think it's reliable!"

Their whispering had drawn the attention of the guards standing outside, who had abandoned their post and were slowly venturing closer to where they hid. "Well, at least there's that. They're coming this way," said Marcus. He retrieved his pike from his pocket.

"Yes, I can see that," muttered Neroon.

"Just thought I'd point it out, in case your instinct was a little impaired!"

"Keep talking," said Neroon dryly, "I shall make you a little impaired."

"Oh, promises, promises," Marcus replied, and if Neroon had a retort it was ignored, for the guards had reached them.

Neroon shot out past Marcus and grabbed one guard by the arm. He twisted him around to hold him around the neck, and then began to apply pressure.

Marcus struck out quick on the other, a pike across the face for surprise. He took the Drazi by the shoulders and shot his knee up into their solar plexus. They fell to the floor, kneeling and groaning, and Marcus let this one catch their breath and watch as their friend slowly lost consciousness in Neroon's arms. "Do we have to do the same to you?" asked Marcus. The other Drazi did not look cowed. Must be Green, he thought. To be hired by Gorrom and still willing to fight them. "Suit yourself." He whacked them hard with the pike, upside the head, and the blow bounced them face-first against the wall.

The skirmish had been clearly heard by the end of the short hallway where Gorrom peeked out from the open doorway. Just in the nick of time. Marcus called out to Gorrom. "Fancy a chat?"

Drazi did not pale like Humans did, but Gorrom's expression was openly horrified. Wide-eyed and
shocked, he bolted back into the room.

Marcus tore off after him. In two bounds he was at the door, which Gorrom was slamming shut, and he thrust his pike forward to keep the entrance ajar and stop Gorrom from locking himself inside. Then he kicked the door in. It flung wide and Gorrom stepped back, rubbing his wrenched wrist.

"I'd love a chat, myself," said Marcus, "and actually, I wasn't offering, I was demanding." He lifted his pike and aimed. Gorrom threw his hands up and backed away. "Right, then! In we go."

Neroon reappeared at his side, one unconscious Drazi hauled over his shoulder and the other dazed and dragged along the floor by a limp wrist, and followed him inside. He closed the door behind them and took point there at the threshold, two Drazi at his feet, with his pike extended. Watching Gorrom's every move, waiting.

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Marcus strode over to Gorrom in three steps and took him by the cloak with two fistfuls. He threw him backwards into one of the six chairs around the large conference table that took up most of the room. Gorrom fought him on it, and wasn't half strong. "Unhand me!" he cried, grabbing at Marcus' wrists, "I have a very important meeting to get to with the Stock Traders guild -"

A second pair of hands - Neroon's - helped pin Gorrom to the chair, and together they wrestled him into it. "Your meeting has been indefinitely postponed," said Neroon.


"Beside the point, as I doubt he shall be attending it," growled Neroon. He pointed the pike at Gorrom's throat. "He has time to stay put and answer questions."

"Oh yes," said Marcus. "Plenty of time for that." He stood back. Gorrom looked up at Neroon with narrowed eyes - Neroon too had released him, but was eyeing him warily, in case Gorrom were tempted to fight, and he made it clear with his posture and his expression that if Gorrom acted on such a temptation, Neroon would be delighted to fight back. But Gorrom did not move. "This is a very dangerous play, Star Rider," he said. "You should have thought of your position."

Neroon did not react.

"Like I think about mine! I am a mediator!" Gorrom exclaimed. "Our people are experiencing friction right now, only the Labour party under my leadership would be willing to take steps to mediate that -"

"I don't suppose there's any point in hiding that I overheard everything you spoke about, with Ka Phor," said Marcus. He took a seat, perching himself on the conference table. "So! Let's talk about the aides that you killed, shall we?"

"I didn't kill them!" Gorrom protested. "Green does not kill green!"

"And purple doesn't kill purple," Marcus finished. "Ka Phor's purple. How then do you expect me to believe he dispensed with the purple aide? Unless you two both took part, trading off by killing the other colour's aide." He gave a derisive laugh. "But you just don't strike me as the type to share."

"I told you," said Gorrom, "his associates -"
"Your associates, you mean." Marcus folded his arms over his chest. "Very well, so you didn't do it yourselves, but I'd still like to know who's on first, what's on second, and all that. You're not here for nothing."

"I am working overtime with the Stock Traders guild," said Gorrom. "You may check, and I'm sure you will, I come to the station for all the meetings!"

"Oh, I'm sure you tell many people you're just working overtime, with the Stock Traders guild," said Marcus. "Because the meetings are accurately timed. But you're not doing that, either. So what's left? You meeting with your associates, and you know you shouldn't be, because why else hide it?"

Gorrom shook his head. "How many eyes have they again? Ten? Twelve?" Marcus peered down his nose at Gorrom as he said, "Fourteen, isn't it."

Gorrom's reaction to the true number was telling. He knew, because he had looked into them, and it had taught him how dread and fear and revulsion could be felt in one wild, paralysing feeling.

"The Shadows won't hang around with someone who is manipulable firmly enough by an extended arm, by a servant they've already conscripted," Marcus figured. "And they conscripted you first, not Ka Phor. And they would not spend extra time hanging around you on Zhabar, when they're already spending time hanging around Ka Phor on Zhabar. So they stay here, on the station, and that explains all your trips."

"It's not a crime to meet with other races," said Gorrom defensively. "You Earthers set up a whole station just for meeting with other races."

"Yes - you've got Babylon 5 for diplomacy. This is... well, I'm really not sure what this is, besides a mess," said Marcus.

"We will be stronger with their support!" Gorrom insisted. "They said - they give me instructions on what to do. And yes, it inflames tensions and escalates them - occasionally - only for now - but that's just natural! To be expected! In the end, we will have the might and the strength of these creatures as our allies against any of our enemies, like the Centauri who have begun to threaten our borders."

Gorrom shook his head. "I cannot do this as mere Finance Minister. The current Shadak is mostly Centre party voters, and they have sought to do nothing! As First Minister for Labour I would be the direct head of opposition, I could implement ideas for defence. But you've interfered," he snarled, "they'll kill you for this."

Marcus rolled his eyes. "And that somewhat answers the why, who if I recall correctly was left field. Or maybe right. I've always been more of a footy fan. Anyway," he continued, because Neroon was glaring at him to remain on topic again, "you've certainly been rather good with everything they've asked of you. You come here when they ask, you do what they say. What a good boy you are! But in recent days you've been behaving rather badly." He gave a thin sneer. "After all, you've drawn the attention of the Rangers. And their nasty Warrior friends." He gestured to Neroon, since it was clear Gorrom no longer thought him a Ranger anymore. "Your secret's out now - who's to say they won't kill you for that? Maybe they'll ask you to prove yourself in combat. I'd like to see you go up against one of those beasts! But you're a bit of a coward, aren't you?"

Gorrom slammed his hands on the conference table and made to stand. The butt of Neroon's pike prodded hard into his chest made him reconsider. "That is a grave insult!" he cried.

"It's only the truth! Whatever we can say for Ka Phor -" hot-headed, desperate, exploited Ka Phor - "he didn't lie quite like you did. You said he comes here and makes you delete the logs. He doesn't come here at all - you delete the logs for you coming here. Look, whatever you think you're doing with them, you're wrong. You can't win against this race! They play a game they've already fixed.
And they knew that, because they capitalised on the directness of Drazi, and the culture of Drazi. You're not mediating anything, you've played directly into their spiky little claws and they've got you on contract."

"Exactly!" declared Gorrom, leaping onto the victimhood, and ignoring everything else, "I am the one who is being manipulated -"

"You have not exactly been faultless throughout this charade," Neroon pointed out. Gorrom soured.

"You keep coming up here," added Marcus. "You double-hired Janella's men to take us out. You've been interfering with the call log in our apartment - which is probably at which point you realised that Mikrine is not, in fact, Mikrine -"

Gorrom's face screwed up in a murderous glare. "You accuse me of skulking around when you have a Warrior Caste Minbari doing the exact same thing," he said, gesturing to Neroon with a jab. Neroon whacked his hand with the edge of his pike as a warning and Gorrom growled. "Do you know what they promote? Do you know who they're working with? Who your friend directly works with? Do you know what he did during your war?"

Marcus did not know what Neroon did during the war. What he did know was that he'd much rather hear it from Neroon's lips than from a cornered Drazi who had been toying with them both. "You had ideas," continued Marcus. "You had ambitions. Your one mistake - so you said! - was delivering information to the Centauri Refa which resulted in the obliteration of the colony at Zagros VII. Whether it was only ever intended to be a simple blockade is debateable, because that's not what happened. You should have faced a tribunal, but you were exonerated." He shrugged, playing along. "Friends in high places, I take it! Many-legged friends. How fortunate for you. I'm guessing not everybody bought it. Probably the purple aide. Because for some reason, the group tensions have remained high, even though the Shadak was appointed last year."

"It was an unjust appointment, anyway," grumbled Gorrom, "there was interference on your Earth station."

"Your people brought your conflicts into a place of peace," said Marcus, "and my people were right to interfere."

"They are not conflicts, they are our culture!"

"That's the rules at Babylon 5," said Marcus, even though the rules were really far less stringent - no drugs, no weapons. But they did have the right to kick people off if they were messing with the status quo. Whatever Marcus thought Susan had learnt about the Drazi, she had been justified - and that was irrespective of whatever feelings he might have harboured for her. "And if they're not conflicts, then why do the tensions continue to escalate? Because you've sold out the Freehold to be an errand boy for the Shadows!"

"No, because of the way it was handled in your Earth station!"

"No, Babylon 5 is on the other side of the galaxy," he argued. "And there weren't even that many Drazi involved. Meanwhile, the Freehold - with the bulk of the Drazi population - is all the way over here. You're really suggesting there's so much crosstalk that it mattered? It's more likely the case that someone is at home, inflaming passions when they should be deescalating them. And that worked against you, because I don't doubt that if that purple aide had been green, she wouldn't've gone poking around nearly as hard as she did."

"I hear much allegation in there, I don't see any proof," said Gorrom.
"Speaking of purples," continued Marcus, who admittedly hadn't any proof besides what he'd put together about the excuse with Lord Refa. "Your punishment for the Zagros VII incident should have occurred nearly a year ago. It didn't. Roughly around the same time you sat adjudication for a young purple fellow who'd been sacked and was asked to prove himself in combat. Now, one judge accorded him such miserable grades that they pulled the average past failing. But I saw the documentation - he shouldn't have failed. Only one judge among the five clearly didn't feel the same as the rest. That judge was you, and that much I can prove." Gorrom looked alarmed, and Marcus knew he was getting warmer. "Deny it. I dare you."

"You don't understand," said Gorrom.

"Oh, I understand," said Marcus. "They came to you, and they said, do us this wee little favour, this trifle, and in return we'll make everyone forget all about Zagros VII. You'll keep your job. You'll be able to run for office. Why, we'll even support you in your efforts! Because what could be better to them than to have someone neatly placed in a position of power who was already in their pockets?"

Neroon's pike wavered in his hands, but Marcus wasn't finished.

"Ka Phor didn't come to you, back then," said Marcus. "The Shadows did. And you've been working with them. And your purple aide found out about that, and quite wisely told your green aide, hoping to ensure that even if you removed her - because purple - you couldn't remove the truth - because green. And now the Shadows continue to pit green versus purple - you versus Ka Phor - because you had a quick snoop in our message logs but Ka Phor was the one who broke into our apartment and took Neroon's Warrior Caste identity chip, and you were both aching to be the first to give that information over to the Shadows, hoping to gain their favour enough to get out of their debt."

He had to laugh. "Oh, you poor sods! Any Drazi would call it even and you could go on your merry ways after the promised favour transaction but that's just not how Shadows operate."

"They already knew," said Gorrom. "They already knew all about your Star Rider friend. They're the ones who told me. And ask yourself - how would they know? Couldn't it be they recognised him when he took one down?"

"I am not unknown among my people," said Neroon, low and dangerous, "and in any case, this is again beside the point and a piss-poor attempt at deflection -"

"I don't think it's beside the point at all," said Gorrom. "You're right that you're known - it's not hard to do a background check on you, is it? Terribly well-decorated veteran - thousands of Humans on Beta II Colony alone!" Gorrom snapped his fingers in Marcus' face. "Up in smoke!" Neroon's grip twitched on his pike, but he let Gorrom move without retribution.

Marcus did not blink. He was, however, even more tempted than before to break Gorrom's bones. The old rage simmered, and he could no longer tell whether it was because of hearing how his people had been slaughtered by the advance of a far more powerful enemy that refused to relent even when it wasn't equal, or because Gorrom was implying awful, terrible things about the man who he claimed had done it - the man who was now inextricably Marcus' friend.

These complications - these feelings - had gone too far. Marcus would not let this distract him. We're going to get home, he thought, and I'm going to clear it out once and for all exactly how I feel about him.

"An admirable thing," said Gorrom to Neroon, "I hear your superior officer was rather proud." He turned to Marcus. "Why would you even work with him? For when he received that blocked call
who did you think could it be - very clever Human, have you not put it together?"

"No one else is any longer your concern," said Neroon, "I am, for I am the one who has you at the end of a weapon."

"You're wasting time with your baseless accusations," said Marcus.

Gorrom sat back. "They're not baseless," he said. "The Minbari have never been impenetrable, as you could find out from your friend here if you asked and if he told you the truth, but he lied about his name, why won't he lie about this too -"

A jerky, whip-fast movement from Neroon's pike to Gorrom's forehead and Gorrom shut up, his head lolling forward on the ricochet. He toppled forward in the chair and landed face-down on the conference table, out cold.

One of the Drazi bodyguards had reawakened and got to his feet, but Neroon swung the pike around and aimed for him. "Not unless you want one of your own!" he roared.

The Drazi held his hands up in surrender and sat back down.

"We're leaving, now," said Neroon urgently. He turned around and made for the door, resigning Marcus to catch up.

What Gorrom said had made some sense. That was the problem of it: he was half wrong, and it was going to take some time and research to figure out what exactly he was wrong about. Was he wrong that someone in the Warrior Caste was working with the Shadows? Was he wrong that it was Neroon? If Neroon really had so much influence, why didn't he alert the rest of the Caste into movement by now? Who was stalling the war effort?

Please, thought Marcus. Let Gorrom be wrong. But if not Neroon then who? If Gorrom got Neroon's identity from the Shadows, and not from the message logs in their apartment, then how could Ka Phor's remaining Shadow have known it was him besides having recognised him? How could the Shadows have delivered that information before the logs were even accessed?

And what had Gorrom been about to say about the impenetrability of Minbari before Neroon knocked him out?

Sharp timing, that.

In two bounds Marcus had caught up to him. "So! Will you be telling me what you did that for?" he asked. Neroon did not stop racing away and Marcus had to tug him back by the sleeve. "Oi, I was speaking to you -"

Neroon whirled around, wild-eyed and enraged. "They are coming," he said. He shook his head, cross. "You cannot hear it? Your Human hearing must be inferior to mine."

"What on Earth are you talking about?"

"The scritch of spindly legs on the stairs down to this level," said Neroon. "Marcus, there are at least ten. We have to get out of here."

"I don't hear anything," said Marcus. He had a sinking feeling Neroon didn't hear them either.

"And? You would prefer waiting until they show themselves?"
I'd rather wait until I know I can trust you, thought Marcus. He studied Neroon for a moment. No, Gorrom was desperate and would say anything. There was an explanation for this. He'd find it. Neroon had to be trustworthy. Marcus wanted it, he needed it. If not, then Marcus would have wasted every brain cell thinking about him the way he'd been doing on a heap of lies, and that wasn't on.

Marcus made a snap decision and nodded. "Alright," he said.

In a flash, Neroon was three paces ahead, surging down the hallway to the half-flight of stairs. On the second stair he stopped, sudden. "Not this way," he said. "Four of them." He turned to Marcus. "We need another route back to the docking bay."

Back the way they came, then. Further past the hallway where Gorrom and his guards lay unconscious - there Marcus knew was a lift and another set of stairs heading down. Neroon headed for the lift. "Not that way," said Marcus.

"Are you sure the stairs will take us where we need?"

"No, but I've come to realise Drazi lifts are too slow to be a viable escape route."

Down the stairs was a smaller atrium. At the end of that there was a long hallway leading out. If memory served, it connected to one of the spokes holding the toroidal structure of the station to its central columnar arms. "Two along this path," argued Neroon, gesturing forward.

"This is the only way left," said Marcus. "There is no other way."

Neroon's eyes were fierce. "Then run," he urged.

"Where?"

"Through. Guide us back, just keep going," he said. "I'll follow you. Go!"

Four flights of stairs to the central column. Marcus wasn't even winded. Adrenaline. "Are they still there?"

"They're gaining," said Neroon. "A third has joined them." He stopped to concentrate, with his head cocked. "No - four," he decided. "Two pairs."

Marcus grabbed him by the arm. "Quickly!"

They turned left and up a ramp to one last hallway which separated the stairs to the central columns. Only two flights of stairs after this to the docking bay - they were paces away - he glanced back - Neroon was no longer behind him. So much for I'll follow you! Marcus pivoted, raced back down the hallway and turned the corner -

He processed the image in a horror of a second:

Neroon on his knees, trapped in the clutches of a Shadow, who was quite visible, and quite angry. Two legs kept him pinned there; one spike of an arm held his own pike braced against his throat, another leg pressed his back forward, and the other arm had spindly sharp fingers wrapped around the spikes of his crest, forcing him back to bare his neck to the choking pike. The Shadow pulled the pike with unshakeable strength, and Neroon made a terrible croaking sound. He groped ineffectually for the pike with one hand; in his other was his link, and he made to throw it but it landed poorly and skidded a few feet.
"Take it!" rasped Neroon. "Take it ... go!"

"Minbaarrii... Waaarriorr...", the Shadow whispered, sandpapery, grating, "youu fight becaussse it iss your natuurre, you ssshhaall die becausse it is yourr natuurrre!" It pulled the pike harder still and tugged Neroon's head back by the bones, and Neroon fell back, growing sluggish in the creature's grasp. His eyes unfocused.

"I don't think so," said Marcus, low and dangerous. He pulled out the pistol PPG and raised his arm.

One shot - a second - it twitched - he shot it three more times as he strode forward and advanced, avenging, his hair buffeted behind him with his haste - it began to smoke through the eyes. He mustn't use a pistol with Neroon clenched so close in its arms, the chance that Marcus could miss was low, but the consequences of missing were too great. He couldn't risk it but nor could he help it, he couldn't let this thing have Neroon, he wouldn't let it have him! The creature screeched and released its hold, and Neroon slipped free of its claws, rolling out of the way, his eyes wide and amazed.

Marcus had no thought but revenge. He shot again and again, unloading charge after charge on its ugly triangular face. He forgot he could be this angry... How dare you touch him, he thought, how dare you try! He kept shooting until he pulled the trigger and nothing came.

Nine shots total. Sorely maimed, but not dead, not even close. The Shadow shrieked, blinded, its sharp skewer arms held defensively to its face, and reared up on four legs to lash out the front two in lightning-fast jabs. Marcus darted away, pulling out the Drazi blades to deflect the limbs.

Neroon fell upon his dropped pike and struggled to stand. He parried out in a quick but unsteady thrust. He got lucky - he caught the beast between the sinews on its limbs - then he tucked and rolled to bring it to the ground, smashing it head-first into the floor. With its jaw at the floor, Neroon brought his leg up and stomped down hard on the back of its neck with his heel. There was a high-pitched shriek from the beast and the sound of its exoskeleton cracking. He gave it a second blow and the shriek garbled. This did not convince him, and Neroon flung himself down upon its neck with the fullest amount of his considerable weight. A sick, wet crunch. Finally the beast twitched into death.

Neroon was back on his feet in two seconds. "Behind you," he cried.

Marcus turned, the Drazi daggers in hand. There was nothing behind him...

Until a Shadow dissolved into view, reared up onto hind legs, looming.

It lunged and darted forward to grab at him. Marcus darted back, slashing at it with the daggers, but the Shadow blocked his strikes with two blows so forceful they knocked the blades out of his hands. They flew into the wall and stuck fast, three inches deep into solid metal. Marcus found himself weaponless. The Shadow reared up again and screamed -

Neroon took him by the waist and threw him out of the way of the Shadow's jab a split second before it would have impaled Marcus. He dashed past to mount it (Star Rider, thought Marcus, why must he keep doing this?) and his knee was dug into its spine, with his pike around the front to steady it, to keep its jaw open, its airway exposed from the bony mantle that protected it. It screeched and shuddered but in that scant second it had lost to the advantage of surprise, Neroon had tightened his gloved fist and raised it aloft. Three crystal knives emerged at the knuckles, glinting in the station's overhead lighting.

He swung down in a punch, embedding them into its neck, and twisted his wrist savagely.
Both Neroon and the Shadow screamed - the Shadow tried to buck him off but Neroon held on even as he ripped the glove off to throw it at the floor. A split second later something black and steaming oozed out of it. It must have burnt his flesh. Without taking the time to be properly horrified, he plucked the crystal knife from his boot and hurled himself around its throat with a vicious slash. There was a sound like grinding metal on metal and the blade broke off in its neck.

Neroon looked at the useless handle - then at Marcus in aghast perplexion - and tossed it aside as he vaulted off the creature, tuck-rolling away into a dash. He picked up the link as he did. In a thick, quavering voice, he said, "Leave them!" for Marcus had been tugging the Drazi blades from the wall with little success, "Docking bay, now. Run!"

They had no blades, no pistols, just pikes.

Marcus did not have to be told twice. He faulted over the fallen Shadow, leaping two paces on the wall to avoid the growing, oozing, steaming puddle of blood, or what passed for it. It spilled out the Shadow's neck, oil-thick, black and steaming. Blood - acid - poison - all of the above.

Only as they turned the corner did he risk a look back. The Shadow fell to its knees, then to the ground, where it lay there, shuddering as it died.

They burst through the docking bay and sped to the flyer. "Restraints on," shouted Neroon as they approached. The faster runner by far, Neroon got there first and flung the doors wide. He busied himself with the controls.

Marcus leapt into it after him and closed the door. He heard the sound of both primary and secondary afterburners kicking in. "Do you really need both?" he asked. "We could run out of charge."

"We may," Neroon replied. "Sit down - restraints on!"

Marcus engaged the locks, a split second before THUMP came against the wall of the flyer. Marcus jerked back. Another thump. Then a scratching like nails on chalkboard, and a piercing metallic scream.

Another thump. The flyer dented inwards.

"Sit down!" Neroon yelled. He reached up, grabbed Marcus by the thigh and yanked him into the passenger seat. "Airborne in three -"

Marcus put the restraints on - there was a beastly shriek -

"Two -"

Another thump - the flyer dented further -

Neroon punched the gas and they drifted up with the engines, then forward thrust past the atmosphere shield and out of the docking bay.

After thirty seconds' speed they were far enough away to get a good view. Neroon twisted them, rolling the flyer around to see the station. The gunports were open, Marcus noticed. He somehow doubted it was for decoration or friendly respect. No, that was because he was ready to obliterate the station if they needed. Neroon leaned over and in a quick, deft flick, hit the switch to charge weapons.

Behind the station, a large Shadow vessel dissolved into view. A swarm of fighters launched from its arms.
"Oh, fuck," said Marcus softly.

"I'm inclined to agree," Neroon replied. "We must get back to the Freehold - I cannot out-gun those ships -"

"We can't outrun them, either," said Marcus. He spied the controls. "Weapons range in 200 klicks and closing."

"We will have to outwit them," said Neroon.

"There isn't anywhere to hide!"

"Then we will make somewhere to hide," he growled, and spun the flyer around, turning tail.

They flew away from the station, embedded in the area of the belt, sparsely decorated with asteroids. There was a large one ahead - was he thinking to hide them? The first wave of fighters already had their contact!

Neroon engaged weapons and exploded the asteroid, then flew directly through the explosion. Another decently large asteroid at four o'clock, not too far away. He shot this one too; this time he flitted in and out, between and behind the pieces, creating cover and obstacles.

"They've got us," said Marcus, "targeting!" Neroon jerked the flyer a fraction and the beam from the first Shadow pulse cannon flew across the bow. He looped and rolled away past an asteroid fragment. Just in time - a second pulse cannon struck the fragment.

The rest of the fleet reached firing range and began picking off the asteroids, exposing them, but Neroon stayed one step ahead. They fired - Neroon dodged. He twisted, turned, flipped, spun - no wonder he'd told Marcus to get his restraints on. He was a bloody fantastic flyer, Marcus noted. It was incredibly impressive, and his own skills were more than enough to know that the kind of stuff Neroon was doing was next-level good.

But they kept skirting radially around the sun, following the asteroid field, travelling away from Zhabar.

"Neroon," said Marcus, "the flyer charge is decreasing fast."

A bright terrible light and Neroon reacted frantically, keening them into an inverted spin that corrected with a tailslide. He almost did not correct in time for the second strike on the other side.

"They're gaining ground," Neroon grumbled. He rolled them around one asteroid fragment and figure-eighting them around two others. One fighter had begun dipping in and out beyond the asteroids, keeping pace, and Marcus wondered how long Neroon could keep them alive if it tried to dogfight. A second was on their tail on the other side. Neroon pivoted and flipped to avoid being flanked, but seconds later more fighters had caught up.

"Marcus," he gasped, "I cannot look at the fuel gauge and operate weapons and fly us this aerobatically at the same time - monitor the charge gauge and tell me at what point we should make for Zhabar."

He banked left into a pitchback, and Marcus waited for him to complete the manoeuvre to inform him gently, "We already don't have enough power to make it home."

Neroon looked over at him. Dangerous to do while he was flying, surely, though Neroon piloted this thing like he was dancing with the rocks, possessing a natural fluid grace. He likely didn't need to
keep such a hard eye on the controls. Yet he needed Marcus' assistance. His eyes raked over Marcus' face, in a strange sort of intense gaze that had Marcus feeling scrutinised, uncomfortable. As though he were debating whether to say something momentous.

A tense moment passed. Neroon seemed to decide something. He licked his lips, took a breath, and punched a few buttons on the main panel. A single oxygen mask popped out, and Marcus felt his own seat recline.

"Put that on," said Neroon. "I am going to do something inadvisable, insane, and you may lose consciousness."

"Even if I do, I'd still breathe on my own," said Marcus.

"Just - do it for my sake," snapped Neroon. "And don't argue!"

Marcus had a sinking feeling he knew what Neroon was planning. He secured the mask, lay back, and Neroon wasted no time, swinging them into a wide arc out of the asteroid belt, towards the inner planets like Zhabar, twisting and rolling as he played keep away with the Shadow fighters' pulse cannons without the benefit of even sparse asteroid cover. As he increased the speed and began the curve around the closest planet, Marcus' vision tunneled, greyed out, then faded utterly.

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When Marcus came to, he found they were much closer, just past Xatn, the third planet, on their way to Zhabar, the second. The fuel light indicator was blinking. There was an alarm that should probably have been going off.

"I silenced it," said Neroon. "There is a secondary fuel source. I do not like to use it - it is not renewable the way our crystals are. We have almost used up all of that. We shall make it to Zhoshesh Dorallo, but only just."

"And the Shadows?"

"When I used the gravity of the fourth, and then third, planets to propel us faster inside, they gave up and stopped following," Neroon replied. He took a deep breath, and as he exhaled he took one hand off the controls, shook out the tenseness and fatigue, and rubbed the back of his neck. "My apologies," he added. "The inertial compensation was insufficient for you... and I had not anticipated... how long..."

"It's alright," said Marcus.

"This is the second time you have regained consciousness," Neroon said. "After we spun around the fourth planet, your muscles jerked you awake and you did not appear to remember anything about the pursuit." Marcus didn't remember anything about waking up around the fourth planet, either. "Please, tell me I have not caused undue damage."

Marcus blinked himself alert, and resettled his chair in its upright position. He tilted his neck around and sat up straighter. His back felt fine, and anyway, it wasn't his first time losing consciousness in the cockpit. "None you didn't already do in the denn'shah," he said, grinning weakly.

Neroon gave a wry scowl and threw him that offensive hand gesture again as he replaced his hand on the steering. "I don't understand," he said. "I thought they would destroy us. Hunt us down. Surely we know too much."

"You called their bluff by getting us as close as possible to Zhabar," said Marcus. "The Shadows
wouldn't fire upon us if we were too close or Zhabar satellite monitoring would've pick it up. This way they don't draw attention to themselves."

Then Marcus thought a moment. "But they've begun open attacks and the Drazi are not exactly safe either," he mused. They could've done it. They probably should have. They didn't.

Another alternative. "They don't want to encourage the Drazi to enter the war, possibly," Marcus said. "A threat so close to the Freehold homeworld would be acted upon. That'd undo all the work they've been doing on the Drazi for months now. Ever since the Shadak - pit purple against green. Pit Labour against Centre. Use Drazi culture to divide and conquer, and keep them busy in-fighting so they're too distracted by an at-home threat to send ships to Babylon 5 for a threat they don't yet see. Bringing the fight home to Zhabar airspace would only inflame them. They don't want yet another ally to join the forces at Babylon 5."

"A good analysis," said Neroon. "I admit I was not thinking that deeply about it."

"You were busy getting us home," said Marcus. "Alive."

Neroon grew morose. "I nearly didn't," he murmured.

"Were you nervous?" asked Marcus. "You'd no reason to be! I've never seen anyone fly like that."

"You slumped like a - like a helpless sack of grain before we were even at full gravitational acceleration around the fourth planet! The inertial compensation was at maximum, there was nothing I could do for minutes and you just laid there," blurted Neroon. He straightened in his seat. "It was ... mildly disquieting."

He realised he'd said something too vulnerable, and remained quiet throughout the remainder of the trip, checking in occasionally to flit little glances at Marcus when he thought Marcus wasn't looking.

Oh, you do care, thought Marcus, his cheeks warming. You hate that you do, but you do.

A niggling, wicked part of him wanted to know exactly how much Neroon cared.

He considered himself forgiven for his earlier implications about Neroon's trustworthiness and honour.

An hour they were back on Zhabar, safe and parked in the hangar bay in Zhoshesh Dorallo. Marcus removed his restraints without realising that Neroon was not moving, a thousand yard stare in his dark eyes.

"Neroon," said Marcus softly. "Neroon, darling. It's alright, you made it, we've survived." He put his hand on Neroon's - the one whose glove he'd sacrificed - over the steering, and Neroon snapped out of it with a sudden jerk, ripping his hand away like Marcus had burnt it.

Marcus tried not to look hurt, and suspected he was failing. He fixed his gaze straight ahead, angry that Neroon felt free enough to his hands wherever he liked while they were riding Janella's scooter, but a little bloody comfort from a Human, no! Too honourable to accept that!

He let Neroon think, waiting for him to reach whatever conclusion was keeping him so occupied, and kept his hands to himself.

Meanwhile, he thought of his mission from Delenn. Surely he'd succeeded. Surely this kind of reaction meant Neroon was on their side, would devote ships to the cause, would send them Star Riders, Moon Shields, and Night Walkers. It was a difficult revelation to have, Marcus supposed. It
didn't come easy. That he'd been wrong all this time to stay away, and that Rangers alone - Religious, Worker, Human - weren't going to cut it against the Shadows. Neroon had slain three Shadows, by now, and somehow outrun an armada of their fighters - ships that were much faster than his flyer. That must be a lot to process. His silence was likely him planning his next moves.

At long last, Neroon retrieved the link device from his pocket and held it in his hand another silent moment. He set it on the dashboard, then picked it up again and returned his hands to his lap, fiddling with it. "You should know," he said, "that there is a third Shadow agent."

Marcus tensed.

"Shakiri," announced Neroon, tremulous and breathy. "It's - the Shai Alyt - of the Warrior Caste, is - is the third Shadow agent -"

He broke off and clapped a hand over his mouth in abject shock, his breathing erratic.

Marcus waited until he had calmed enough to reply. Finally he asked, "How do you know?"

"No, I need to know how far down the rot has grown," said Neroon weakly. "Marcus, you must swear not to tell anyone, I implore you."

"I can't promise you that," said Marcus. "You know I can't... the Entil'Zha -"

"Especially not her!" said Neroon. "She once threatened to destroy the Star Riders over my actions. What would she do to my caste as a whole for Shakiri's? No, I must handle this internally. I should not have even told you - stars above know why I did -"

"Delenn wasn't Entil'Zha back then! Look, my duty is to investigate Shadow activity -"

"If you promise nothing, you shall get nothing," snapped Neroon.

Marcus frowned. "Alright."

"Swear."

"I swear it." Neroon remained unconvinced, so Marcus elaborated. He twisted in his seat and looked Neroon dead in the eyes as he said, "In Valen's name, by the grace of the Entil'Zha, she the one who is, isil'zha veni."

Neroon did not immediately launch into an explanation. "Help me understand what's going on, on Minbar," pleaded Marcus. "Help me understand this - this internecine conflict." For why else was one caste seduced so easily and the other two stain-free?

But Neroon barked a harsh, sarcastic laugh. "You don't care about Minbar," he snarled. "Don't lie to me after you've sworn in the name of one of our greatest legends."

Marcus didn't not care about Minbar. "Alright," he said. "I want to know because I will eventually need to discuss this with her -" but that also wasn't the whole truth - "and I want to know because I want to understand you. Why do you think your own superior officer is a Shadow agent? What's your rationale? What path did you take?"

Slowly, heavily, Neroon spoke.

"Shakiri called after I fell unconscious," he began. "To call only the once implies he was checking up. For an emergency, he would have called far more often. But he had no reason to check up,
unless he had been told that there was a Warrior where they shouldn't be, where he had not sent one. The only entities who could have told him that a Warrior was on the Drazi homeworld at all were Ka Phor, or the remaining Shadow. I exclude Gorrom because he said he learnt this from the Shadows. Thus he knew who I was only as early as the day we fought the Drazi, which is according to Janella the day he was there. Shakiri's call predates this.

"Do we trust Janella about that?" asked Marcus.

"Even if we do not, Ka Phor and Gorrom are not likely to exchange information: the Minbari contact was Gorrom's, not Ka Phor's; equally, Ka Phor would not confide in Gorrom about the Warrior he saw. A timeline featuring Gorrom would include Gorrom's accessing of our apartment logs, seeing my name, and finding out for himself through his Minbari contact. Possibly that is why he was on the station the day we fought his mercenaries. But the call log was accessed for deletion only after the call from Minbar arrived, which means Shakiri could not have received this information from Gorrom. And if Gorrom didn't know you were a Ranger until days later, he couldn't have known I was Warrior Caste until the same time.

"Ka Phor furthermore suggested that it was a punishment that his Shadow accompaniment had abandoned him. While I do not pretend to understand the motives of the ancient enemy, I also think that his assessment of the situation was accurate, for it explains why Ka Phor wanted so badly to find out my identity that he entered into our apartment - he wished to regain his ally. It is after all not Ka Phor's Minbari contact but Gorrom's, and Ka Phor will not admit defeat or surrender to competition by asking Gorrom. Thus he finds our apartment, and my identity chip.

"Meanwhile, the Shadow - in some vindictiveness, perhaps - doubts that Ka Phor will find anything. Or otherwise intercepts to contact the Minbari contact directly.

"At this point, it could be any Minbari contact. Though ... given Gorrom's behaviour and accusations tonight, it is likely it is a Warrior Caste contact." Neroon, regretful, sighed. "What contamination. Our caste is better than this."

"I know," said Marcus. "I'm looking at an example of that right now."

Neroon half-smiled, wan.

"Thus the Shadow places the question to the Warrior Caste contact: we found a one who looks Warrior or Anla'shok, we request confirmation of the presence of such an entity in the Drazi Freehold. Also, we note we killed him, for at last position he was face-down in a pool of blood and not moving." Neroon reflected. "It might further have mentioned this one was in presence of known Anla'shok Marcus Cole, as you were identified by Ka Phor.

"Now, the Minbari contact, if Warrior Caste, would have little domain over the Anla'shok - that is Delenn's department."

Marcus began to understand. "And that's why he called her so many times?" he asked.

"Not quite," said Neroon. "The Warrior Caste Anla'shok who spirit information back to the Warrior Caste would not have to call Delenn to find out whether there were Anla'shok in the Freehold. Shakiri would source them for information first. Shakiri also could place whatever calls he liked to any warrior for whom he could not account. He then found that within the Warrior Caste, I could not be accounted for, as I did not answer when he rang. This is atypical."

"You always answer when he calls?" asked Marcus.
"How else am I to keep abreast of his plans and movements, and encourage him to think me reliable?" said Neroon. "Thus Shakiri formed the suspicion that it was I - though, what I would be doing in the Drazi Freehold, he had surely no idea, and he doubly would not understand what I would be doing with the very Anla'shok who challenged me to denn'shah - the very denn'shah where I walked away, dishonouring myself. Incredibly suspicious and out of character behaviour from me, and it begins to look like involvement with the Anla'shok. That is why he placed calls to Delenn, after he did not receive the answers he sought from the Warrior Caste Anla'shok whose assistance he has enlisted.

"I suspect," Neroon continued, "that Shakiri requested information as well. Did this supposed Warrior, who fell one Shadow and was in turn fallen by another, perhaps leave some trace of their information? Was there any identifying Minbari information from computer use, were they staying somewhere in the city, on the planet, was there a Minbari ship at customs, what name did the Minbari give at customs? All of that is information that Ka Phor would find extremely difficult to locate given his status, but that Gorrom would find easily. Thus Gorrom is called back to Dorrno Station and the day we fought the team of mercenaries he hired, the Shadows request Gorrom's assistance in these matters. By this point Gorrom has already deleted what he likes from our logs, and he is free to give my name and rank."

"But if Shakiri knows all our details," said Marcus, "and he was informed of them as early as the day we fought the Drazi in Gorrom's office, why hasn't he called you asking about why you're in the Freehold?"

"A very good question," murmured Neroon. "It could be Shakiri is being careful. To be clear, he already suspected it was I from the moment he failed to reach me. He suspected I had truly fallen, and that would action him into a series of moves that would consolidate his power in the clans in which his influence was marginal, which he would conduct from his home base."

"In Drogani," supplied Marcus.

Neroon nodded. "Which is why he was in Drogani, instead of Klolem. And why there was a rumour of my demise which he failed to contain."

Marcus scowled. "I'm a little disgusted he took time off from de-escalating tensions after a riot that his people helped to inflame to secure his position and play politics."

"So am I," said Neroon. "But after cycles of watching him act and plot, it does not surprise me. Let me be clear: I did not suspect him of being a Shadow agent because I thought him misguided in his priorities. Such actions were not illegal. Dishonourable, yes. But -" and here Neroon gave a wistful, self-deprecating laugh - "I evidently have my own unorthodox theories about dishonour, given that I constantly tend towards it like a gravitational well. So who am I to judge?"

"Your heart's in the right place, I'd say that matters," argued Marcus.

"And you know my heart, do you?" Neroon mused softly.

Marcus couldn't figure out what to reply to that. Yes was on the tip of his tongue.

Neroon let it slide. "Did you pay attention to what the Shadow said, when it had me pinned?" he asked.

"Really wasn't thinking much of anything," admitted Marcus. "It ... had you. I was - I couldn't think." He reflected. "Shouldn't've charged it like that. I could have hurt you, there were smarter, more effective ways, I know, I was just so ..."
"I understand," said Neroon. "A threat so immediate, so deadly, makes half-wits of us all. That is why we train, so that we may build and rely upon instinct. That is the whole point of mora'dum." He turned to Marcus. "Which, given your conduct, you must have passed with high scores."

"I could have missed," said Marcus.

"No," said Neroon. "You couldn't have." He sighed. "If you recall, I said Shakiri follows his own spiritual path of warlike righteousness. The Shadow told me: you fight because it is your nature. I don't fight because it's my nature. What nonsense! I fight for life. But Shakiri has said that on many occasions. Those are his very words. And I believe that is why we escaped - they know from Shakiri all too well that despite his efforts I still occupy too precarious a position, and without me, Shakiri has less influence in the Caste."

"They just didn't want to bring the fight home to the Drazi," said Marcus.

"Their weapons are better than our stealth," said Neroon. "Aren't they?" Marcus nodded. "The moment we left the station, they could have shot us out of the sky. They should have. They've let us go at the expense of losing their Drazi agent, Gorrom. They know that leaving us alive means he'll be prosecuted, which means they shall turn their attention from gathering influence in the Freehold and will find it elsewhere in another race -"

Marcus understood where he was going with this. "They'll try now to get something on you," he said. "So they can control you, extort your services."

Neroon nodded. "I imagine they will. That's logical," he said. He began to toy with the link again. "They haven't anything, now," he said, thinking aloud. "I have been careful, so careful ... to protect myself against Shakiri, stay one step ahead of him at all times, mitigating whatever dishonour I bring upon myself ... but it is one thing to make mistakes against Shakiri, quite another to make mistakes against ... against ..."

Marcus reached across the seat and placed his hand over Neroon's, stopping his gestures.

Neroon nearly ripped his hand away - Marcus could feel the muscles twitching - but didn't. Gradually, he stilled. "You touch me often," he grumbled.

It sounded like a complaint, but much of what Neroon said sounded like a complaint. And they had been getting along better recently, so Marcus didn't know anymore. Neroon needed this comfort. Marcus was convinced he wasn't wrong in his guess - the fidgeting gave him away. Neroon knew Marcus' tells, but so too did Marcus know Neroon's.

"I'm a tactile sort of person," Marcus said.

"Hm," said Neroon. "Do all Humans act so?"

"No," he admitted. Goodness knows Susan never did. Or Stephen. Or Garibaldi. Or the Captain. "I suppose you're right - it's just me. I could say, if you like, that it's because I grew up on small mining colonies where the background noise is generally too loud, and if you're at a work site you're probably wearing ear protection, and it's the only way to get someone's attention."

"You do not touch me to get my attention," said Neroon. "You touch me when you already have my attention." He added, more quietly, "My full attention."

"Well, I guess I just got used to it," said Marcus.

"No Minbari is so free with their hands," said Neroon. "You would have learnt this in your training
in the Anla'shok, which I know was not deficient."

"So I'm selfish," said Marcus, growing irritable. Why was Neroon harping on this when there were so many more important things to harp upon, like the fact that the Shadows would turn their divisive efforts to Minbar? "It comforts me. To know I'm still alive." To know you're still alive, especially after that Shadow had you in its nasty claws, he thought, but did not say. "If you don't like it, you can say so. Is - is that what you're doing now? Hard to tell! Only you make it so difficult sometimes to read what it is you want if you're not being blunt about it. And I've never known the Minbari to beat around the bush when they don't like something. Well? Go on! Speak your mind!"

Neroon had not moved his hand.

There was silence as Neroon let Marcus' words hang in the air, vicious and awkward. Why should Marcus be irritable about this, anyway. Yet one more thing Neroon criticised about his behaviour. Well, that's Tuesday for you, wasn't it! Marcus ought to be used to this by now. Why should he be so defensive?

Because Marcus had not been touching him to get his attention. That was why.

Don't think about the fact that you wanted to touch him.

Excuse me for wanting to be friends, he thought, sorry that I bother caring about you when you already care about me, and he was about to say it when Neroon said, softly, "Take what you want of me, then."


"I will not say it twice," Neroon snapped. He turned away from Marcus to glare out the window. "It is bad enough I have said it once." If Marcus didn't know better, he could swear the colour on the top of Neroon's head, the blue around the fore-facing spike of his bonecrest that lay on his skull, had deepened.

Surely just a trick of the lighting.

Still, the hard clench of Neroon's fingers around his link lessened, and his fingers uncurled, ever so slightly. The tips of them intermeshed with Marcus', and Marcus' breath hitched.

He did not pull his hand away. He did not dare move. If Neroon's superior Minbari hearing was what had alerted him to the Shadows hundreds of metres away and floors above, there was no way he could not hear the madcap racing of Marcus' heart in his chest.

And yet Neroon made no remark about what he could or could not hear, and they sat there in companionable if tense silence. Holding hands.

After a long moment, Neroon shifted, changing position, and the resultant slip of his bare fingers against Marcus' was nearly too sensual to bear. He relaxed back in his seat, but then he did it again, sliding them together, with no other movement to explain it, and his muscular control was too good for it to be an accident. Marcus strove to maintain control over his breathing, to keep himself from hyperventilating.

"You knew," murmured Neroon. "Didn't you."

Knew... about...?

"You with your Ranger information," Neroon added. "You knew."
"I had some suspicions," Marcus said. "I - I thought, someone in the Caste. I didn't know who."

"You would have thought it was someone well-placed," said Neroon, realising it slowly. "Someone with the Shai Alyt's ear."

"No," whispered Marcus.

"You thought I was a Shadow agent," said Neroon. "You thought it was I."

Marcus could not lie to him. Sitting there, Neroon's hand in his. "That was different," he protested, "I didn't know you then."

Neroon pulled his hand away, stung. He twisted in his seat away from Marcus and began opening the airlocks on the flyer door nearest him.

"Neroon," Marcus said, "please - you've got to understand -"

"You don't know me now," spat Neroon. He flung the door open and leapt out. Within seconds he had fled out of sight, leaving Marcus alone with the flyer and the link and the miserable feeling that he'd bollocksed absolutely everything up.

I shouldn't have thought what I did, Marcus thought. I should have known - should have suspected - the superior officer, someone else in the Warrior Caste.

I shouldn't've touched him.

I shouldn't be attracted to him.

Marcus' thoughts swam, back and forth, whirling in eddies, as he walked home from the port authority, as he dressed for bed alone (Neroon had not returned), as he turned down the covers and lay there in bed, awake, even though they'd returned in the early hours and it must have been four in the morning. The Shadows would use this, if they knew. This was perfect extortion material. This was a bad idea. Everything was such a bad idea. This could undo everything he had done, everything he had worked for, this could eliminate Neroon's own usefulness to the cause, to his own caste.

Marcus couldn't keep on with this. He should go back, somehow, they could remain friends, he should be happy and content with that, like how he was happy and content with his crush from afar on Susan -

Oh, god, Susan! He hadn't even thought of Susan in days! He clenched his eyes shut.

He should leave Neroon alone - he could not make himself the most obvious besmirchment on Neroon's honour when that honour was a tool of power that he wielded in the last remaining caste to enter the war. This was too important for him to be thinking with his prick!

Well, he wasn't.

With his heart, then.

Marcus put his head in his hands and sighed. Couldn't he have just one thing? Just one thing for himself, after years of serving others? After years of responsibility, after years of waiting?

One thing, certainly. But not this thing. It was too essential.

No, he could not do this. He would pull back. He would focus on the mission. Neroon was a useful
ally for the cause, too useful to jeopardise. What could Marcus do, in any case? It was foolish, Minbari didn't do these things with non-Minbari, and Neroon as Warrior Caste especially wouldn't!

This was even worse than it had been with Susan because - well, Susan was unlikely to return his feelings: she was a representation of unattainability, of an enlightening but clearly out of reach goal, and his love for her was at once devotional, forbidden, and pure. But Neroon was so much less likely to return anything at all.

Was he, though?

Marcus stared at the ceiling. No answers came.

*Take what comfort you want of me ... I will not say it twice. Bad enough I have said it once.*

He held my bare hand, Marcus thought.

That wasn't a courtship ritual -

It didn't have to be one. He touched Marcus' skin with his, he didn't pull away for minutes. That wasn't something Minbari did with their friends. It wasn't something they do with people low on the courtship ritual scale, either, or Marcus would've heard no end of it from Inesval. (Though, that meant nothing, Workers probably followed different rituals.)

Not that Marcus would ever be on the courtship ritual scale. Not that Marcus even wanted to be. There were no rituals for dating those whose people you warred with, hunted, mass-murdered. There weren't even rituals for your everyday average alien. Minbari did not do this sort of thing with aliens. They barely made friends with them!

Then *why the hell* was Neroon acting the way he was?

Neroon had as much as granted him licence to touch. Was that a ritual? It felt like one. What other rituals were there? He wanted to know.

But this was absurd, and anyway he was still in love with Susan. He thought about it, checking again. Yes, certainly, he'd always love her.

- But unobtainably. If he pedestalised her, wasn't that objectifying too, just...going about it a different way?

Marcus thought back to the ride through the city on that terrible motorbike and envisioned Susan at his back. Would it be as diverting? Well, certainly. Susan was beautiful, and Marcus had eyes. But there was an element of rescue about it, when he pictured such a scenario in his mind. Like he'd swept her out of danger and sat her astride his horse, riding her off into the sunset. Susan didn't need rescuing, and at a very private level, Marcus knew that.

Very well, so he would never sleep with her. He couldn't imagine the possibility!

(Could he imagine it with Neroon? Not just sleeping like they had been doing. Skin to skin like their hands had been, Marcus’ chest against his - he began to gasp, panicky. Perhaps he'd start with a kiss. Could he imagine a kiss?

Neroon's face inches from his own, on the balcony after he pulled Marcus up. Seconds stretched. Neroon did not pull away, but rather drew closer - his eyes would slip closed, and the gentle warmth, the soft press of Neroon's lips on his mouth ... he shifted his head, kissed him deeper, let his lips fall open and Neroon's tongue touched his ... did Minbari even kiss like that? It didn't matter, Neroon in
his fantasies did, and wrapped his arms around him, holding him closer ... Marcus would be weak-kneed if he weren't already in bed.

Oh, god, he could imagine it. But he could imagine a kiss with Susan, too! Perhaps not as carnal. But no less romantic, and that was the sticking point for him.)

Even if he would never sleep with Susan, surely he could use the image he had of her to take him far in his deeds? Like the knights of old with their courtly love!

But that was not a relationship.

But had he craved a relationship, in the first place, with anyone?

Ah, that one was easy to answer: yes. Yes, he did.

Well, he couldn't have one with Neroon. The very idea ranged from ridiculous to dangerous.

But, then, how to explain this? This foolish, wayward feeling, stuck where it didn't belong, directed where it wasn't appropriate.

It was the proximity. This sort of thing happened for anybody you spent enough time with. It was natural to develop an attraction. So Marcus would as naturally ignore it. Simple as that. He'd let it go and Neroon would return home and tomorrow they'd figure out their next step, which probably involved Marcus apologising to Neroon for having suspected him, no matter how briefly, of being a Shadow agent, and they could carry on being friends.

Friends! Friends was the operative word! No more of this ... this lingering in limerence! He'd only had an evening of it and that was plenty!

Tomorrow. That was tomorrow's job. Which meant that tonight for the next few hours, he could fantasise. Get it out of his system. If he was going to have these terrible delusions, he might as well commit to them.

Take what you want of me, Neroon whispered, like smoke.

Truly? What can I take? Marcus thought again of kissing, if Neroon would let him take that, and let his thoughts warm him into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

:D!
Chapter 14

Much later, by the frail light of dawn, the door opened. Marcus was too well-trained to let the sound slip by without waking and cracking an eye open, in case of intruders, but it was only Neroon who had returned, moving quietly so as not to disturb his rest. He slipped off the golden Worker Caste robe and his boots, then headed for the washroom. Moments later, Marcus heard the water engage.

Should I say something, he wondered, so he knows I'm awake, should I tell him I'm sorry I suspected him? It was far too late for such a conversation, they would be up in another two hours anyway to meet Janella.

Neroon exited the washroom, fanning himself gently by tugging the neckline of his loose undershirt, flapping it against his skin. He flattened himself against the wall, and was quiet for a moment. As though wondering what his next move should be. Wondering if Marcus were asleep, perhaps. Studying Marcus? It felt like he was. Marcus could sense the weight of his gaze.

"Just come to bed," murmured Marcus, sleep-rough, "we'll talk about it later."

Neroon did not move.

"If you have forgiven me?" he added, hopeful. He turned down the corner of the cover, inviting him.

"Of course I have," said Neroon. "I cannot blame you for what you thought -"

"No. Not now," said Marcus. "In the morning." Let Neroon have at least a little rest, which Minbari didn't profess to need, but clearly did.

"Marcus, it is already morning," Neroon argued.

"Do you or don't you want sleep?"

It took a moment of silence, but Neroon decided against whatever reluctance had built and finally shuffled inside, beneath the covers, inches from Marcus. Not long after, his breathing evened and deepened.

Marcus stayed awake longer, watching. The curve of his lips. The strong jaw, the deep-set eyes, the short nose. The massive bonecrest. He didn't look a single thing like Susan.

I really wish I didn't find him attractive, he thought.

He must have drifted off to sleep himself at some point because the next thing he knew, it was sunlight and the temperature in the apartment had risen too high to remain under the covers comfortably. Marcus kicked them off with one leg, only to realise one of Neroon's legs was looped over his other, pinning it down. Neroon, sleeping on his stomach (horizontal, even), wore his knee-length leggings, but Marcus next to him on his back wore nothing but pants. Earth-style boxer briefs were thigh-high and close-fitting and must be indecent by Minbari standards. *Neroon* was indecent by Minbari standards. Heretofore Neroon had been sleeping in his fatigues, but that was still too warm for this climate, Marcus imagined. He could feel the heat radiating off him.

He was so close, Marcus could reach out and place his hand on Neroon's arm. Strong forearms.
Defined biceps muscles, broad shoulders. Not comically large, but intimidating, solid. Marcus swallowed, his mouth dry.

This bed is too small, thought Marcus. That's the only reason he's so close.

"Mmrh," grunted Neroon sleepily, and burrowed his face into the pillow.

"Come on," said Marcus, trying to extricate himself, "we've got to meet Janella."

"I had perhaps two hours of sleep," mumbled Neroon.

"And whose fault is that?"

"Yours, technically."

"I distinctly remember you said you forgave me," said Marcus, petulant. Neroon's leg was still overtop his; Marcus had only succeeded in bringing their bare calves into contact. And if Marcus kept thinking about it, his body would do something very dangerous. Actually, it was halfway there already! He's not attractive, Marcus told himself. It was impossible - Neroon's morning-gravel voice was throaty and deep and he finally sounded like a real person instead of a staid, uptight, impossibly perfect Minbari.

Surely the body hair must tickle, thought Marcus. Surely it must offend him. A constant reminder of Human-ness. But Neroon didn't move away. In fact, his calf nudged delicately against Marcus'. It was too sensual by half to be anything but purposeful.

"I did forgive you," murmured Neroon. His eyes closed again. "I do. Just five more minutes."

He was exhausted and sleep-deprived. He was barely coherent. And Marcus' skin was comparatively cool. That was all.

Marcus could not seem to tear his gaze away. We're just friends, he thought. We're friends, and he's going to help our cause, and finally the Warrior Caste can enter the war, and we're just friends, and I don't like him one bit beyond that.

His dark eyelashes looked so dramatic against his pale skin. Marcus was struck by the sudden, terrible image of Neroon, as seen from above, partially submerged in deep waves of pillows and bed sheets, his eyes closed like that, eyelashes kissed to his cheek, lips parted, sighing, bright cerulean around the forefront spike -

No. We're friends!

Five minutes were eternity.

"Alright," Marcus said at last, "I mean it. Up."

Neroon grumbled out a wordless complaint but rolled over. Only then did Neroon seem to finally realise where his leg had been, and he gasped, scowling. He leapt off the bed like there were ants and shoved himself in the Worker Caste robe yet again. Clearly he was getting used to the clasps; it was on him in a flash.

Marcus too sat up, strategically using the folds of the bedcovers to hide his groin, which had taken a half-hearted and completely inappropriate interest. He slipped the Ranger robe overtop and quickly rearranged that around his waist, too. Neroon watched him carefully during this. No, there was no way he would know what to look for, Inesval didn't, and Inesval actually spent time on Earth.
"What?" snapped Marcus.

Neroon's curious glance morphed into a glare. "What yourself," he said, flustered. "That of which you accused me is a grave offence on Minbar."

"Yeah, well, I really didn't think you'd forgive me so easily," said Marcus. That was a good question - why had Neroon forgiven him so easily?

He thought his frankness had mollified Neroon, who partially turned away (conveniently, so that Marcus could get up and adjust himself back into propriety). But a moment later he whirled around, his voice bitter. "Come now, what were you to think," said Neroon. "I thrashed you soundly on your station. I left you dead on the floor. I was too weak - weak! to say that you'd won to your face - of course you'd won, just look at you." And he did so, his dark eyes roving over Marcus' face, settling curiously over his lips for a fractional second too long before moving back to his eyes. Marcus frowned. What did he mean by that? "So I waited until you were unconscious, and I told you then, thinking, hoping - you weren't actually listening. How, then, can I blame you, to think that I would do something so dishonourable as collaborate with the ancient enemy, when the precedent is so overwhelmingly against my favour?"

"It's not the same," said Marcus.

"By being subordinate to the Shai Alyt and executing his orders, I have been collaborating," protested Neroon, "and there is no excuse for that."

Marcus shook his head. "That's how the chain of command works, I understand that."

"Not on Minbar!"

Yes on Minbar, thought Marcus, for what was there Neroon could do if issued an order he didn't like? Then again, he'd said it himself: much of the Warrior Caste followed the Star Riders; all of the Star Riders would follow him - maybe there was much he could do.

"Why are you trying to make me feel better? Hm?" Neroon seemed upset. Either that Marcus didn't understand the dishonour component, or that Marcus was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt about this.

"Because I'm sorry," Marcus said. "I want you to know that. I know you probably think Humans don't understand sincerity."

"Stop assuming what I do and do not know of other races," snapped Neroon.

"I didn't know you then. Now that I do - or at least a little more - yes, it's a ridiculous notion. I agree, I understand that. I was correct about there being a connection within the caste, and you were the only one of the caste I knew, and you held much sway. It was a completely natural assumption to make but it was wrong. I was wrong. Alright?"

"Why was it so wrong? Certainly you were briefed of what I did during the war. Gorrom himself mentioned it. Well? Aren't you going to scurry along and use your connections to find out exactly what atrocities I committed? The computer is right there, have at it!"

"I'd rather you tell me the sordid details yourself," said Marcus. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I've clearly hurt you -"

"Insolence," Neroon thundered, "to think you could!" He glowered. "Do you want to have a row?" he snapped. "Is that it?"
No, but you're clearly spoiling for one, thought Marcus. "Are we going to have to?"

There was only silence.

"We don't have time for this," said Marcus. "And I don't want to fight with you. Either you tell me yourself or not at all. But I don't want to hear your exploits against my people from anyone else but you, thanks. And by now you owe me the explanation yourself."

Anger flashed past Neroon's face. Marcus half-expected a cruel retort of I owe you nothing! "Later," he said instead.

And when was later, wondered Marcus. But he let it drop. "So what about now?"

"Now, we finish the mission," said Neroon.

"And the Shai Alyt?"

"Leave him to me." Neroon turned to busy himself with the computer.

"I can give you a month at most," offered Marcus, "and then I'll have to tell Delenn. She absolutely has to know."

"Then I will come to Babylon 5 in a month, and I shall tell her myself."

Fair. "Yeah, alright," said Marcus.

This drew Neroon's attention. "You do not object?"

"I think to hear it from you specifically will mean more to her. It's a dangerous allegation, no matter the truth of it. And... and maybe she can help you. You could help each other. I trust you."

"Do you," said Neroon, looking him in the eye.

Marcus stared him back. "Yes, I do," he said. He held Neroon's gaze until Neroon dropped it first. He gestured to the computer. "Any more calls for us?" he asked.

"I wasn't checking," Neroon replied.

Marcus came closer to peek over his shoulder. Neroon was cutting a data crystal. In his hand, he held his link device, which he had evidently retrieved from the flyer where Marcus had left it.

"The hy'lerr was recording, while you were questioning him," Neroon said. "That's why I told you to take it."

"While you slowly died at the hands of a Shadow?" said Marcus. He remembered Neroon's stupidity in throwing it to him, like his own life didn't matter, in comparison to the link.

"I told you," said Neroon, "if you succeed in your mission, the death is valid. I don't deny it was a disfavourable outcome. But with the hy'lerr, you would have had ample evidence to accuse Gorrom, and you could gain access to the flyer to return here."

"Those aren't terms I'm prepared to accept!" Marcus shot back. What a hypocrite. So Marcus wasn't allowed to go to such extremes but for Neroon, it was perfectly acceptable? "I'd much rather operate under a leave no man behind principle. That's standard for Humans."

"It is not at all standard for the Warrior Caste," said Neroon darkly. That wasn't an answer, thought
Marcus. The data crystal popped out of its slot from the computer and he pocketed it. "Shall we?"

This, too, Marcus filed under 'later'.

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They returned to the same bar where they kept meeting Janella. They ordered a meal, ate it, loitered a half hour longer than necessary after they'd paid the bill, but she didn't show. Marcus began to grow worried. It was presently the end of what counted for Drazi lunch. Did they miss her? Were they too late waking up? Was it because she was fired? But she said she'd be here!

The waiter from before, the one who'd called Janella a man-eater, arrived on-shift. "<Sorry>," said Marcus, pulling him aside, "<maybe you know, Li Xortl ->"

"<Through the left door, just before the washrooms>," said the waiter in a bored tone. "<She says she's been waiting two hours.>" He looked from Marcus to Neroon and back again, shaking his head, amused. "<A Human and a Minbari at the same time. Now that's one for the ages.>"

"<Thanks>," said Marcus acidly.

Down the hallway and through the door, Janella waited for them, businesslike, with her legs crossed and perched on the bed, a leather satchel beside her. There was a desk and a chair, but that was all the pretence it had of being a meeting room. It was exactly as lurid a scene as the waiter seemed to think. Janella leaned back on the bed onto her elbows. "Don't mind Li Khetti," she said, "he always thinks that. I have a lot of meetings here, and I usually don't have repeats. Letting him think that is just easiest."

It hit Marcus suddenly, square in the face. "Oh my god," he said. "You're Central Drazi Intelligence."

Janella smiled.

"What?" said Neroon.

"Your years as a temp - that's a complete legend, isn't it - Gorrom told you to do the deletions from log files - and you're why Gorrom didn't know until too late who we were. Because you did them, you just didn't float the information up. But you knew, all along. It all makes sense!"

"I guess it takes one to recognise one, doesn't it, Anla'shok Cole," said Janella. "Former Earthforce Intelligence. Took a lot of security clearance to pull your file. The real one, that is."

"Your name isn't even Janella, is it?"

She shrugged. "That, I can't tell you. It's a name."

Neroon narrowed his eyes. "You're entirely too excited about this."

"I'm vindicated, is what I am!" said Marcus. "I was right about Gorrom and Ka Phor and I'm right about her! That's three for three. It's only a shame I couldn't have gathered the whole group here and had myself a moment with a grand reveal."

"You missed your calling as a dramatist and now you must be an actor with everyone in your life," drawled Neroon.

Marcus' cheeks warmed. "A-ha! Then you admit you're in my life, do you?"
"Don't start," said Neroon tartly, though a grin pulled at the corners of his mouth, Marcus' keen sight caught that too, "or I shall leave it." He turned to Janella. "So too are your acting skills to be commended. It is good to know the loss of your position and the lack of letter of reference will not trouble you after all."

"Ah, no," said Janella. "Obtaining one was intended to be proof of field agent skill set. I might lose out on a promotion at Central for this. But that's on me. I got greedy - I saw a tactical advantage in information in you both and tried to go for two cases in one. Should've asked for backup."

"So why are you investigating Gorrom?" asked Marcus.

"All part of the political procedure," she replied. "First Ministers submit to such scrutiny post-election. In Gorrom's case, we made an exception because of what happened with the aides, and began the investigation early. It was on Li Dro Lrkta's recommendation."

Which was why Li Dro Lrkta had been the one to point Marcus to the very pub they were in, so he could talk to her in the first place. "I can't believe it," said Marcus, shaking his head, "I should've seen this coming."

"Well, I'm delighted you didn't," said Janella. "Most Humans think Drazi intelligence is an oxymoron. I get pretty tired of explaining that."

"Why didn't you tell Gorrom who we were?" asked Neroon.

"Because I wanted to know what you were doing here first," she said. "He received word that his Minbari contact attempted to contact you. He needed that log deleted." Neroon soured. "You have to understand, Alyt," Janella said calmly. "I've known about you some time. The moment Marcus made contact with me, I began the background check. Standard procedure, especially since he seemed interested in Li Gorrom. From that, I found that you had both logged in at port authority customs, Marcus under his real name, you under the pseudonym 'Mikrine', and that it was your flyer parked there, and that you had booked an apartment together. I had to do some more digging to find that there was in fact any Minbari at all, because you only booked with one bed, and I thought naturally, the Minbari was a fabrication and the Human would be alone -"

"About that," said Marcus. "That was a mistake."

"It was a damn good one," said Janella. "Excellent misdirection. Noting that for the future. Anyway, imagine my surprise when there was in fact a Minbari."

"Because of the logs?" suggested Neroon.

"Because of the rumours. It didn't take long for people to start talking about the Minbari wandering around Zhoshesh Dorallo. I figured it must have been you. It wasn't until I checked the logs on the apartment that I found the calls placed to something marked Tuzanor Ranger base - there were three of them, one the first day, two a little later, after I'd met with Marcus -"

"To Iriell," Marcus realised.

"- and the three calls marked from Alyt Neroon of the Star Riders - a known Warrior Caste clan - to an unidentified recipient. Li Gorrom had asked me to delete the call log incoming from an unknown recipient to Alyt Neroon to preserve the anonymity of the unknown recipient."

"Gorrom, meanwhile, did not realise the call went through to my hy'lerr device," Neroon said. "And that deletion at the apartment would be futile."
"It was at that point I was pretty sure 'Mikrine' was a pseudonym. That's something Drazi will do - it's something we know Humans will do - but I didn't think it was something Minbari did."

"It isn't," said Neroon. "Not ordinarily."

"These are extraordinary circumstances," offered Marcus.

"That's no excuse," said Neroon.

"Anyway, Central Intelligence has an outstanding agreement with the Minbari Federation. Warrior Caste activity is of course permitted in the Freehold - your people are too well-trained and too well-armed for us to say no to - but you are legally required to inform us. And there were no outstanding reports of dispensation."

Neroon frowned. "So you verified with the Federation?"

"Ah," said Janella. "No. I should have. You're correct. I would be well within my rights to clear it with the Minbari authorities. But that takes some time, and in the meantime -"

"You were curious," said Marcus.

She nodded. "What in the world was a Warrior Caste Minbari doing in the Freehold, under a pseudonym, incognito? I looked up what Alyt meant. That's a high rank, and you weren't just promoted to it yesterday, either. I could understand them slipping a low-level drudge under the radar. Why would they send ... someone equivalent to our Li Dro Vorn? And what, if anything, did that have to do with Li Gorrom, because don't forget - the two of you are clearly partners -"

"After a fashion," muttered Neroon.

"- and Marcus was involved with Li Gorrom. Which meant you could be, too. I'd tripped over something big. And I didn't want Li Gorrom to, too. So I ... withheld the part about who you were, Alyt. And I let him think for the longest time that you were Mikrine of the Starship Crafters."

"And what about me?" asked Marcus.

Janella grinned. "I fed him information about a Mikrine, and that there were calls placed to the Ranger base. He put that together and deduced that one of you was a Ranger - his money was on Mikrine, not Cole. I didn't tell him otherwise. At this point, he charged me to investigate the Ranger, so I did."

"Knowing that I was the Ranger?" said Marcus.

"No, I thought you both were Rangers," said Janella. "I was just more interested in the Alyt, who was arguably the more concerning threat."

"I'll have you know I'm plenty threatening!" said Marcus.

"One cannot be Alyt and Anla'shok simultaneously," said Neroon.

"Yeah," said Janella, "it wasn't until after I'd done a little more research that I realised that, too. You Minbari don't make it easy to know anything about you."

"No," said Neroon. "We do not."

"But Gorrom - who, just to be clear, was threatened by me, that is a fact - found out on his own who was who," supplied Marcus.
"Someone must have told him, but it wasn't me. I figured it was whoever he was meeting on Dorrno. He kept flitting off there - his excuse was overtime on the Stock Traders. But then why wouldn't he let me have minutes for those when he made me type up his Risk Analysis minutes? He said because he wasn't supposed to do double time for same pay." Janella shrugged. "This, I could believe. And that's why he deleted the logs, too. But I found it strange he wanted me to delete some logs and others, he wouldn't even let me touch. He continued to delete them before I could get access to them. He might have lied about Dorrno - I kept abreast of his movements insofar as he left the planet and remained in the system because there was no registration of jumpgate access. But where else would he go in this system? Xatn III is an abandoned penal colony. Lhshra Mokart is closed for renovations. And Thronara's Lagoon is a holiday retreat which he can't afford."

"No, you were right, it was Dorrno," said Marcus.

"There were other logs he wanted to delete himself. He didn't even want a log of the meetings he kept with that fellow you had me track, who came by the day after I spoke with Marcus. Li Gorrom was most irate. At the time I thought it was because he, too, didn't have an appointment."

Interesting. "What of that matter?"

"About that," said Janella. "This... Li Ka Phor... he falls off the grid about a year ago with no word. If there's any connection to the disappearance of Li Gorrom's aides, it would have come up in my investigation already."

"He has kept little of a trail, it seems," said Neroon.

"Gorrom said he's been hiding out in the mountains between Zhoshesh Dorallo and Phinti," added Marcus.

"True. Unfortunately, he was clever enough to turn off the tracker in the spinner," said Janella. She produced from her satchel a map, which she unfolded and laid on the bed. "Your best guess is that he's still in the mountains. The range is large enough to hide, and anywhere else he'd be trackable - public transit pass, maybe, tolls, the odd security footage. Little things that everyday Drazi tend to forget about. But he's not in security, he's not in intelligence, so why would he keep track? To rent a room he'd need his ID, and he hasn't used that in over a year. It's easy to go off the grid, it's hard to get back on. He'll have a lot of questions to answer if he ever wants to bridge back in."

"I think he's planning on relying on help," said Marcus.

"Li Gorrom?" suggested Janella.


"Well, no matter. Someone else handles his case, not me. This is where I lost him," she said, and she pointed to a region she'd helpfully encircled in red on the map. "I'd start there and follow his tracks."

"Excellent!" said Marcus. "Can we use your bike?"

"Absolutely not," said Janella hotly, "you can take the city trains like everyone else!"

"But there's three hours' walk between the city limits and the mountain path," says Marcus.

"So?"

"So I don't mind the heat, but Neroon here might falter."
"I am not a wilting flower," said Neroon.

Wilting was precisely what Neroon did the last time he made that walk. But let the man have his silly pride. "There's one more thing," said Marcus. "Gorrom mentioned fabricated evidence given to him by Ka Phor -"

"Yes," said Janella. "He had me working on it. I still can't tell whether it's fabricated or not, but it paints a very interesting picture of Li Gorrom, if it's true. I'm no longer sure what to believe."

"Try cross-referencing it with this," said Neroon. He reached inside his pocket and extracted the data crystal he'd made, and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"A confession, of sorts. Which we extracted at Dormo. I don't know whether it will be of any use," said Neroon. "But on the off chance that it is..."

Janella tucked it inside the satchel. "Thank you," she said, delighted and no little surprised. She reconsidered and said, "Alright, I'll take you as far as the mountain path. Meet me back here tonight at sundown, and we'll leave. You should be travelling at night anyway, if the heat is your concern."

--

They returned to the apartment, and while Marcus packed supplies for a trek through the mountains, Neroon contacted Ventrell. Neroon didn't tell Marcus to leave, and he didn't conduct the call on the balcony, so Marcus assumed it was open season to eavesdrop.

"<Ventrell of the Star Riders reporting>," said Ventrell, sounding nervous, when he picked up.

"<Yes>," began Neroon, "this is son of Mikrine of the Starship Crafters, logging movements ...>"

He described their locations in Zhoshesh Dorallo as well as their trip to Dormo Station. He even gave a rough estimation of the trajectories taken around the planets, which was news to Marcus. Marcus ran the numbers in his head, working out the forces to have spun them around the planets and gotten back to Zhabar in under three hours - no wonder he blacked out. "<This concludes a report of my movements>," Neroon finished. There was silence. "<Ventrell?>"


Neroon frowned. He looked over his shoulder to exchange a glance with Marcus. Marcus shrugged.

"<Yes, actually!>" huffed Ventrell. "<First, there was an attack on the Temple of Universal Love in Vogar - no casualties, it was during the middle of the night - the Twelfth Fane of Set'val has blamed the Fire Wings for this but they could not have done it for the unit closest to them is still on probation from Klolem and the explosive was standard Worker Caste fare and the workers were silent for a day which probably means they did it but now they continue demonstrations and their cause has spread to Mora Province and workers from all over are assembling ->"

"<Ventrell. Please breathe. Also, it is not a crime to assemble>," reminded Neroon.

"<But there's a lot of them>," said Ventrell. "<And they grow rowdy. They're blaming us for mistreatment, but we've done nothing of the sort! They blame the Religious Caste too, but let us be honest, the real blame is always on the Warriors and now they refuse to do their jobs like transport goods including food and medicine and, and - and I don't think they want us to keep the peace anymore! I think - I think they're the ones who attacked the temple because they knew the Religious
"Caste would blame us!>"

"<Speculation is unwise>," said Neroon.

"<Friction has already sparked in Tinarel>," said Ventrell. "<One of the awnings of the ancient pharmacy in the old market square caught fire yesterday. If it had not been contained ...>"

"<A fire could be an accident.>"

"<Not when the whole old market reeks of spent fuel, it couldn't be! Do you know that's the site where the old Valeria's Tears monument stood before we won the religious wars fourteen hundred years ago and the Religious Caste had it rebuilt in Yedor ->"

"<I am aware>," drawled Neroon, "<I was born in Tinarel. I know a few things about the city.>" He rolled his eyes. Marcus had to grin. Where was Tinarel, he wondered, looking at Neroon in a new light.

"<Well, well I thought, maybe they want it back again. Please, Alyt, when are you coming home?>"

"<Ventrell!>" snapped Neroon.

"<I mean>," said Ventrell, nervously. "<B-because you are - who you are - I simply think it would really be prudent if you finished whatever business you have on Zhabar sooner than later. Sir.>"

"<Yes. Opinion noted>," said Neroon dryly. "<Thank you for your advice. Tell me, child, where is the Shai Alyt in all of this?>"

"<He is the one who made a statement about the Religious Caste shifting blame to us, sir>," said Ventrell.

"<Really>," mused Neroon. "<What proof has he?>"

"<Er, that is>," said Ventrell. "<He didn't exactly say it outright. But - but it was implied. I'm sure that's what he meant!>"

Neroon pinched the bridge of his nose. "<Suppose we concerned ourselves with what he actually said>," he said.

"<Well... alright. But surely you received a copy of it already? Since you're - ah. Who you are. Sir.>"

"If you paid a modicum of attention to the reports I have been dictating, to you, you will find to your astonishment that I have in fact been away from Minbar>," said Neroon, speaking tersely through his teeth, "<and so I would appreciate it greatly would you kindly read the statement given by the Shai Alyt. Now, Ventrell.>"

"<Ah. Of course.>" Ventrell's voice had grown very small. "<Ah... Let us see ... we stand with all of those affected, and keep them in our thoughts and prayers, for as the Religious Caste well knows it, prayer is what shall see us through these trying times - all of us, Warrior, Worker, and Religious in particular. For to them do I extend a separate message, as evidence of continued friendship between the Religious and Warrior Castes, which must persist despite those who would divide us. Unity is paramount; thus, may the acolytes and priests find it within themselves to take upon the worker and rebuild their sacred places. That's what he said.>"

Strange words, thought Marcus acidly.
"<A donation is ordinarily bestowed towards reparation>," prompted Neroon.

"<Oh, but he did donate!>" said Ventrell proudly. "<He has sent Alyt-nali Fashar of the Wind Swords, who he says is one of the best sleuths in the clan, as assistance for finding the culprit. He says that actions are worth more than coin.>"

"<I see>," said Neroon. His tone of voice made it quite clear this was a disappointment. "<Very well. If that's all?>"

"<Yes, sir>," said Ventrell. "<May the stars guide you home, sir.>"

"<May they direct me swiftly>," said Neroon. He disconnected with a particularly strong push of the button on the link, and then he whirled around and flung it impetuously on the bed.

"Thoughts and prayers,'" said Marcus.

"And not a single credit," snarled Neroon. "He sends a warrior as a 'gift' - that will be interpreted by the Religious Caste as an act of distrust and interference in their own investigation, which they are competent enough to run!"

"Interference or monitoring," mused Marcus.

Neroon shook his head bitterly. "An excellent point. Possibly both." He sighed, folding his arms across his chest, and leaned back against the wall next to the computer. "An explosion in a temple."

"It sounded like it was the Worker Caste -"

"Standard Worker Caste fare is also standard Any Caste fare. What labour and materials is considered standard for the Worker Caste would be available to every caste," said Neroon. "Shakiri has a habit of forgetting this, and not according to the workers the honour they are rightly due. I see now this attitude is catching, in the absence of Worker Caste Satai, who outrank every serving officer - including Shakiri himself. The Worker Caste specialises, as the Warrior and Religious Castes do. We warriors do not ring our local worker the moment a septic system has overflowed or a door is knocked off its hinges. We repair the basics ourselves, and thus we have access to such materials!"

"Then it could have been the Fire Wings," said Marcus.

"Yes," said Neroon. "It could have been. It is imprudent to involve the Religious Caste in such a burgeoning conflict, but it does not surprise me that it tempts them to do so."

"Because the Fire Wings are foolhardy and like to punch above their weight?"

"Because the Religious and Warrior Castes have never liked each other, and an opportunity to ruin each other's day is not one to be missed."

That much was true. "But ruining a day is one thing," argued Marcus. "This is blowing up a temple."

"I agree. This has gone too far." Neroon looked so forlorn that Marcus felt his own spirits drop. "I should be on Minbar," he said.

Marcus drew nearer to him. "You should be on Minbar," he agreed.

It took all his strength to stop from placing a hand on Neroon's shoulder in comfort. That was comfort for him, he knew it wasn't comforting for Neroon. He settled instead beside him, nudging their shoulders together. Neroon pressed back, and they stood there, silent, connected. (No, said
Marcus to his heart, busily skipping beats, this means nothing, it's just comfort, we're just friends.)

"Thank you for listening," said Neroon softly.

Marcus really needed to get this heart thing of his under control. "Yeah, well," he replied, jocular. "Not being Minbari, I expect I can't do much else but listen."

"I have come to realise," and Neroon threw him a rakish half-grin, "that there are perhaps certain topics with which you especially are skilled. Certain things for which you uniquely are qualified. Because you are not Minbari." Completely impossible! Marcus' heart flew headlong into doubletime. Neroon grew more serious before he continued. "With Minbari ... I could not trust any of the Religious Caste. Nor the Worker Caste. And other Warrior Caste have now become too difficult. Who has already allied with Shai Alyt Shakiri? Who believes him wholesale? Who could I yet exert my control over? Control is not something one does to friends."

"Well," managed Marcus, "let's - let's finish this mission, and then you can return, and run all the damage control from the Shai Alyt's mismanagement."

"Let us aim for expediency," said Neroon. "At the rate he progresses, such reparation is already too much work for myself alone."

--

Janella picked them up at sundown as agreed, and drove them past the edge of the city to the edge of the tree line, where the mountains and forested area began that split the boundary between Zhoshesh Dorallo and the three small towns, Phinti, Kradlor, and Wremak. Two was company, but three was a crowd on the small motorbike, with Marcus behind Janella and Neroon behind him.

The riot in Phinti that had escalated recently had similar parallels to the one in Klolem on Minbar, thought Marcus. Though to hear Janella shout the story over the booming rumble of the bike, it had actually resulted in casualties. Green versus Purple, and after three weeks of escalating brutality, four Green deaths, and twenty Purple deaths, it was now firmly Green territory. Purple alliance fighters had been kicked out of the entire Zherresht Province outside the cities.

Janella's driving skills were adequate and entirely expected for Marcus, given what Marcus knew of Drazi traffic. Neroon evidently doubted them, for he remained silent in the conversation except for the odd gasp of breath into the nape of Marcus' neck, his lips resting against Marcus' skin where his Ranger uniform had slipped down (it wasn't a kiss, there just wasn't room to move), and with every turn and lean as they darted through the city at a madcap pace, he clung, pressed to Marcus' back. It felt so much closer than they'd been when it was just them and that had been close enough. Again, Marcus thought, there's just not enough room, he clearly doesn't want to fall off, so he holds me closer.

And if Marcus leaned back into Neroon's embrace it was simply to reassure him that nobody was falling off this awful motorbike and because it was chilly with the night air and the wind from their travel and Neroon was a living inferno.

That was all.

Within an hour they were at the forest road. Neroon jumped off the moment they stalled, adjusting his black fatigues back into place in his irritation.

"You're welcome," said Janella.

"You drive like that on purpose," huffed Neroon.
"You can prove nothing," she replied. To Marcus she threw an over-the-shoulder. "You're welcome for that, too."

He frowned as he got up. "Thanks," he said. Surely she meant about driving them.

"There is one thing I've been meaning to ask," said Neroon.

"Shoot," said Janella.

"You fight Green, yes?"

She snorted. "Obviously."

"You say obviously, but your scales are dark," Neroon pointed out. "Gorrom's were green, and he fought Green. Ka Phor's are purple, and he fought Purple. Li Mrakto is green, but fights Purple. Li Dro Lrktz is purple, but fights Green. Where is the correlation?"

"Well, you see," began Janella, and launched into the explanation of the Shadak appointment with all its violence.

Neroon listened patiently - patiently for Neroon - and at the end said flatly, "You're joking me."

Janella shook her head. "There's nothing funny about it. I would never joke about something like that, especially not in this political climate."

"All of this is because - because you put sashes into a great barrel and pull them out - all of this is because of random selection?"

"It's not random!" said Janella defensively. "Some like to say that their gods and goddesses move through them to select the right one - I knew someone who fought Purple his whole life and swore it was Vettaya the Golden-Tongued's intervention -"

"So you don't even - the last time your Shadak was appointed, five years prior -"

"I was Purple," Janella said. "And very faithful! And now I'm Green. And very faithful!"

"I can't believe this," Neroon muttered. He stalked off into the forest.

"We shouldn't have told him," said Marcus.

Janella shrugged. "Good luck," she said. She extended a hand for Marcus to shake - she was firm and decisive, and a frill of scales on the fleshy part of her hand where the thumb was scraped lightly against Marcus' palm. "And, uh, it's been nice." Then she kickstarted the motor which straggled into life with a loud boom, and sped off for the city.

Neroon had already mostly disappeared, and Marcus could only catch up with him with the sound of his stomping. That must have been for Marcus' benefit, since he knew Neroon could be quiet when he wanted to. In the faint moonlight (the Drazi moon was much smaller than Earth's), the forest path was dimly lit and difficult to see. "You don't have to be so insensitive," Marcus said. Though this actually ranked surprisingly low on the insensitive things Neroon had said and done.

"It's random!" he complained. "All of this - Green, Purple - it doesn't even mean anything!"

"It means something to them. You don't have to understand it, but then, it's not for you." Marcus had to laugh. "Look, there's plenty of things about Minbar and Minbari that I don't get, and I lived there for months!"
They walked in silence for a few paces. "Like what?" said Neroon at last.

Perhaps it was later, thought Marcus, though he'd prefer to hold on to the memory of Neroon clasped to his back just a little while longer before they began another spat. "Oh, like that unexplainable ability of yours for one," he said, "or how lying, even little white lies, are unforgivable deception and dishonour. Or, my personal favourite, why it is you threw me the link and told me to run along without you. You wouldn't have done that for another Human. You said you wanted to ensure I would finish the mission, but there was no guarantee of that. You even realised it later: we only escaped because you were onboard at all, because sacrificing you meant an unacceptable loss to their Minbari agent. Letting me go was one of the stupider, less thought-out things you could have possibly chosen to do. I'd love to know why you did it."

Neroon did not react as defensively as he expected. "I lied," he said simply.

Did that mean truth was forthcoming? "About what?"

"That is, I lie more often than most do," he admitted. "I am not proud of that. I may as well confess it to you now."

Yet another few minutes in silence. Marcus refused to fill it with anything else, lest Neroon take new dialogue as a means to twist the conversation and talk about something else.

"As to that ability," began Neroon at last, "upon reflection, there is something of an explanation. It was not until you challenged me on it that I deduced it in full myself." He stopped and looked around. "And we're quite alone now, so I may tell you."

They kept walking on the path, and as they did, Neroon explained.

"One of the many secrets of the Grey Council," he said. "When one becomes Satai, there is much reading to do." He smiled, self-effacing, barely visible in the moonlight. "Of course it is against our laws for me to have told you that. But if there is no more Grey Council to keep the Workers, Warriors, and Religious from squabbling with each other, then there is certainly no more Grey Council to prosecute me for saying something that should never have been a secret in the first place, in my opinion. Consider, then: a planet of beings where some possess an ability to sense things like deception and trickery. The enemy sense, as Sech Faliri taught it. That in turn will affect the perception of deception. And a society could select one of two paths to handle it. The first: to hone such ability like a skill; thus, those that are accidentally more proficient become far more skilled, which serves them in their self-preservation."


"This is theorised to have happened very early on in our evolution, before we were sentient," Neroon said. "Alternatively, the second: once everybody has the means to detect deception, after those who were proficient have become dominant through many generations, the skill of deception becomes less important and less valued as a trait. From this point onwards, it becomes stigmatised. Those who indulge in deception are at best wasting everyone's time with little games; at worst, functionally detrimental to cohesion and cooperation in the society."

"That's how it relates to dishonour," realised Marcus.

"Thus does dishonour come to be equated with enmity, and also to mean to be detriment to the function of society at large. On Minbar, that is unforgivable."

"Because it's all based on cooperation in the masses with an oligarchical few at the top - you're
supposed to serve."

"Exactly. So in those who serve, dishonour, deception, and trickery is heavily punished." Neroon held up a finger. "Here is the thing," he added. "In those who lead, such dishonours become useful, and serve them. Now. This sense ability was a trait the castes and clans had picked up in varying amounts of goodness, or so goes the theory. The group that would later become the Star Riders performed this ability exceedingly well, which helped them survive and indeed thrive as a set of proto-clans, at the expense of other proto-clans that did not perform it as well. This predated Vorlon experimentation to create telepaths -"

"Vorlon what," blurted Marcus.

"Another, related, Grey Council secret," said Neroon. "It has no proof, but we likely did not evolve telepathy naturally. This is all built from four seminal theses, research from three hundred years ago from highly advanced workers in the fields of genetics, archaeology, geology, and atmospheric physics. When they published, they were ridiculed, and not long after the Grey Council took their work, marked it classified, and it was never discussed again. Again, these are all theories - nothing is known for certain. But it is likely. Their research taken together suggested we were interfered with at least twice. Once for biological evolution, and once for mental evolution, which created advanced telepathy."

Marcus was floored. "Good god," he said.

"Not really," replied Neroon darkly. "This is also, I suspect, why the only formal treaty of alliance the Federation ever signed - an extremely one-sided pact for supposedly-mutual aggression and defence - was with the Vorlon Empire. Which is why we wait for them to act before we may become involved in any conflict that does not spark with Minbari bloodshed. In any case, the time for Minbari can be dated to roughly the same era of the last time the Vorlon ships entered our atmosphere on Minbar, which left an imprint in the composition of the atmosphere and geological record for rare elements. At that stage, in our fossil records and genetic analysis, the deception detection ability had spread to all Minbari, though some were better than others. Two generations later came our first telepaths. That cannot be coincidence."

"So it is linked to telepathy," said Marcus. "Those who can catch enemies better, those who can figure out deceivers quicker."

"Which is why the Star Riders and other clans became so protective of who may mate with whom," finished Neroon. "Years and years later of scrambling to encode for these genes naturally, through mating, has resulted in a smaller gene pool and lesser diversity. It caused a higher incidence of telepathy. But it also has caused mutations to surface readily. Such as that which arises in my family on my mother's side."

"Her condition," said Marcus.

"The Religious Caste believe her 'lost in the spirit stream of consciousness of the universe', and that her nonsense babbling is some kind of interpretive prayer," Neroon said blandly. "The Religious Caste Satai know better."

"So - whatever you have that senses enemies...

Neroon grimaced. "I was top of my class. Like my mother before me, like her mother before her. It is too soon to say. It is a rare condition... the earliest symptoms will not appear for another thirty, perhaps forty cycles. More than enough time to get my affairs in order. I can even have something like a life."
There was silence.

"Sorry," said Neroon. "Heavier conversation, again. You were not expecting this."

"Not at all," said Marcus, hushed. "Why did you tell me?"

They walked in silence for a moment. Then, in the low light, he saw Neroon shrug. "Penance, for my dishonour, for having lied to you," Neroon said. "Or because I thought you ought to know. Or because I've wanted to tell someone, for some time, and you are the best person I could tell, as you are not Minbari, and ... and I thought you might understand. Or ... or because you asked. Pick any reason you like, they're all true."

His heart warmed. Neroon must have forgiven him for his earlier suspicions. Good, he thought, because they were natural to make, especially since Neroon himself had admitted to other deceptions, both great and small. Nevertheless, Marcus couldn't express in words what this meant to him, and didn't bother to try. That Neroon would choose him as confidante, even if he had done so only because Marcus was the last remaining sensible choice. He moved closer to Neroon, close enough that the backs of their hands would brush together, every few paces, as they walked.

Neroon let him.

"Sometimes I think Minbari pre-history is all kept secret for this very reason," he said. "Too shocking for public discourse. Or perhaps the keeping of secrets has made us too easily shocked."

"That wasn't the worst part of it," Marcus decided. "Every species has its secrets. That much, I get. And you're probably right about telepathy generally. Any sentient species that had it all along wouldn't need tools, wouldn't need to evolve. But that... but that this condition of your mother's could happen to you ..." He couldn't picture Neroon in a Religious Caste temple, babbling nonsense.

Neroon softened. "I take heart that I might take after my Worker Caste father, who has none of those problematic genes."

"So that's why you threw me the link?" Because he thought he'd only live a short life anyway? Because it didn't matter anyway? Because who wants to live forever?

"No, that's not why," said Neroon. "I wanted ... I wanted you to escape. I wanted to buy time for your survival and if you succeeded - I knew you would, I haven't fought with you this long not to notice your agility. I wanted what we did - what we discovered here in the Freehold - I wanted it to be worth something. To mean something."

Marcus remembered himself screaming it at Neroon before: *Everything I do - everything - is so that it'll mean something. That trial and suffering mean something. That it not be because the universe was unfair, and you got the hand you were dealt, and the house always won. Marcus knew about that. Why else did he stay with his father's company after his parents had died? Why else had he elected for the longest time not to let his life be his own, because otherwise it meant giving up everybody else's sacrifices, so they'd've died for nothing? "So when I do the exact same thing, you criticise, but when you do it, it's alright," said Marcus.

Neroon did not react to his accusatory tone. "Yes, very well, so it is hypocritical," he said airily, with a dismissive smile, "what of it?"

The hypocrisy wasn't even the worst part. "Why would you do something for just a Human?"

"Because you're not just a Human to me," said Neroon. He sighed. "Though I greatly wish you were."
Marcus, stricken, had no idea what to say to that, and Neroon did not elaborate further.

For a further two hours they walked in silence until Neroon looked up, squinting. "We should be heading fifteen degrees northwest to make connection with the spinner's last known location," he said, "should a forest road bank that way."

"How can you tell?" Marcus had Janella's map in his rucksack, and Neroon hadn't asked to look at it once.

"The position of the Drazi constellations," he said. "That is why I have been watching them for the past week."

"Thought you were just stargazing," said Marcus. Or avoiding sleeping with me, he thought.

"The proper term in Fik," replied Neroon, "is fi'sularaz." To star-ride.

Chapter End Notes

sorry I'm just dumping all my Minbari headcanons all over this fic. I promise next chapter we'll get physical.

'Fi'sularae' is from the Jumpnow Minbari dictionary (meaning 'star riders'); 'fi' is canon (means star, c.f. Drala Fi) but the remainder is their invention, I think. I've toyed with the ending to make an infinitive verb out of it. ask me more about Fik grammar at your own peril because I Can And Will Talk At Length

anyway see you next week! (I hope!)
They walked and walked, and the only upside was that the brisk night air made keeping a good pace a necessity. There were no real breaks until the next day at noonish, when it became too hot to walk. It was relatively balmy for Marcus - only thirty degrees, the mountain air was cooler but more humid than it had been in dry, dusty Zhoshesh Dorallo, and there was even a breeze from time to time - but Neroon had quickly regressed into his usual bitchy self and it took two squabbles over nothing for Marcus to remember that heat and Minbari did not mix.

"We'll nap when we find the spinner," said Marcus, trying to remain bright.

"I don't need a nap," snapped Neroon, petulant. "I am perfectly fine. I could walk for days."

Marcus didn't bother replying. A half hour later they came upon the spinner and Neroon fell asleep in its shade within minutes. It was up to Marcus, then, to investigate.

Bloody Ka Phor had eaten all the food and taken all the supplies Marcus had stocked the spinner with, but at least they had the vehicle back and it was more or less in one piece. Well, it looked unflyable, but it had looked like that to begin with. They'd see what the security deposit said.

Not having proper food might be an issue. They could hunt for meat, but Neroon couldn't eat it; and in any case starting a fire would be something Ka Phor, with his Drazi sense of smell, would pick up on. They'd lose the advantage of surprise. Then again, they may never have had it in the first place - he could probably smell them, trekking around in the heat. Heretofore they'd both been eating rations bars that Marcus had picked up in the city. Drazi rations were like Human rations - dessicated compactified nutrient-paste containing a few thousand calories in a few bites - and thus Neroon claimed he would only need one to feed him for two days. Hadn't stopped Marcus from packing ten.

The spinner's water supply had also been pilfered, but Marcus had anticipated that, and wasn't comfortable relying on anything else but himself for water - too important. They each had their own flask and a handful of purification tablets (which Neroon also claimed not to need, and which Marcus took enough of for the both of them anyway). Throughout the morning, as the temperature increased, Neroon drank less and less from his flask, using more of the water to moisten his skin. On one hand, doing this made him slightly less irritable. On the other hand, his skin glistened in the sunlight and Marcus was having a lot of difficulty with that.

In any case, they'd have to leave the spinner behind. It would be far too loud to pursue Ka Phor with any reasonable stealth.

There was a shallow creek nearby - larger than a spring, smaller than a river - and Marcus took full advantage of Neroon's nap to bathe. He stripped nude and stood thigh-deep in the warm water, alternately scrubbing himself with the silt clay on the bottom of the creek bed and rinsing it off until he felt more normal.

It didn't take him long to feel watched. He faced away from the bank of the creek, but by now he knew the weight of that gaze very well.

"I see you're awake," he called.

He turned. Neroon stood by the bank, leaning on a tree next to where Marcus had folded his
uniform, next to his bag. For a moment Neroon did not reply, his expression preoccupied, puzzled, and not a little spellbound. It took him a moment to remember Marcus had spoken. "I, ah - I cannot sleep long, in the heat," he said quietly. "I awoke. And... found you had left... so I..."

"Quite alright," said Marcus. He gathered his hair over one shoulder and wrung it out, the water dripping down his chest. Neroon stopped talking but did not stop watching him. "Well, if you're going to stand there, might as well make yourself useful. In my rucksack there's two towels. Could you toss me one?"

Neroon came back to himself with a start. "Yes," he murmured, "of course." Finally he tore his eyes away.

Why not take notes while you're at it, thought Marcus. Well, Marcus was probably the first Human Neroon had ever seen. Alive, anyway.

It was a hand towel, because that was all that fit inside his rucksack with the rest of his supplies. It wasn't even close to being able to cover him. But Neroon had already looked his fill, there was little point in covering anyway. And he didn't seem to have any nudity issues himself. Why he'd be so out of sorts when Marcus was finally catching up to his own personal mores was anyone's guess.

Maybe he's out of sorts, he thought, because these feelings of mine are mutual. That was ridiculous. Neroon would never court an alien.

But someone who would never court an alien wouldn't be this interested, either.

He looked up at Neroon, wondering, and Neroon averted his gaze immediately.

An awkward silence passed as he finished towelling himself dry. Would Neroon ask questions? He looked curious enough. What's the hair for, for one, why is it where it is, why is it different than that on your head. Or perhaps he'd ask about his privates. (Inesval had. "It doesn't retract inside you?" he'd chattered excitedly. "And the seed-producers are the globes, you say, but they're outside too?" Inesval absolutely would court an alien.) But instead he waited in silence for Marcus to leave the water and fully dress before he decided on saying, a little breathless, "Perhaps that's a good idea. To cool off. Being that it is so warm."

Oh, so now he was being shy? "Creek's all yours," said Marcus. "I'm off for a nap."

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Neroon had been correct. Two hours was about the limit for sleeping in this heat. Marcus woke, unpleasantly groggy, to find Neroon nearby, starting a small fire. On the flat rock beside him lay six small fish, gutted and descaled, and next to his foot was a shallow dug pit where he'd collected inedible parts.

"It is roughly mid-afternoon," said Neroon. "You said your tracking is best in the evening light. That will not occur for another three hours, at least. In the meantime..." he held up his fighting pike, to which he had affixed one of the three crystal knives from his remaining glove with a bit of Marcus' dental floss. "I recognised the fish in the creek as I was bathing."

"So you went fishing," said Marcus. He tried not to sound delighted but something in his voice gave him away, and Neroon threw him a shy, proud smile.

"Not long after we returned to the city, the first time, I checked with Li Mrakto. The protein structures are different for Drazi fish. That which is problematic for Minbari in the Drazi meats is not present in the fish. A further problem is that they'll likely have worms and parasites, but she said a
quick sear would kill these. Apparently it's a common dish. Not one she made me prepare, because it was not one she favoured." The fire took, and Neroon sat back to blacken the tips of two sharpened sticks. "If we're going to eat anything over open flame, it may as well be now, before we begin properly tracking Ka Phor, or we shall give our position away."

Neroon had also woven a trap out of grasses and reeds and caught a handful of crustaceans - edible once he removed the central nerve core and the digestive tract with another of the crystal knives, but tiny things, too crunchy for Marcus' liking, so Neroon ate most of them, and Marcus helped himself to the fish. He can be such a gentleman, thought Marcus, when he wants to be.

They ate and waited until evening, and then tracking began. In this light, the sun cast longer shadows over the impressions in the ground. There were no footprints around the spinner - Ka Phor was bright enough to have erased those. But he wasn't clever enough to have removed all sign that he had been there, and Marcus followed the trail of trampled grass, broken branches, turned-over leaves, and disturbed soil that led east away from the spinner. A few hundred metres after they left the spinner Marcus found better signs. Mud and soil transfer on a rock or a log here and there, where Ka Phor'd had to climb over.

"Are you sure about this?" Neroon had asked once.

Marcus came upon a veil of hanging vines and set them aside to expose a clearing beyond, in which there was a small firepit that had been kicked over with sand. "See? I know what I'm doing," said Marcus. The embers had completely cooled, but there was a bed of overturned earth by the firepit, and Marcus dug this up to find the bones of a marokk, a small flightless bird that was easy to trap. Ka Phor had eaten most of the meat, but left enough for Marcus to interpret. "He's been here about a day ago," he suspected, judging by the state of the leftover meat and the growth of the worms on it. "Probably in the morning." While they were still in bed, Neroon's leg entwined with his.

Neroon, amazed, made no further criticisms.

Finally Ka Phor had gotten lazy and there was a clear set of tracks leading east, away from the clearing. That made sense - eastwards led to higher ground. But it was away from water.

"He could be avoiding us," decided Neroon, when Marcus told him. "He knew we were pursuing him. He did not know we wouldn't do it immediately, but this time a day ago he would not have realised that yet. Higher ground makes strategic sense; away from water makes defensive sense. Drazi need less water than either Humans or Minbari. He thinks we will stick close to the network of creeks and springs; thus, he will avoid them."

"He hasn't been clever enough to backtrack his footprints, alter his gait, or walk backwards," Marcus argued. "Not like I couldn't follow the trail of animal bones and firepits alone."

"He hasn't thought of that - he hasn't your skills," said Neroon, approving. "In fact, I do not know many who do. Do they teach all Anla'shok this?"

"No," said Marcus, "that's Earthforce. They taught me that in the war."

Neroon's smile faded. "Ah," he said.

"But you're right about tactics," said Marcus. "I doubt he's mapped the entire mountain range in the year that he's been off-grid, but he will be familiar with some of it, and he'll stick to the parts where he's most familiar. Where that is, I'm not sure. But if I were him, and occasionally faced with the odd rain shower - common in the mountains but rare in the cities where he's from, rain will be foreign and unpleasant for him - I'd've spent the past year moving from one safe shelter to another."
"He will stick to caves," said Neroon.

"Almost certainly. And they'll be fixed hiding places. I'd wager fewer than five." Which reminded Marcus. He looked skyward, judging the fading light. "We ought to find one ourselves. We can't track as well at night."

"Any cave he has abandoned," added Neroon, "he may have done so for a reason."

True. "We'll have to take that chance." Marcus took a handful of pebbles and arranged them at the base of a tree to mark the last connection with the path, and then headed them off in a direction perpendicular.

Another hour passed before the light failed completely and the best they had found was the smallest rock overhang. It wasn't even a proper cave, it was barely enough for one person, let alone two, but maybe that was a good thing, given the night chill. The last time Marcus had needed heat, he'd taken it from Neroon, though Neroon wasn't exactly awake to say anything about it.

"How close do you think he is?" said Neroon.

"Not very close," he replied. "Far enough away we can talk comfortably still." The closer they got, the less they'd have to chat. "I'll know more about his movements tomorrow. Drazi spiders are like our spiders - they'll spin in the evening, and in this climate, dew falls in the morning, so if he's stupid enough to pass through them - and I think he probably is - then tomorrow we'll be able to see where he's been earlier the same day. Right now we're tracking his movements from yesterday." He thought about the morning. "We'll want to wake at dawn, though."

Neroon nodded. "Then we ought to take shifts sleeping."

"Why did you ask?"

He shrugged. "I thought I'd make a small fire, if we could risk it."

"Best not. Are you still hungry?"

"Not at all. I thought ..." Neroon's trailing off felt ambiguous; his eye contact elusive. "Well. We do not make progress towards our goal if you cannot sleep from the cold," he said, reasoning. "So, you need to be well-rested and warm. It is simply logical."

Marcus smiled, wan. "We get through it together," he said. "There's the emergency blanket."

"But would it cover us both?"

"If we're not far apart."

Neroon, caught, looked at him warily for a moment. Marcus hadn't planned on having only the one, but hadn't had time to purchase serious camping supplies. Then, Neroon nodded once. He rifled through Marcus' rucksack for the emergency blanket and began unpacking.

Neroon was only going along with this so they could be finished on Zhabar. He wasn't touchy like Marcus was - he'd leapt off the bed that morning to get away from him - it was good of him to be reasonable about this but Marcus had no doubt it wasn't high on the list of things he liked. They'd finish up here, and then Neroon could get back home to fix Minbar. Which was also Marcus' goal, in a roundabout way. It was all very logical. It made sense.

It also made Marcus thrilled in a way he didn't like to admit to, to think about cuddling him close at
night. Pretend you're not secretly pleased, he thought.

For someone who claimed only to be concerned about the logical decision, Neroon too was acting a bit cagey... No, he was coy, that was all. This wasn't something Minbari needed to do, so it wasn't something they culturally knew.

Nights were nicer, atmosphere-wise, as Marcus found out. They lay there together, in the coolness, tucked under the emergency blanket that barely covered them both. Neroon was kinder, less of an arse, in this temperature. He explained the star patterns he'd picked up, pointing them out where the rock overhang did not block the view. Useless, though interesting, and served only to let Neroon's beautiful voice wash over him.

Marcus had to pull himself out of this infatuation, he knew, but it would be so much easier to be friends and only friends when they were not constantly around each other, when Neroon hadn't shuffled closer and laid next to him, a warm weight at his side as they looked skyward. When Neroon didn't have that dream-like passion to his voice. He was clearly enchanted by the night sky, even one that wasn't Minbar's. Little wonder, then, that he'd become a starship captain. He pictured Neroon at the head of one of their cruisers, calling orders, obeyed instantly, and for once the image didn't unnerve him. In his mind's eye Alyt Neroon was authoritative, decisive; he wore the uniform like a model, and he held himself removed from the crew, as though cut from crystal. Impossible and dangerous to get too close.

Marcus inched closer, laid his head on Neroon's shoulder, and closed his eyes.

What is happening to me, he thought. What am I doing, this is ridiculous. Too tired to argue it. Too comfortable.

Neroon hesitated, then kept talking, a little uneasily. At long last he called him on his silence. "You don't really care about the stars, do you," he murmured.

"I don't not care," said Marcus, drowsy.

"I suppose it is irrelevant information ... we could use it to orient ourselves but we no longer need orientation, we need to find Ka Phor. It is not particularly useful for tracking him. Only you can do that, and only in daylight."

"Still think we make a really good team," he replied, and he knew Neroon was thinking it too because he grew curiously silent. "You wouldn't've even known that if you hadn't left me alive."

Silence.

"You could've killed me," added Marcus.

Neroon sat up, propped on his elbows, to face him. "No," he said. "No, I couldn't have."

"I mean, I'm glad you didn't, but you could have, you'd killed how many Humans before -"

"None like you," murmured Neroon.

"- and you would have retained your status in the caste if you had."

"At the expense of the regard of the Worker and Religious Castes," said Neroon. "Which, given what Ventrell has been saying, may begin to be more important. It was the right decision. I see that now."
"But you didn't then. Why did you do it?"

Neroon sighed. "You ask a lot of questions," he said, "and if I with my sharp edges have finally become a suitable pillow, you must be exhausted. Sleep; I shall take first watch."

Marcus would have argued, but Neroon had lain back down, returned to his side, and tucked the blanket around them.

"Very well, but I'm not letting it go," said Marcus.

"Indeed not," replied Neroon, "you never seem to."

"And -" he yawned - "I'll pull it from you eventually."

"Mm, yes, you have a habit of that as well."

"Habits are hard to break," Marcus murmured. Neroon might have replied, but Marcus fell asleep too quickly to hear it.

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Neroon did not wake him until dawn.

"It's light enough to begin work," said Marcus. "You did that on purpose."

He smiled, sheepish. "I thought it better to let you sleep," he said.

"What's better is that we're both well-rested and not irritable," said Marcus. "Fighting with you takes effort." Too much effort.

"Easy solution, do not fight with me," teased Neroon. "I shall keep my temper to myself."

Like hell he would. "A dubious claim!"

"That being said," he added wryly, "it would be helpful if you would also keep your own quips to a minimum."

"Ruining all my fun," said Marcus.

They returned to the path and continued tracking. Mid-morning Marcus led them to a cave that was probably Ka Phor's residence, or one of them, at least. "There's prints all over this," said Marcus. "He's been here for some time, but he was also here yesterday evening." He put his hand over the firepit, testing the warmth of the embers. Barely there, but present. "I'd say he slept here."

"Then he will probably not return," suggested Neroon.

There was one way to make sure he wouldn't. Marcus fumbled through the rucksack for the towel he'd used yesterday, to dry himself off, and tucked it out of sight, near the mouth of the cave. "Now he certainly won't return," he said.

They kept walking. Neroon waited for Marcus' back to be turned to stifle his yawns but Marcus wasn't reassured. "I really would've rather you woken me," he said.

"I'll sleep during the hottest hours." Neroon looked up at the sky. "Roughly two hours from now," he supposed.
Yeah, thought Marcus, you'll sleep alright - poorly. "Tonight, I'm taking first watch. We're more effective, and I feel better knowing I'm not dragging you around."

Neroon waved a hand, dismissive. "This isn't as bad as it could have been. I would never have known that, if I'd slay you."

There was some silence as they came across a spent vial of poison for a blade. A thick brownish liquid was stuck fast to the tube, which Marcus poked at with a twig. This poison he thought he recognised - there were only a few kinds one could get without a licence and without his Shadow assistance, Ka Phor would find it difficult to maintain his earlier standards. The black poison he'd had when he'd fought Marcus was much faster acting. This one was free-running and purplish when it was fresh, and it took about ten hours for the first symptoms to appear, and it would take thirty hours after that for paralysis. This was the poison in the blades of the security team Gorrom had hired for his evening party - which meant this was what Ka Phor, who had stolen a uniform, was using now. Even if he managed to stick them, unless it nicked a vein, they'd have enough time to return to Zhoshesh Dorallo and procure an antidote. For this poison, they sold them over the counter in pharmacies.

"I shouldn't have left you there," said Neroon softly, and it took Marcus some time to remember what he referenced, what they had been talking about. The denn'shah, and its curious outcome.

"Well, I'm sure you had other priorities on the mind," Marcus decided. "Besides, it wasn't like you were totally covert about it. Showing up late at that ceremony made Lennier wonder what had happened to me."

Neroon glared. "Delenn's aide should not have gambled so foolhardily with your life!" he snarled.

"Again, that's sort of what Rangers do -"

"She has the authority to make that decision," argued Neroon, "no one else. Not her aides, not her friends, not her lovers, she alone."

"Is that why you stopped?" asked Marcus. "Because you finally realised that?"

For awhile Neroon did not reply. Marcus busied himself following fruit pits, footprints, and a mark in the soil that would've been urine (and from the ammonia smell of it Ka Phor had elected to dehydrate himself to avoid them - Neroon had been correct).

But finally... "It wasn't right," said Neroon. "I cannot explain it any better than that, I simply ... I knew somehow, that killing you would leave our caste worse off in the end. Consider, I walked into that situation swimming in dishonour, this would've drowned me in it."

"Certainly, but the context -"

"It wasn't about the context!" Neroon blurted. "It was about the fact that I looked in your eyes and you stared back at me - at death - and you were ready for it!" He stopped, folded his arms across his chest and glared. "And in that moment you showed more honour than I had seen in my people for some time. Than I had seen in myself. To be a warrior means honour, duty, and sacrifice. And that was sacrifice - a price paid for a goal achieved, and your goal had already been achieved - it was too late, I couldn't stop the ceremony, I had already failed in my own mission - so you were done, you'd stalled as long as you needed to, but you went the extra distance. Because you knew -"

"Because I knew you wouldn't stop," said Marcus. "Because I didn't think you'd stop."

"You thought I would pursue Delenn and kill her anyway, to ensure someone else be appointed
Entil'Zha, to ensure the Warrior Caste had a second chance.” He considered it a moment. Then he shook his head. "I do not know what I would have done. I probably would never have returned to Minbar."

Marcus frowned. "You've become an outcast?"

"I would have committed suicide." The cavalier way Neroon stated it had Marcus taken aback. "So. There would have been at least one death."

"Suicide," said Marcus, appalled. "Rather than fail in your mission?"

"Even if I could have achieved success and regained control of the Anla'shok for the Warrior Caste, with Delenn's death, I would have committed suicide rather than return to face anyone back home." He grimaced. "Shakiri probably suspected as such. Catch two fish with a single bait."

"He told you -?"

"He ordered me. To intercede in the ceremony. To stop it from taking place."

Marcus was beginning to see. "Then... you had really no choice." He kept walking, following the footprints and trampled grass.

"There's not much recourse when we've been given an order we don't like," replied Neroon, dogging his steps. "Follow it, or die. There are rituals to be undertaken should we follow it but at peril to our own souls - this is called the cha'dumwa, and it is important enough that we seek out the Religious Caste to lead us through its conducting. I of course did not complete such a ritual."

"Because you don't believe?"

"Because it's a triviality," grumbled Neroon. "Because it's one more way the Religious Caste obtains knowledge about our people and our thoughts and they use this information and knowledge as we use our weapons. One must disclose the order one dislikes to the Religious Caste - isn't it funny how all their rituals involve disclosing information. Because it's another meaningless ritual to make people feel better but it never does. I sat this ritual a few times in my life, I can tell you what it involves and how it is intended to work. The last time -"

He trailed off.

"The last time was at the end of the war with our people," supposed Marcus.

"Yes," said Neroon, "when I, like the full Warrior Caste, was ordered to cease hostilities. And I obeyed. Alyt Sineval of the Fire Wings, for example, did not, and committed suicide rather than follow the surrender order. That's what I should have done with Shakiri's orders."

"Out of curiosity... what were the orders, exactly?" said Marcus. He suspected he already knew.

"Shakiri sent me to regain control of the Anla'shok, at any cost necessary. He had me swear to those words. He was clear what he intended by them." Neroon laughed, derisive and caustic. "Once more he stops short of saying exactly what he means, relying on implication, so that he can later argue himself out of it, should he need."

"I thought you approved of the Anla'shok under Warrior Caste oversight," said Marcus. "Certainly you don't think the Religious Caste is well-equipped to handle them. Delenn aside, you hardly say a nice word about them." If it weren't for the fact that Marcus knew many Religious Caste Minbari, he'd think they were all crooks, to hear Neroon say it.
"That entirely depends on who would be Anla'shok Na," said Neroon. "Or, should someone be appointed to such a position, Entil'Zha. I believe now that Shakiri would have taken command of them himself. Or he would have appointed someone he trusted far more than me. But it would have spelled the end of the Anla'shok involvement, their likely disbandment, promotion of Warrior Caste membership and dismissal of all Worker Caste members. Likely dismissal of all Religious Caste members too, if Shakiri could muster that amount of leverage."

Marcus had not regretted challenging Neroon to denn'shah. Stopping him as best as he knew how. Finding something he couldn't simply walk away from, finding something that would keep him busy with a Human when he didn't even respect them, long enough for the right person to put herself in the right place at the right time. What Neroon was saying only reinforced his conviction. The ribs hardly even hurt anymore. This was worth it. This was even worth his death, had it come to it. Maybe everything with Will - with Arisia - had led to that moment. It was a nice thought, to think that being the last man standing was finally worth something. Though it confused him to no end that the universe didn't think it was worthy enough to follow through all the way. He shouldn't wonder why he lived, but he did. "And the Humans?" he asked.

"Oh, removed," said Neroon apologetically. "No question about it."

"You're almost regretful about the prospect," Marcus noted.

"He would not have discriminated," said Neroon. "In his dismissals. He would never have known you. He would never have known what a brilliant Anla'shok you make." Neroon's expression seemed almost sad. He didn't realise by half how he looked, did he? Marcus could get lost in those soulful dark eyes of his... He tore his concentration away and put it back into tracking. "You really do. And the Anla'shok would have suffered a terrible loss. Marcus -"

This time Neroon had reached out and taken Marcus by the arm. Marcus froze and turned back, expecting Neroon to let him go, but it took a moment for Neroon to drop his touch and during that full minute Neroon's touch was a firebrand around the muscles of his upper arm.

"I stopped because I saw you do what you did," said Neroon, "and in that moment you showed you were a better Minbari than I. You never held doubt about it. And until I met you neither did I. That's what sacrifice looked like and I know - I've sacrificed - but not like that. If I disliked the order Shakiri gave me, and I did, then I should not have followed it." He pursed his lips. "I will admit, I dislike Delenn. We are not friends. But I cannot but respect her. That he would stoop to have me swear to stop her by any means necessary - and imply openly the possibility of... of... I look back on that version of myself and I don't know how I followed through as far as I did. The correct decision was always clear."

"You would have killed yourself," said Marcus softly. If he'd been exactly as honourable as Marcus knew he could be, Neroon would've died. Something in Marcus seized, stricken by the thought alone. Maybe that's why he gets so mad when I'm careless about my life, thought Marcus, though he does the very same thing. He reached out, pressing Neroon's forearm before he even realised what he had done.

Neroon looked down at their contact and smiled, relaxed. "Yes, well," he said evasively. "A necessary sacrifice. Better to die with honour than live without. When you fell to your knees, bloody, you made the correct decision, the one a Minbari would make. The one I should have made. And you did not flinch."

 Neither had Neroon when he'd touched him. That was a first. He dropped his hand from Neroon's arm. "I'm surprised you don't think it that I'm flinging my life away uselessly," he mused, "you've said as much before."
Neroon shook his head. "It was your mission and you had already succeeded," he said. "At that point a casualty is acceptable. Favourable? Certainly not!"

Then Marcus wasn't the only one who had found some poetry in dying in denn'shah. And yet this was the man who had been in control of that judgement, and he'd ripped it away. "So you'd miss me if I offered myself, would you?"

"How can you wonder?" Neroon spat, indignant. "Of every one of your kind, you are a singular example." Marcus struggled to say anything. Alright, compliments was nice, but this was too much. What was Neroon saying with this? "You fool Human, have you not seen... the moment you slumped in the flyer and lost consciousness, I thought I'd lost you, I thought I'd miscalculated, because of your Human physique and nature. What I'd planned was no problem for a Minbari but you're not built like we are. And I knew this, but I failed to know precisely how much."

Too right about that. "I really think a singular example would be a little stronger physically," Marcus said. "You could pound me into the dirt with a single blow."

Neroon rolled his eyes. "Any idiot machine can lift deadweight. That isn't important, at a day's end. Do not talk to me like you weren't listening to Sech Durhan. He would've told you there is more to strength than physicality. That's what he meant when he distracted you and in that moment your opponent bested you. Listen to me: the last Chosen One of the Grey Council was named Jenimer. And he was perhaps a hundred and eighty, and he was frail - he had been frail his whole life, but when I knew him he was old and frail. He was one of the most iconic example of Religious Caste strength. And I know I disparage them. That is because the grand majority are no better or worse than the grand majority of warriors, than the grand majority of workers - common, necessary but common - and they have the gall to think themselves better. More enlightened."

Marcus had to agree. "They build the sense of humour around it," he said.

"Few are exceptional. Jenimer was one of these. For when on his deathbed he drew me closer and whispered in my ear his last decree: you must appoint Sinclair as Entil'Zha - I did it, as distasteful as I thought it was. I would never have not followed."

"Because it was his last decree," said Marcus. "Too auspicious not to."

"Because Jenimer was terrifying in ways you cannot imagine," said Neroon. "Ways I lack the words to describe." He snorted. "Suffice it to say I have little problem with violating post-mortem auspices."

"Eloquent, poetic Neroon, lost for words," remarked Marcus. "Now that is something."

"Jenimer was right, in the end." Neroon sighed. "Entil'Zha Sinclair was the right choice. When he left Minbar and did not return... Delenn never did tell anyone of us what happened to him... I suppose there was no Grey Council anymore to tell. But may she follow in his footsteps."

"Delenn'll make her own footsteps," said Marcus.

"That is precisely what I'm afraid of," Neroon said darkly.

He still thought she was a Religious Caste zealot? It struck Marcus then that a great deal could be answered for Neroon if he knew what precisely had happened to Sinclair.

"What I'm saying is, Entil'Zha Sinclair was right to allow Humans. To make you Anla'shok," said Neroon. He took a step closer. "Marcus, I don't say this as pittance. If we fought again, you'd win. There is a difference between force of strength and force of will. This is why I am proud to have you by my side. Prouder than I thought imaginable."
One should be proud of their mate, and that should be reciprocal, Marcus remembered.

You're not just a Human to me. Though I greatly wish you were...

When had Neroon begun thinking all of this? When he allowed Marcus to touch him, when he began allowing any of these conversations?

Marcus had already acknowledged that they made a good team but hadn't asked himself why. Why did this work so well?

This wasn't what Marcus knew of romance. What Marcus knew of romance, he'd read in books, and it was Don Quixote and Dulcinea and it wasn't a partnership like this was, it wasn't equals like this was, it was - it was what he had with Susan, wasn't it - it was lingering in delicious beautiful agony that your chosen one may live, it was inspiration, powerful and consuming, it wasn't -

It wasn't lying in bed aching to touch someone who was painstakingly real, someone who fucked up but whom you forgave, someone who you knew would have your back like the greatest ally, but who would challenge you like your lifelong adversary, someone who shared with you their soul or their heart or their mind or whatever you thought in your particular cosmology made them them until you knew all the parts of it, the beautiful and the disgraceful, someone who knew the rotten and sad parts of you too - romance was idolatry, not base carnality, it was divine, not fallible -

Wasn't it?

I am in love with him, he realised. And 'friends' was not even remotely an option, any longer.

This wasn't the honourable thing at all, for Neroon. This was literally the opposite -

That was why he was doing it. That's how, Marcus realised, that's how you know it's real, that you're not just going through the motions. One more item to cross off from a responsibility checklist.

Things Marcus was uniquely qualified for, not being Minbari -

You would see them, and you could immediately know: yes, I'll cast everything aside for them.

Neroon had told Marcus secrets he wouldn't dare breathe to another. Some of those secrets were even his own. Things about himself he'd cut people for knowing. But Marcus had escaped unscathed.

The silence had become too heavy. Neroon clearly realised he'd said something intimate, but he did not cover it up, or let his temper go. Odd that he was more comfortable letting words hang than letting himself be touched.

We pick our intimacies, thought Marcus. Perhaps I'll pick mine.

"So I take it I'm not all that bad, is that it," whispered Marcus, reeling.

"Hah!" Neroon was sarcastic. "You are more than not bad, and you know it, and now you are fishing for compliments, so I shall not bite."

"No," said Marcus. His heart was racing faster than it had been when they'd been in the flyer, holding hands. "No, I don't think it's compliments I'm fishing for. Not anymore."

"Well, then what?" Neroon asked, dismissive. "Name whatever you want, I'm sure I'll give it you anyway. I seem to let you get away with whatever you like."
"Alright," he said, "I shall. And if I'm wrong, be sure to let me down gently, I'm not sure my feeble Human heart could take it otherwise. Hidden strength or no. But understand this: I don't think I'm wrong."

The surprise and confusion on Neroon's face was nearly amusing - his heavy brow furrowed as he frowned in perplexion, just for a split second, because in that split second Marcus had stepped forward, leaned in, and covered Neroon's mouth with his own.

Warm lips. Softer and sweeter than they had any right to be.

Neroon's eyes widened, then fluttered closed. So Marcus tried for closer. He tilted his head to fit them better together and pressed himself to Neroon - solid, strong, and warm - with an arm around Neroon's waist. Neroon's weight nearly buckled, and he pitched forward, gasping. Marcus parted Neroon's lips further with his tongue and held him close enough to drink him in, close enough to feel him clasp against his body from chest to hip. Carefully he pressed deeper for the slightest taste of tongue - Minbari tongues were just the same as Human, horrifyingly familiar - and brushed their lips across each other as he moved and Neroon let him, as Neroon's fingers traced their way up his arms with a feather-light shaky touch, until -

Neroon took his shoulders in a strong grip and pushed him off.

He looked shocked. Distressed, panicked - terrified. Marcus shouldn't be surprised. This was a call-out on the subtle flirtation that was present, simmering, for days now. This was always what he'd been doing for the past week when Marcus got just a little too close and he wasn't sure that he liked it. Marcus only worked it out sooner than Neroon had, that was all.

Neroon did realise he was flirting, didn't he? Marcus spent how long in the company of how many Minbari during Ranger training? He knew what it looked like when they were interested. 'Interested' was days ago.

"I," began Neroon, stammering. He put a hand to his lips in disbelief. "I can't. I absolutely cannot, that, it's beyond -"

He backed away, two trembling paces, then turned and fled out of sight, into the forest.

So much for letting him down gently.

--

Marcus carried on without him. Ka Phor had become less cautious and the trail was rather easy to pick up; furthermore, the past day and a half Neroon had been watching everything Marcus was doing. (Everything, thought Marcus acidly, much as Neroon might like not to admit it.) Marcus was making little effort to hide his own trail. He'd see how much Neroon had learnt if he could find Marcus again.

After two hours, Neroon caught up with him. "Well," he said stiffly, announcing his return. He had evidently applied water to his skin because his neck was glistening in the sunlight. "We will not speak of that again." Oh, we won't, will we, thought Marcus. "My apologies that it took me so long, I - I left, to find water, and to bathe. There was a sudden flummoxing heat and my senses reeled. The weather. It was unrelated to the thing we are not speaking of."

Marcus snorted. "Are you well enough to finish this mission?" he said.

"If necessary, I shall seek out a healer when I return to Minbar," said Neroon. "Do not concern yourself with it."
"Trust me, I won't," Marcus snapped. "So is that what caused you to bolt like a frightened horse?"

There was a beat of silence. Marcus ignored Neroon's obvious offence and prodded on with the trail.

"I will pretend for your sake I did not hear that insult," said Neroon.

"Comparing you to an animal?"

"Implying I retreated out of fear," he said. "Fear is cowardice."

"Ah. What did you retreat out of, then?"

"That was strategic," said Neroon, ruffled, "I needed - to centre myself."

This ridiculous man. Marcus whirled about-face to fix him with a sharp glare. "Ever thought about what I needed?" he said. "I told you to let me down gently! You could've been kinder. Less selfish. Less self-centred."

Neroon would not meet his eyes. "That's true," he said, to the ground. "You have my apologies."

"And a fat lot of good those do," said Marcus. "Well, come on, we haven't got all day and there's mountains to cover."

Neroon frowned. "But it's zenith," he protested, "it's warm - we were going to have a short break -"

"No, I think we'll continue," said Marcus coldly. "We clearly wasted enough time with a sudden spell of bad weather."

"Anla'shok, please," began Neroon.

"I've already told you to call me Marcus," he exploded, "and you've been doing that for days. Don't back off now!"

"But I must," insisted Neroon, his voice plaintive. "You - you must understand, I think you do understand - Minbari do not do these things with other races. So. I apologise. I should not have - I should not have let things progress -"

"The way they already have?" Marcus finished.

Neroon had no words for a clever reply.

If he didn't want to, he would have caught on and let me know a lot earlier, thought Marcus. If he didn't want to, he wouldn't have let things progress at all. He wouldn't have let things begin. But he clearly did. And that was already done. There was no taking that back.

If Neroon was upset about anything, it was against himself, he was ashamed of himself. Marcus elected not to press the point. "Come on," said Marcus instead. "Ka Phor's gotten so sloppy, we can track him in broad daylight, so we may as well do so. Let's get moving."

Chapter End Notes

cha'dumwa is partially invention: 'cha' = ritual (canon, c.f. Nafak'cha, rebirth ceremony), 'dum'wa' = conflict (from jumpnow)
also, the kudos button is attached to a giant Rube Goldberg machine that will, through a series of complicated cogs, pulleys, and levers, activate a hand to *slap Neroon across the fucking face.* :D
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

A quick note: this is the 'let's have a spat about the Earth-Minbari war' chapter!

I don't intend to make a critical analysis about topics like e.g., whether the humans were hard enough done by the Minbari during the war or whether the Minbari are justified in their definition of honour to have done or intended what they did - I'm not interested in getting into that. Now is also a good time to draw attention to the new tag 'unreliable narrator': just because Marcus (and also Neroon lbr he's kinda the instigator) low-key wants to get into this and dredge up old angers doesn't mean that I, personally, want to have a serious discussion about war crimes and who did what during the war.

For my own personal take on this relationship, however, I did want to portray these two talking about this part of their past. imo it's clearly a sticking point to both characters, and I def feel like this fight is an elephant in the room for them aaaand I think they only get to the point of being in love by giving this up. So ... in essence.... it's a rebirth ceremony. (is everything a rebirth ceremony? IT SURE IS!)

If you're curious about what I added vs what I took from In The Beginning ofc you're most welcome to discuss, and if you think I did Earthforce or the Minbari dirty feel free to discuss that too! just please Be Excellent To Each Other

Neroon wasn't forthcoming with conversation at all throughout the day. More accurate to say he was purposefully silent, and Marcus didn't bother trying to engage.

This felt awkward. It felt bad. He knew there was a logical reason: they were gaining on Ka Phor, and they didn't want to be overheard, but that didn't stop it feeling terrible. This was not because of Ka Phor. This was because Marcus had kissed him, and now things were weird. Shouldn't've done that, he supposed.

Then he thought better of it. No, he was glad he had. So many things he hadn't done because he thought he should do something else. Because it was more responsible to do something else, to focus on something else. Whatever else can be said, thought Marcus, that was for me. And he hadn't sat there and been roundabout, asking about lovers, and waiting for Neroon to ask about his in return, so Marcus could describe him to his own face without confessing it was him, to gauge his reaction. Which was something Marcus had done in the past.

(Without success. He wasn't proud. Fair enough, it was a dishonest tactic. Another bad habit from Earthforce, being so distrustful. He'd had so few romantic attachments that he preferred to think he'd waited for a reason, instead of the truth, which was that he was too busy or too angry or after years of celibacy just plain dreadful at getting into them.)

In the late afternoon, they came across another cave. "He was here earlier today," said Marcus, fingering a discarded fruit pit and testing the moisture, "I'd say in the morning." Probably around the time Marcus kissed Neroon. He couldn't stop thinking about it, honestly.

"He still has not realised we are in pursuit," said Neroon. "He eats a lot."
"Drazi tend to," said Marcus.

"We could remain here until the evening, to see whether he will return." There was a hopeful note in Neroon's voice. Daft fool was exhausted, no doubt. Marcus had been working him hard.

Well, it was his own idiocy in letting Marcus sleep the night through at his own expense. Marcus refused to feel touched by the gesture. Noble idiocy was still idiocy. (Alright, more honestly: he was sore with Neroon after his disastrous reaction to the kiss, and this was a little bit punishment.) "No. We should keep hunting for another cave," he argued.

Neroon sighed. "Suppose there is no other cave."

"You really think he's been about all this time in the mountains and he hasn't got at least three lairs?"

"You don't know that. He could have three, he could have twenty. Is your plan really to ambush him in one of the caves? Supposing he has twenty, the only option is to track him down, not wait for him and set a trap. Unless you intend to set twenty traps."

"He'll be able to sense us coming," said Marcus. "He'll smell us."

"He'll smell you," said Neroon.

"Excuse me," retorted Marcus, "I'll have you know that as hiking trips go, I've been extremely clean and hygenic - I could have stopped bathing and just let myself marinate in my own Human funk or something equally revolting, but no, I do these things to protect your careful Minbari sensibilities - not that you ever grant me credit -"

"I meant only that Minbari do not leave much of a scent trace," said Neroon, in a conciliatory tone. "I was not - for once, Anla'shok, that was not intended to be an insult."

"Well, spare me from your intentions," grumbled Marcus. "How?"

"How... what?"

"How don't you have scent?" Every other animal did.

"It's the skin," Neroon explained. "No oil glands exposed to air, no pheromone release, no esters, no scent. Simply chemistry."

Marcus scowled. "Sometimes I get so sick of your perfection," he muttered, "the lot of you, walking around like you don't stink. Lies, I could smell you just fine when I was on your shoulder yesterday evening, you didn't reek but you smelled noticeably different. Alien. Whatever that was, Ka Phor can pick up on, as long as he's close enough -"

Neroon was aghast.

"Oh, what," said Marcus, "because I was on your shoulder? Well, you let me, mate. You've been letting me do all sorts of things. And you could've said no. A handful of no's at any time. I didn't hear a single one."

"Just... just drop it," said Neroon, tired. "Please."

"Fine," said Marcus. "Fine."

There was a long silence. "So what shall we do about the caves, then," asked Neroon.
"This is time he's taking to get away from us," Marcus replied. "We should pursue him. I will bet you anything we find another cave before nightfall."

Neroon nodded. "Very well."

Lovely. If he'd known it was that easy to get Neroon to agree with everything he said, he'd've kissed him ages ago!

They found *two* caves before nightfall. "He left this second one about six hours ago," said Marcus. "It's like he's visiting them in sequence..."

"Are you marking these on the map?" asked Neroon.

"Not yet. But that's a good idea."

Neroon gestured for the rucksack. Marcus handed it over and he dug inside for the map, which he laid flat on the ground and bent down, kneeling over it. Without a writing utensil, he used pebbles to mark the caves. The four caves they had found made a clear path through to the other side of the mountain range.

"He's not just wandering, trying to lose us after all," said Marcus, squatting down to see properly. "He's headed for the villages."

"Phinti, in particular," said Neroon. "Should he continue on his course, that is. Perhaps he will not."

"Phinti's the one that had the worst riot," said Marcus.

"But it is closest. The other two towns are leagues off. If he had wanted to get to one of those, surely he would have taken the spinner."

But instead he ditched it in the forest. Marcus thought a moment. "He's headed there to pick up another spinner, I'll wager," he said. "He'll arrive at nightfall when there's fewest people around. He's going to steal it."

"Why?"

"Because," said Marcus, "that's Green territory, and it's hostile to Purples. They wouldn't sell him anything."

Neroon squinted, thinking. "Would they sell *us* something?"

"They might. Why?"

"Because we have only pikes. if we want to get him -"

"We can disarm him without blades," said Marcus.

"Can we? Surely he's stolen weapons."

"He only has the blade he stole when he was pretending to be security for Gorrom's party. And he's spent his poison for it - he'll need to procure another vial."

"He could have stolen another already. Not to mention, those blades are as deadly without poison, if he aims them well."

Marcus smirked and hit Neroon playfully on the shoulder. "Well, that's what you're for, bodyguard."
"I have a single glove with three crystal knives the size of my thumb," protested Neroon, "I left the other on the station. I hardly consider that properly armed."

"You can handle a single Drazi. You took down a Shadow with nothing but that pike."

"Only because I was lucky!" said Neroon. "It did not expect me to do what I did. I did not expect to do what I did. I ... was not really thinking clearly at the time. In any case. They have some sort of neck armour that they engage. Very quickly you'll lose the element of surprise. When I tried with the crystal blades, they - they just snapped."

"But they penetrated the armour," said Marcus.

"Because I was quick and I struck before it fully engaged its defences." Neroon sat back on his heels. "Their necks are thin - they evolved something to combat a natural weakness. Or perhaps they interfered with themselves. Another secret of the Grey Council. Information a thousand years old, from the last Shadow War. All we could discover about their physiology, and that may be outdated."

Useful. Probably something Delenn already knew. "You really studied those secret files, didn't you," said Marcus. He sat down across from Neroon. Nightfall already, and Ka Phor had passed on - they may as well stay here.

"For years the Council kept a vast collection of information from our people," Neroon explained. "I was told, as we all were, that it was for our benefit. That we were to know exactly what we needed, and no more." He grimaced. "That never satisfied me."

"Natural curiosity?"

"Yes," said Neroon, "and no. Power," he admitted. "The Religious Caste uses information like weapons. I sought to arm myself. At any cost. Even if they didn't think me worthy of it. I know there is power in secrecy. That ... some things have to be kept locked away, to maintain that power. I did not want them locked away from me."

"That's not very Minbari of you," chirped Marcus.

"Well, we have already established that I am not a very good Minbari," said Neroon bitingly.

"Because you shouldn't've followed Shakiri's orders," said Marcus.

Neroon shook his head. "No, that's not why," he murmured. Because I kissed you, thought Marcus, and you let me, and you've been letting me take far more than you should have.

If only Neroon would put it together that there was a reason he was letting Marcus at him, that there was a reason he'd allowed his defences to slide into complacency so Marcus could slip past them.

Marcus sighed. "I know what happened to Sinclair," he said. "I've been sworn not to tell, but... but you should know it, too."

"Why you?"

"It's ... complicated." To say the least! "If you remember... there was another mission, where he left, while he was still stationed on Minbar. He took two other Rangers with him. Myself and -"

"Anla'shok Sakai," supplied Neroon. "Yes, I remember her. She glared at me throughout the entirety of Sinclair's Entil'Zha proclamation ceremony."
"You did goad her fiancé into drinking poison," said Marcus.

"It was tradition!" he protested. He stopped, processing. "They were engaged?"

"They were," said Marcus. "I came back. So did Sinclair. Catherine... didn't."

Neroon frowned. "Why would he have planned a mission so dangerous and attend it himself?"

"It had to be done by us," said Marcus, "because -"

No. First, he'd have to tell Neroon about the time rift. Then about the Great Machine in Epsilon 3. Draal. Zathras. The fact that Babylon 4 jumped through time, twice. The fact that Sinclair remained on Babylon 4 and took it the second time, back a thousand years, to Minbar, where he helped them win their war. The fact that the Vorlons gave him a triluminary device - one that the Minbari considered sacred, one that was embedded in the very sceptre of their Chosen One, Leader of the Grey Council, one that Neroon himself would have worked under - which was specifically built for Sinclair so he could become Minbari, call himself Valen, and lead their armies.

Marcus swallowed. "Alright. I'm telling you everything. But you'd better sit down."

"I am sitting," said Neroon, who was kneeling.

"No, get comfortable. And - and promise me you won't get upset."

Warily, Neroon unfolded his legs and sat, cross-legged.

"I mean it," said Marcus.

"Very well," said Neroon. He leaned forward, because apparently 'curiosity killed the cat' wasn't something Neroon had ever cared about in his life. "I promise."

Marcus began.

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So much for promises.

"What lunacy," hissed Neroon, disgusted. "One of our greatest legends. A Human. You expect me to believe this -"

"I could show you proof," said Marcus. "If we were back at Babylon 5, I'd ask the caretaker of the Great Machine - reminder, by the way, that Draal's Minbari himself, so perhaps you'll believe him where you won't believe this dishonourable Human - and he could tell you how he himself kept the rift in time open in sector 14 so the fourth Earth station could travel through it and win the first Shadow War for the Minbari. Sinclair knew you wouldn't trust him so he transformed himself -"

"Knew?" said Neroon. "He knew because it had already happened! That's not knowledge, and it's sure as the stars not prophecy -"

Marcus held up his hands. "Look, I don't pretend to understand the causality myself -"

"Do you not realise how the very fabric of Minbari society was altered by him - and now you tell me it is because of an interloper? When I return to Tinarel," said Neroon angrily, "I shall appreciate the old market and its chaotic, pre-Valen ways that much more. At least that was ours!"

"Sinclair wasn't sitting on his hands the time he spent on Minbar! He took that time to study your
people, he didn't rob you of anything so much as he gave it back -"

"I'm glad the Grey Council was dissolved!" blurted Neroon. "If she hadn't done it, I would do it myself. Yet another purportedly noble Valennic institution, brought to us by the Earthers!"

Was it really so wrong that Human and Minbari were so thoroughly interwoven? Didn't Neroon see the symmetry in it? Neroon had come to trust Marcus, to befriend Marcus, he thought at least one Human was honourable - couldn't there be more? That is, no doubt he'd thought that up until Marcus had gone and violated all notion of honour by kissing him. Perhaps that they were of the same heart - which Neroon himself admitted! - was a bit of trivia to be academically studied and commented about but never acted upon. How dare Marcus perceive that in his own Human way, apparently! How dare he fall in love!

"Well, I'm sorry he had to transform his entire body before you would even accept hearing him out, when you were losing a war anyway," said Marcus tightly. "When nothing had happened to his mind, his heart, whatever there is for a soul that we have -"

"Souls!" thundered Neroon. "Don't speak to me of souls when our religious rulers bade us stop fighting because -"

"- because they thought we had Minbari souls, and Delenn's transformation closes the circle, yes, I know -"

"- because they conjured up an explanation they liked about a cosmology they insisted upon and cherry-picked proof out of two people's causal tampering and shared insanity and called it prophecy and spoke of souls when they knew it was historical fact -" Neroon had gotten to his feet and was pacing around, and in his black fatigues he reminded Marcus of a skulking panther - "and that's another thing, as they themselves love to say, the quality of Minbari souls began to diminish at the same time as Valen's era. So we were better when we were killing each other? Were we more ourselves when we were fighting to the death? Not that the Religious Caste often did such a thing, oh no - the blood spilled was Warrior, ten times out of eleven -"

They were getting far too loud. Their voices would carry... "Look, you promised you wouldn't get upset, and now you're fuming," said Marcus, soothing, "I understand, but it doesn't absolve you from the truth -"

"No, I am livid with the absurd secret-keeping done by the Religious Caste -"

"You've already said Entil'Zha Sinclair was right for the job," he insisted. "Now you've a reason why! You were correct about him. Whatever it is you sensed, you were correct! You've known for decades the Religious Caste have skeletons in their closet to keep their position in society, that should no longer surprise you. That they morphed this whole thing to suit their needs doesn't surprise you, either. Don't take it out on them when it's me you're angry at." Marcus too got to his feet. "You want to be angry, well, have at me."

"What in the glittering heavens have you done?" cried Neroon.

"I kissed you!" said Marcus.

The sharp intake of breath was loud in the empty cave. "Stop," gasped Neroon, "why must you keep bringing it up -"

"I crossed a line," said Marcus. Even though he was positive he didn't, and Neroon's anger was just defence mechanism, but at this point Marcus was beginning to question his own sense of falling in
love anyway. How could he possibly have thought what he did? "Alright? I was wrong." He
snorted. "Don't worry, it won't happen again," he added nastily.

"Your species is ever crossing our lines," said Neroon. "You did it during the war and you do it even
now."

"How dare you speak to me about the war!" yelled Marcus. "The war where you nearly
exterminated our kind!"

"What a pity we stopped!" shouted Neroon.

"You don't mean that," said Marcus. "You don't mean that anymore. Our lines - my lines - are further
in than yours, but we still have them, and we absolutely loathe having to cross them. There lies
our dishonour."

"Then you have had to cross them," sneered Neroon. "And you have done so."

"I was ordered to," Marcus bit out. "So I know what that's like. To go beyond the limits of your own
personal honour. Even though you think we don't even have any."

"I did not say that," said Neroon. "Now you are putting words in my mouth -"

"But you have, before, on multiple occasions, said exactly that!" Marcus too was still mad about the
kiss, and Neroon's reaction, and was taking it out on Neroon. Which was unfair. He knew this. But
he was too angry to give a shit.

This anger, he remembered, will warm me, but leave me cold in my grave. I have to pull back -

"That was different," said Neroon, "I didn't know you then!"

He couldn't.

It's not anger, he realised, it's sodding heartbreak.

"You don't know me now!" Marcus bellowed. "How am I ever to know your opinion's changed! It's
not like you do something like, oh, talk to me, that would be mad. -"

"I have talked to you more than I have talked to any other Human in this universe," shouted Neroon.

"Yes, and aren't I lucky," he sneered. "You talk to me about awful things that the Grey Council
hides, you talk to me of Minbari in a generality. I meant about your feelings, and you know it. For
why else are we dancing around the topic that Shall Not Be Named?"

"What are your lines, then?" asked Neroon. "What would you not do?"

He doesn't even care, thought Marcus. Neroon was only stalling and trying to distract him from
getting any closure because he didn't want to talk about the emotions he had for a Human. "There's
loads of things I wouldn't do," he said anyway. He thought about it. "Biological weapons. Chemical.
Nuclear - unless it's space warfare, but arms against another warring vessel is different. Mass drivers,
planet killers - never. I wouldn't go after civilians. That is - it would depend if our intelligence
suggested there were guerrilla tactics. That'd be a case-by-case basis. And - that's what intelligence is
for, anyway, to figure out who're the combatants. I wouldn't keep engaging after someone
surrendered."

"Well," said Neroon stiffly, "those are acceptable."
"You kept coming after we surrendered," said Marcus.

"You fired on a non-engaging vessel!"

"That was an accident!"

"Indeed, and according to our intelligence you tried to cover up your 'accident'!" Neroon glared. "It was not until you realised you were up against a stronger foe - for your people thought themselves overly capable - that you began to try and placate us. If we had been weaker - perhaps one of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, your former allies? - would you have continued in your deception? What other things could your people be capable of?"

"Is that why your lot went after our civilians?" said Marcus.

"They were forcing civilians to fight!" shouted Neroon.

"What d'you - you mean the conscription?"

"Dress it up with a fancy name, it's still dishonourable. Those who are in our Warrior Caste are there because they want to be. One shouldn't be forced to fight! That's not a calling."

"Well, as someone who was, I can't say I disagree," Marcus spat.

Neroon stopped in his tracks. He frowned, and his eyes widened. "You ...?"

"They took everybody above a certain age and enlisted us. I was above the threshold. It was that simple." Marcus shrugged. "Do the maths, if you like."

"You were forced to fight," Neroon repeated, numb. He shook his head in disbelief. "But - but you're a natural, you fight with honour -"

But you're like me, Marcus heard. No, he thought, I was made like you.

"Within a certain amount, we were allowed to go where we wanted to, within the armed forces," he said. "For example, I wanted to learn to fly, and they did teach me - quite well, in fact - but they thought I was a better intelligence asset and nothing I said would change their minds on that. So I was no fighter pilot, I was intelligence."

"You would not even have joined had it not been mandatory," Neroon realised.

"Knowing what I know now? No, I wouldn't've! But there's much we didn't know about the war, about you. Hindsight's twenty-twenty, and all that. You know, I respect that about the Minbari. That you are where you are because you must really want to be there, and there are no take-backs. I wish it were like that for us. I wish it so badly, you don't even know how much. Sometimes we did things because we were told. And it didn't matter whether we agree with them, because we served." And he wasn't only talking about his service in the war, either.

Neroon swallowed, tightly. "And what sort of things did you do, because you were told, not because you agreed with them?"

"Oh, I learned it all somewhere," said Marcus acerbically. "What to find out, how to pluck information from people, who to give it to. How to track targets. What happens to the targets afterwards." He huffed. "People - not targets, I should say. People. But you wouldn't even open a line of communication until after the war, so you really were targets then! On one of our colonies, I tracked a landed camp of Night Walkers and mapped their position. I took out the comms array, I
overloaded their scanners to blind them from your ships, so they couldn't call for help and you couldn't rescue them. Then I tagged their explosives and I remotely detonated them, before they could do... whatever they were planning on doing to the civilians."

Marcus stepped closer to Neroon. Neroon, to his credit, stood his ground and did not flinch. "I saw the pictures of the aftermath," said Marcus. "They'd helpfully encircled the bodies in red. Fifty-nine, that they could identify. I don't know what they did with the bodies."

"A regiment holds three hundred," snarled Neroon.

"One example of many. You could ask me, if you like, how many anti-aircraft artillery units I set up, how many were successful! I'm not saying this because I want to compare numbers - it isn't pretty, and I'm not proud. Not that that helps. Those people are still dead, and pity won't bring them back. And I didn't regret what I did then. I hated it, that's true, and in light of what we know of your people now - in light of whatever I feel for you - I do wish it hadn't had to happen. But it did, and why? Because those were my orders, I was told to do it. Because you were killing us off without telling us why - did you know we didn't know? I had to find out about your fallen leader through the grapevine -."

"Did you interrogate my people?" Neroon said. "Did you assault them personally?"

"That was our soldiers, I'd imagine," said Marcus. "With my methods, you never saw me coming."

"But you knew of it," snapped Neroon. "You knew of the torture."

He'd heard rumours. He hadn't participated, but neither had he regretted any information he'd used that had come from such a source. More than once, it had saved his life. And if someone had struck a Minbari in questioning, he wasn't sorry. Not back then. "We never had any information," he said instead. "We didn't even know who you were. Were those Night Walkers planting explosives? That's what I was told. Seemed logical. Knowing what I know now of the Drala Fi and what great dishonour you lot thought that was, I start to wonder. But then I also wonder what they were doing with explosives in the first place, and you never called us to confirm or disprove our speculations about your grand plans for our civilian population. And yet you knew enough of us to figure out which were the military bases early on in the war! So I suppose that's always how it works, isn't it? Forcing obeisance through withholding information. Shouting about a clean war after it's already gone past the point of no return. If we knew more - if you knew or cared that we were people - we might not be so willing to do everything they told us. That's one of the reasons I don't mind working for Delenn. Or Sinclair, for that matter."

"Delenn absolutely withholds information," spat Neroon. "And then she touts it as religious prophecy and demands people believe."

"You're right, she does that. But she also values life - Sinclair, too, valued life; you see, Delenn gets it from Valen himself! And that's all life - not Minbari lives versus Human lives. So if they were to send me out to take someone out, I can rest assured that person must really deserve it. No less grisly, but it must be necessary. I'm not just doing some higher-up's dirty work. If they sent me to do something - it must need doing. Even if that spells my death. But I can trust them, Neroon! The thing about the chain of command, especially in Earthforce, is you have to believe that the person who is issuing you orders is issuing just orders, you have to trust them to put a value on life, not to see privates as cannon fodder, and I don't trust Earthforce - not because I didn't think it was a righteous thing to fight your people. I did - I don't question that. You'd given us no indication you were ever going to stop so it was foolhardy valiance that drew us out to make you fight for every last inch instead of rolling over and I'm proud we did.
"But standards do slide, especially when it's not looking so good, when one side gets desperate, and by midway through the war it was dire, and we were desperate - around about midway through is when I was conscripted - well, you can put two and two together. You're many things, but a fool isn't one of them. I'm sure by your definition of dishonour I've done many a dishonourable thing. Am I sorry? I don't know. Do I regret it? Probably not! Did I hate every minute? Absolutely! So how's all that make you feel?" He snorted. "Don't bother answering - I know you won't."

Neroon was curiously silent.

"Anyway, I know how you hate my prattle," said Marcus.

"I have to know," said Neroon softly. "Because you have alluded to it - the things that you did -"

Oh, he had to, did he? What made him think he had the right to demand information now? "I never saw action," said Marcus, "not the way some did. I wasn't a fighter pilot, I wasn't on front lines, facing you. I was the one running around behind you, slicing at your ankles."

"There was a colony we received information about, in regards weapons development," Neroon began. "We did not know the nature of the weapons. A full three regiments were dispatched, and then silence. Now you said - standards slide when it is not looking so good." He glared. "That is precisely how Branmer had described it." He grew visibly angrier, his face contorted with rage in all its unpleasant angles. "Did you know anything, or carry any information, about a colony your people named Beta II?"

Marcus shook his head. "That one doesn't ring a bell," he said. Besides it being the one Gorrom had mentioned. Thousands of humans slain in one fell swoop, he'd said... "It wasn't a military colony, was it," guessed Marcus. "You took out civilians, didn't you. Women and children, was it?"

"They were no civilians," said Neroon. "Perhaps once they were. But they, too, had been conscripted."

"Were they in uniform?" asked Marcus, his temper rising again, "were they marching, were they trained?"

"They took those regiments for biological experimentation," Neroon shot back. "A gas - a nerve agent - a virus, maybe. Your people were looking for anything that would wipe us out."

"Your people began that war looking to wipe us out!" said Marcus.

"Do you deny it, then, the dishonour of such a tactic? You said it yourself, biological weapons -"

"I don't think anyone deserves to be wiped out!" he cried. "Not your people, not ours. Not over your definition of dishonour. Which helpfully you didn't even define for us until after you were done killing us."

There was some silence. They stood there in the near dark, glaring each other into oblivion. If looks could kill, thought Marcus, we'd be three apiece on each other's tallies.

"Well," he said, at last, "go on and tell me about it, then."

Neroon looked disgusted. "You cannot really want to know."

"It's your history," said Marcus. "And mine. I'd rather know what was done and buried and kept secret. And we're already angry with each other. So let's finish what we started."
"I don't want to hate you," said Neroon.

"Whyever not?" Marcus threw his hands wide. "You've only been shouting at me the last half hour, I'm sure Ka Phor knows exactly where we are through the volume alone - just get it out of your system -"

"Because you're too important for me," said Neroon angrily. "And I don't know when that happened, and I am genuinely upset that it happened."

"Because I'm a Human," Marcus retorted. "And unlike Sinclair, I'll never not be a Human. And you can't cope with that."

Neroon said nothing. There was more silence. Then:

"They were Moon Shields, that your people took," Neroon began. His voice was calm, measured. "For their research. When we hadn't heard from them in too long, I volunteered reconnaissance. This was after the destruction of the Drala Fi - our people were doing well in the war despite it. Yours were not. On that we agree. Although... perhaps you underestimate the degree to which your desperate tactics staggered us. I found the colony, took a smaller team to infiltrate and investigate. There we found our people - in parts."

Marcus stayed silent. He'd guessed about this, but he'd known nothing for certain. And if he had known... he didn't know what he would have done. If there was anything to be done. While three regiments were being butchered, they were slaughtering countless more Humans. Did that justify it? It didn't now, now that Marcus had made friends with so many Minbari - and yes, Neroon included - but would it have justified it then? Lines had already been crossed, and the honourable war - so suggested Earthforce - was the one you won.

"That was the last time I saw Hedronn of the Moon Shields," said Neroon wistfully. Of course it had to be this personal, thought Marcus. Well. At least now he knew why Neroon had had such difficulty reconciling the post-war vision of Humanity with his experiences. "Strapped to a table, his... his skin... and for all his wondrous grace in nilbok'cha... well, he would never dance again." Neroon was partially lost in the recollection, though his pained tone suggested no outright bitterness. It had happened; there was no changing it. "And he looked up at me, and he smiled, beatific, and said, 'finally, death has come'."

Neroon gave a bittersweet smile. "You have probably surmised the reason for our uniforms," he added. "Why warriors wear black, and only black. What it signifies. We take our oaths, and after that point we are already dead. Thus do we serve - anything else is time borrowed from the grace of the universe. And there I stood in front of him, a spectre, and I held his life."

"Which is why," Neroon said, "leave no man behind is not something with which the Warrior Caste is familiar. It was not protocol to offer to save him. But I tried to tell him that we could. Hedronn held up his useless, twisted hands and chuckled - what was the point, he said, he couldn't wield a pike. Instead, everyone of those regiments volunteered - they asked - for one last task: to hold the charges, to wait for our signal until after we had left, and detonate. We watched the explosions from the skies, and from the skies we obliterated the facility, and it nearly satisfied me."

"None of the researchers escaped," he continued. "We made sure of that. We hunted them down. No mercy. In the final calculation, I was told there were some four thousand to add to my tally. The remainder were from ships, for once the Ingata became the flagship after the destruction of the Drala Fi, she hunted and pursued with alacrity."
He said no more.

"Why did you tell me this?" asked Marcus at last. This sounded like something he'd ruminated over, a splinter dug under his skin. Wasn't he sore? He'd selected his words, too. He could've described it far more viscerally. Neroon knew how to use his words and his voice like a weapon. But he'd pulled his punches here.

Was he finally done with fighting, then?

"I had to tell you," said Neroon. "You had to know." Then he breathed in deeply, and let it go.

This was what Delenn meant when she said rebirth ceremonies could be helpful, Marcus realised. This was part secret, part burden, and he'd been carrying it a long time.

"I told Shai Alyt Branmer what we found," Neroon added, and his voice had already begun to pick up more of its former strength, as though it had already become easier to say, "and he assured me he would pass on the knowledge to the Grey Council. I knew then in my heart, we would fight until we had destroyed your people. No Warrior would let this escape. And, understand this, Marcus, I was glad of the prospect."

"Did you know we weren't all like that?" he asked. "Did you ever wonder whether some of the scientists were there under duress?" Marcus thought of Stephen, who said he was once ordered to give over his notes on Minbari biology, notes he had collected through early autopsies, and who destroyed the data. Stephen had had his suspicions what they'd use it for. Stephen was usually right about these things. But Stephen had been senior enough to refuse without court-martial. Not everyone was, and some of them might have shared Stephen's moral principles, but been unable to refuse.

"It would not have mattered then if I did," Neroon replied. "Humans had the capacity. I thought that was enough. And then we were told to stop. Which surprised me, given what I knew of you, that any warrior - including the Warrior Caste Satai - would agree to such a thing. So I asked Branmer whether he told the Council, and he said to my face that he had. But when I joined the Council, and I had access to all their files, and all their secrets, and I did the research... I found no record of what I saw on Beta II, simply that we had destroyed it. The Moon Shields were declared killed in that action. In his own record as Shai Alyt, which I later went through much more carefully, Branmer had written that there was precedent, that we were lenient once with such... experimentations, with first contact situations, and in the light of these, the Shai Alyt had then ruled against action. Upon that basis was Branmer's justification.

"And I thought it a weak defence, until I learned of Alyt-nali Shakiri's research interests," he said. "This is one of the strongest reasons why I have been set against Shakiri since the very start. Not because he allies with the ancient enemy - that, I did not know until very recently. Not because he is Shai Alyt and I am not. I am above such petty jealousies. But because during the war, he too enabled the development of terrible weapons with the Dilgar warmaster Jha'dur." Neroon winced. "Another Grey Council secret."

You're all hypocrites, thought Marcus. Maybe that was a prerequisite for sentience. But then, how dare the Minbari pretend they were different. He didn't say it. The fight had largely left him, now.

"And so for some time now, I have known that... both our species have the capacity," said Neroon. "And I would love to say that we have it because Valen was always Human. That it was your corruption. That the theft of Minbari souls by Human agents has enabled this, that you're why the quality of Minbari souls is diminishing. Indeed, many Minbari might wish to say precisely this. Choosing to remain superior at the expense of a spurious truth. Is it not easier?"
Neroon shook his head. "But I don't believe in souls," he said. "And I won't warp my cosmology to fit the facts, when the facts come first."

Another beat of silence passed. There was nothing worthwhile to say. Perhaps there was nothing that could be said. Or perhaps there was nothing that needed to be said, for Marcus looked over at Neroon and Neroon held his gaze with a tired expression, until he smiled, weak and weary, but genuine.

"It is a futile endeavour," Neroon said at last, "to fight with you about these things. Equally futile, to deny the inevitable." He sighed. "But you understand better why I must return to Minbar, yes?"

"Neroon," said Marcus, "you've honoured me with your confidence before, I know, but this - this was something more..." And yet he couldn't bring himself to say the words 'thank you'. This was trust, no mistake about it - Neroon had trusted no other being in the universe with this. But a row like this wasn't something to be grateful for. Marcus was tired, he was depressed, he was resentful that Neroon had needed to unburden himself and in so doing heap weight on Marcus. The least Marcus could do was heap it back.

There was a rather obvious counterweight. What Delenn wanted him to give up for his rebirth ceremony.

But if he did that, he'd be trusting Neroon where he didn't trust Delenn.

Neroon looked back at him. "You are worthy of it," he said gently. "Know, however, that I do not tell you this to absolve myself, for anything I did. I do not seek absolution for my part in our war. I would do it again."

"I know," said Marcus. "And - my tally's far less than yours, but likewise." He held Neroon's gaze, and it was an uneasy feeling, not to break contact, but it felt necessary. "We were at war. We're not at war anymore. Not with each other."

"But we have planted mines in each other's pasts," said Neroon. "And they will not be easy to get beyond."

"Nothing easy's worth doing," said Marcus. "You're over-exhausted. Take four hours. I've got first watch."

Neroon nodded. He sat back against the wall of the cave, found a decent angle, and curled up. Within moments he was asleep, and Marcus was alone.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took Marcus fifteen minutes to decide on lighting a fire. It had to be a small one - he could only find small pieces of wood around the mouth of the cave - but a fire nonetheless. Couldn't hurt. Probably, Ka Phor already knew where they were from the fight. And probably, Neroon was still sore at him. Dangerous to cuddle close. Neroon was not someone you cuddled, anyway. He'd said it himself, those sharp edges of his didn't make for a nice resting place.

Too true it was. He'd already gotten too close, and was cut for his troubles. Still stung after everything Neroon had said, Marcus felt he'd rather take his chances with the flames.

Whatever one could say about whether or not either side had really been crossing lines, given the context of the conflict - and whether one were talking Minbari lines or Human lines - was a mess Marcus didn't particularly like dwelling on for long - it soured his whole day, and it made his present work in a Minbari organisation difficult. Neroon had navigated it better than Marcus had thought he would. But it was one thing to finally forgive Humanity for its perceived dishonours - that was a long time in coming, anyway. It was another thing to court a Human, or let one court you, after less than a month of being around him. In fact, it had hardly been two weeks.

Marcus was a fool, to have done what he did. To have thought he was in love with him, to have thought he could be in love with him. The more Marcus ruminated, the stranger it became. I can't believe I kissed him, he began to think. I can't believe I actually touched my mouth to his. I can't believe I held him the way I did. Whatever had possessed him to do such a thing?

He could nearly laugh. Outside of Captain Sheridan (possibly), he was the only Human he knew who'd kissed a Minbari. Humans weren't as indiscriminate as some races, but Neroon was right about one thing - Minbari didn't. Or if they did, they were very, very quiet about it.

No, it was best to love someone from afar, knowing it would never be returned. Someone iconic, someone unobtainable, someone safe. Marcus was a fool to think love was anything but! You couldn't date a figurehead. And he didn't wait his whole life for someone like Neroon - not after fighting a war against Minbari, seeing his friends die at Minbari hands! He waited his whole life for someone like Susan.

Susan was special. Susan was beautiful, she was glorious, monumental. She represented something higher, nobler. A perfect, pure, true love, and Marcus could vow to support her in all things as long as he lived.

Susan would never return his feelings.

But then again, Marcus was nothing beautiful, Marcus was not glorious or monumental, Marcus was simply one spy - one Ranger - one among many. A cog in the system. And the fulcrum didn't pay any particular attention to one specific cog. She was at the centre of all things, where he'd placed her, (and why not?) and he was lucky to be on the poster.

Maybe this was all for the better. They shouldn't do anything. Since Minbari didn't, knowledge that a Minbari ever did would ruin him - and they couldn't afford that. Marcus couldn't. Neroon certainly couldn't! I shouldn't've kissed him, he thought again. Freak occurrence. L'appel du vide. An obvious anomaly. Maybe it was all for the best that Neroon had reacted the way he did, that they'd had this
row and this fallout. Maybe it was a sign from the universe that Marcus shouldn't carry on this way, that Marcus ought to move on. But Marcus didn't really believe in signs from the universe.

Yet the more he thought about it, the more he began to believe it. And it was meaningful that it turned out like this.

It was better this way. It really was.

When Neroon awoke a few hours later, he spotted the fire first. He sat bolt upright. "What were you thinking?" he said.

"That I was tired of freezing my bollocks off," Marcus shot back.

"I was right here the whole time," retorted Neroon.

Marcus looked at him like he had grown a second head out of that massive bonecrest. Eventually, Neroon grew embarrassed, when Marcus wasn't forthcoming and it fell to him to talk of it. "Well," he said, a little strained. "We attract less attention when we do not build fires. And... you know very well by now that a Minbari's basal temperature exceeds that of a Human's. I know you know it."

"Cover's blown anyway," argued Marcus. "Thought I might as well make myself comfortable."

"I see," said Neroon tightly. "So I have made you uncomfortable."

Marcus threw him a dirty look. "I didn't mean that! I just assumed you wouldn't want to -"

"How dare you assume!" Neroon said.

"Why would you want to?"

"Why would I not?" Neroon replied, matter-of-fact. And for a moment it threw Marcus for a loop, until Neroon finished his thought. "We complete this mission faster when we are both well-rested."

He rolled his eyes. "Right, of course," he said, as his heart sank again, "the mission."

"The mission is why we're here!"

"Don't patronise me! It's my mission, you think I don't know?"

"I already forgave you," said Neroon softly. "For everything I harboured in my heart. It is gone. I let it go. Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Did you forgive me?"

Honestly! "For what?"

"For my actions in the war, for my hatred of your people for so long, for my ire when I gave you my word I wouldn't be upset - for insulting you? Pick one, or all of them."

"Obviously, yeah," said Marcus. Neroon didn't say anything about forgiveness for not reciprocating feelings. It's because the cold bastard doesn't have any, thought Marcus.

Neroon glared at him. He didn't look convinced. Marcus wasn't terribly convincing. Marcus didn't much care. "I would rather you forgive me," he said gently, "lest things remain broken between us."
There was nothing between them to break in the first place. That was the problem. No - Marcus could not dwell on this. It was useless and it didn't bring anything good. He sighed. The problem was only within him. The problem was Marcus, and Marcus' cumbersome feelings, and Marcus' moronic heart, it was his problem to fix. Not Neroon's. "Alright," he said, more calmly. "Well, your watch."

"I would not have you sleep in vexation," warned Neroon.

"M'not vexed, I just - look, it doesn't matter." Marcus lay back on the ground under the emergency blanket. "It's something I want to figure out for myself, alright? Will you leave it at that?"

Neroon was wary. But he said, "Of course. As you wish." He shut up and helped himself to a ration bar and his flask of water.

Marcus, meanwhile, proceeded to toss and turn on hard stone floor for the next ten minutes, with no luck in falling asleep.

He didn't even feel tired. He flipped onto his back and glared hard at the ceiling of the cave, his eyes too wide to shut.

"Our priests," said Neroon, breaking the silence, "would say that this is a sign from the universe that we are not finished here."

Marcus grumbled. "And what do you say?"

"Not believing in such things, I say nothing at all." Neroon was fiddling with a stone he'd picked up. "Then again, perhaps it cannot hurt."

Only yesterday, they'd been on rock just as hard and Marcus had slept just fine.

Well, he'd also been cuddled up close to Neroon.

Which meant nothing!

But Neroon had been talking and Marcus had been listening to him. Maybe that would help.

"Talk to me, then," said Marcus.

"What about?"

"Oh, any old thing," he replied. "I don't think it matters. Not the war."

"Shall I drone on about the stars again?" Neroon stood and walked over.

Marcus looked up at him from the ground.

"Come on," said Neroon, nudging his shoulder with the toe of his boot. "Move aside."

So Marcus watched, confused, as Neroon sat down next to him against the wall, one leg outstretched in front of him, the other bent at the knee towards Marcus. Then he leaned backwards, propped up by the cave wall, and patted his thigh. "I seem to recall that not only did I bore you into slumber, you had something slightly more forgiving than stone beneath you."

His heart fluttered. Stop that, he told it, no one wants to hear what you think. His heart paid little mind and beat happily away. "Is that what you are," Marcus murmured, "forgiving?"
"On occasion," said Neroon.

Marcus eyed him. If this was his attempt at contrition ... but he had already made an attempt.

Cautiously he leaned his head against Neroon's leg. Neroon's hand hovered around his head, waiting as Marcus got comfortable, as though he was considering touching him. In the end he set his hands at his side.

"You've mentioned Tinarel twice now," began Marcus. "I don't think I've even heard of that city."

"Then your Minbari geography is sorely lacking," replied Neroon. "Capital of Prierza province. In the north, by the pole."

"As large as Tuzanor or Yedor?"

"Yes," said Neroon, "and no. Lesser population, more spread out. It was two cities, historically, Tinek and Arelon, either side saddling the Vez'hilek River. That ground was fought over for countless cycles between the Warrior Caste and the Religious Caste until Warrior overthrew Priest for the last time. There is still a fane of the Religious Caste that cohabits the south-eastern suburban border, but the territory is now split between the Star Riders and the Moon Shields, as it has been for nearly two millennia."

"Being Warrior Caste territory, I guess that's why I've never heard of it," supposed Marcus. He turned his head into Neroon's thigh, trying to find a comfortable position.

"You stop talking and concentrate on sleep," admonished Neroon, though he was jocular about it. He sighed. "I was born there. My family's estates are there. It's ... certainly not as modern as Tuzanor. Or Yedor. That is so by construction - we warriors like our tradition."

"You don't say. What a revelation," drawled Marcus.

Neroon laughed. "The last time major infrastructure and architectural changes were made on a grand scale, it was because we had forced the Worker Caste's hand. Thus the city is steeped in pre-Valen ways. In many places it has modernised, but some things remain the same. The old market, for one. It is a maze of booths in a square, bounded by tall buildings into which the maze has now overgrown. Very like the side-streets here. Unlike other markets on Minbar, there is no identifiable gate or boundary so it is a test of observational skills to perform the rituals observed upon its entering -"

"Religious Caste do that?" He'd never paid special attention to Lennier walking into the Zocalo.

"We all used to," said Neroon. "Shopkeepers prayed for high prices, customers for low ones. I don't suppose the universe would honour both their prayers simultaneously. Thus has the Religious Caste considered it something antiquated. Now it is little more than genuflection, and Worker and Warrior Caste perform it mostly out of respect for an ancient institution. The remainder of Minbar views the old market itself as a relic of a pre-Valen era. Indeed, some of the entrance ways are marked with Valeria icons or Plak'mi cloth, though no priest follows the way of Valeria or Plak'mi the way they once did. Those relics date from shortly after the Valennic era."

"After? I thought you said it was pre-Valen."

"Mm. People followed Valen because they were desperate, during the first Shadow War, but after, once the threat had vanished, there was a pendulum swing effect - which the Religious Caste terms the Regressive Era."

"So you admit it," said Marcus. "You said it yourself - the first Shadow War. You're implying
Minbari are involved in a second." He sat straight up to look Neroon in the face, and the emergency blanket fell past his shoulders to gather around his waist. Neroon was stunned by his own admission, open-mouthed. Marcus had to stop looking at his mouth. "That means any Minbari could ask for military support, and you'd be honour-bound as a Warrior to give it, aren't you?"

"I - didn't formally intend -" he stuttered - "it's just an expression - only the Shai Alyt may -"

"You're right," he said, before Neroon could defence mechanism his slip of the tongue away. "There is a second war. And it's happening now. There is a war going on, and the Warrior Caste is badly needed."

"You have implied this many times," said Neroon shrewdly. "I don't doubt it is half the reason Delenn has asked for my assistance on this mission - I who was Satai, I who she thinks is pliable to her intentions."

"And you have also said that you'll go only where you're needed, only where the Shai Alyt determines. The Shai Alyt who is an accomplice of those Shadows. That Shai Alyt?"

Neroon would not meet his eyes.

"He's holding you back," said Marcus. "You know that."

"I cannot openly go over his head," said Neroon. "I could have as Satai, but only if the rest of the Warrior Caste Satai were unanimous and had attained at least one vote from the remaining caste -"

"They weren't even unanimous? What more convincing did they need?"

Neroon glared. "The Vorlons could have made intercessions upon the return of the ancient enemy, as they promised to do a thousand cycles ago, as they expressed in our alliance treaty."

"They have returned!"

"To the Anla'shok and two Religious Caste Satai, as I only recently found out! If the Vorlons wanted the military aid of Minbar, they know where to find the military caste. They know where to find the Shai Alyt. No Vorlon has approached me - not now, and not as Satai."

"I doubt they approached the Shai Alyt either," said Marcus, "I'm sure they can sense his true allegiances a mile off. That doesn't mean you can't act -"

"Yes, actually, it does," said Neroon. "It is a thing beyond the boundary of my honour."

"Which is the greater outrage?" asked Marcus. "That you submit to a false authority and shirk your duty while those lacking the training you have die in your stead, or that you break from your enemy's collaborators and take your rightful place among your people in joining the fight? In leading it?"

Neroon's expression was incredulous. "What you are implying is high treason!" he said, aghast. "I should not even be thinking this, why do you consistently make me think such terrible things -"

"What your Shai Alyt has done is already high treason!" protested Marcus.

"And two counts of friendly fire makes a strike upon your enemy, does it?" Neroon snapped. "It must stop somewhere!"

It could stop with you, thought Marcus. "The Warriors would follow you. You know they would." And maybe they should. But if he said that aloud it would definitely be too far. He inched closer to
Neroon and sat cross-legged. His knee touched Neroon's. This time he'd done it on purpose. "Don't take forever in deciding what to do," he said, "for there may be none of us left."

"Don't say that!" said Neroon.

"It's true," he replied. "You saw them, you've fought them. You know we're outmatched."

"If I understand the situation correctly, you have the assistance of the Vorlons," said Neroon. "Those new ships the Religious Caste has been constructing and hoarding can outrun the fighters where my flyer couldn't."

"The way the Shadows seem to work is by undercutting a people," Marcus argued. "I keep seeing this. They go after a portion. They find someone who wants something. They offer them that. They fracture the people - they create a group that acts against the whole. Let that group snowball large enough in number and they sunder them and that's how they win and if they get that far ..." He shook his head. "That's why the help of the Vorlons isn't enough. You know they're going to do it to the Minbari, if they can. They have already! Just look at your Shai Alyt's reaction to inter-caste friction!"

Neroon was silent, his expression somewhere between a scowl and a pallor. He had begun fiddling with the stone in his hand again.

Maybe Marcus had pushed too far. "I'm sorry - I ... I didn't mean - this is a rather heavier conversation than I'd intended, I want to be done with heavy conversations with you," he said, to lighten the mood. He put his hands over Neroon's, cupping them together, and smoothed Neroon's knuckles back and forth with his thumb, trying for comforting. Neroon once more flinched, dropping the stone, but he made no other movement to draw himself away, and instead let himself be held. For the moment, Marcus wouldn't question that - there were more important things at stake. "Look, I know this is hard for you, so just - just keep that on the back burner for now, alright?"

"You're right," whispered Neroon.

"Don't I love to hear it -"

"You have been right. All along... about this." He shook his head. "This whole mess ... what he has embroiled us in ... and how I could have been so blind." Neroon made to pull away. Marcus tightened his grasp on his hands to stop him.

"I get it," said Marcus, "you don't want some insignificant Human to tell you what to think."

"You're not some -" Neroon shot back - "that wasn't -"

"Keep in mind some of us are sundered too. Just look at the Earth Alliance! How Babylon 5's had to break away! And we weren't alone, four other colonies declared independence. And now the Drazi. You've seen these both firsthand! Minbari aren't alone in that bit. That's the worst part. You need to take a leap of faith. And - I know what that's like, when you haven't really got any, and someone tells you to believe."

"I do believe," protested Neroon.

Marcus grinned. "Thought you told me you were something of a heretic, where your priests are involved. And now I'm asking you something incredibly large."

"Then ask me," said Neroon.
Marcus' grin faded. Alright, he thought, I will.

"Abandon your Shai Alyt and come join those priests you scorn," he said. "And take from him as many fighters and ships as you can."

Credit to Neroon, not a single muscle twitched in Marcus' hands as he suggested something so damning. In fact, he seemed to have relaxed there. His hands were calm. But he blinked, and his expression was pained. "I," he began.

He'll say he can't, Marcus realised, I can't let him say that.

"Not now," he said quickly. "Watch the skies, then. Ride your stars. And when it's time, then join us." He swallowed. "But, you have to know... soon, it will be time."

"Ask me anything but that," said Neroon. He rubbed his knuckles slowly and sensually against Marcus' palm, and Marcus loosened his grip only for Neroon to enmesh their fingers together.

"Anything?" Marcus asked.

"Anything," he replied.

There was a dare in his eyes.

Kiss me, thought Marcus, the words already on his tongue.

An intrusive thought.

He said nothing.

The moment passed, and the tension eased, as Neroon realised that what he feared Marcus would say, he wouldn't say at all. He shifted - disappointed? Relieved? It didn't matter. They weren't going to do this. They couldn't. Neroon took his fingers from Marcus'.

"Neroon," said Marcus with a sigh, his head bowed away. "I'd never ask you to do anything you didn't already want..."

A touch at his chin redirected his face, and he had no chance to process it before Neroon kissed him.

It was a simple press of lips, but it was Neroon's on his, it was Neroon's action, he was the one who held them there. Marcus froze, letting him do whatever he wanted, trying to figure out what he wanted when even Neroon didn't seem sure. There was a soft pressure as he brushed his lips across Marcus' once, and then he released him.

But he didn't back away. He stayed there, their faces hardly an inch apart, and Marcus opened his eyes slowly to gauge Neroon's reaction, wondering - waiting.

Neroon seemed haunted, startled. He swallowed, thinking. Then he leaned in again, took Marcus gently by the jaw and kissed him, firm and passionate.

Marcus was too shocked - his lips parted in a gasp. Neroon pressed the advantage to trace his tongue with his own and moaned, soft, low and broken - Marcus could feel the vibration of it practically down his spine. Neroon's hand, which had been tracing his jaw, thumbing the beard, investigative - slipped slowly into his hair. And Marcus was lost, truly lost. He forgot everything about how stupid this was - how dangerous, how impractical - and melted, collapsing forward.

His hands were already at Neroon's waist, it was nothing to seize his thighs, beautiful solid thick
things that they were, to brace himself as he leaned into it. They were so close that scent of whatever
Neroon lied about was lingering on him again - Marcus was light-headed with it. Neroon tasted like
dried klhor fruit bar but his lips and his tongue were as graceful and deft as the rest of him was and
he kissed like he was dying for it, like he wanted to drown. Marcus really could not get enough. He
had kissed people before but it was a lark, it wasn't anything like this -

Because he'd never had a Warrior Caste Minbari moaning against his lips before, as Neroon was
doing, as he burrowed his fingers into Marcus' locks and arched helplessly into his mouth.

Closer, Marcus thought desperately, as he worried Neroon's bottom lip with his teeth, I need closer, I
can't let him run away from me again, I want him held fast against me, I want everything - he realised
with an anxious thrill he could do it, he could climb into Neroon's lap and Neroon would let him,
would probably press them together, and he'd have the full heat of him between his legs.

Neroon again tore his mouth away. He pressed their cheeks together and rested a moment, flush and
panting.

"No," croaked Marcus. "Oh - please -"

"I can't," Neroon whispered, "I can't do this." He turned his face to the crook of Marcus' neck. A
kiss, yet not a kiss. He added helplessly, "You're not Minbari," and Marcus wasn't convinced he
wasn't doing it simply for the sacred act of moving his lips against Marcus' skin.

I can't believe him, thought Marcus. Really! What was his first clue? All that hair, maybe? All that
hair he was stroking, even now, softly brushing the pads of his fingers against Marcus' scalp to feel
the black strands slip through his hands?

Did it really matter to him so much? After he'd said he'd forgiven them - had forgiven Marcus - after
he'd tasted Marcus' alien lips - but it clearly did.

Instead, Marcus said simply, "No, I'm not." He had two fistfuls of his black fatigues where he'd put
his hands on Neroon's thighs and he was half in Neroon's lap and Neroon's mouth was on his neck
and Neroon's crest was digging hard into the plush of his cheek, but that wasn't enough, Marcus
wasn't Minbari and he wouldn't ever be and he didn't want to be.

And Neroon did not exactly abandon him either, like he had the first time, but the moment was
clearly lost. He wasn't just having second thoughts, he was capsized in them, he was a few gasps
away from a panic attack, because Marcus could feel his sped-up breaths trailing on his skin. His
hand fell from Marcus' hair.

"It's fine," said Marcus, "I get it."

"No, you don't understand," said Neroon, choked.

"I understand very well, thanks," replied Marcus, and couldn't keep the bitterness out. He moved
away, and without Marcus' counterweight to balance himself, Neroon pitched forward miserably
onto his hands. "I should be sleeping anyway," he said, "shouldn't I. And if you've nothing more to
say to me about it, then I may as well."

"Marcus, please," Neroon said.

"I'm sorry," he said thickly, spitting it out, "I've - I've clearly made it worse, I know! I just keep
crossing all your lines. Maybe I'm waiting for the moment when you finally realise you've had
enough and you'll have to take up arms to protect yourself from my dishonourable ways." He sighed
and ran a finger through his hair, trying to shake Neroon's touch from it. Didn't really work.
After a moment Neroon's breathing subsided, and he calmed. He drew his knees to his chest and sat there at the wall of the cave, a wretched little black ball.

"I'd offer to talk about it in the morning," said Marcus, "but I don't think there's anything to talk about. So we may as well sleep." For all the shut-eye they were likely to get!

"You go ahead," said Neroon. "The watch is mine. And anyway, my mind is too greatly troubled."

Marcus gathered the emergency blanket around him like a shawl. "You know, it seems to me you trouble your own mind," he said. "I haven't got the problems you're facing, not quite. Guess that's something we do better than your species."

Neroon scoffed, grumbling, "Yes, your species is legendary for such dalliances."

That's not what this is, thought Marcus crossly. But then, what was it? He couldn't be so mad at Neroon when he was equally uneager to face answering that question. "We don't lie to ourselves about them," he snapped. "Which is exactly what you've been doing. And you know it."

Neroon made no reply, because he had none to make.

Marcus sighed. "Look, I don't want to go to sleep angry with each other yet again," he said.

"I am not angry with you," said Neroon.

"You're angry with yourself. That's worse. I forgive you, you never seem to forgive yourself. Another thing Humans do better." He thought about his own life. "Well, sometimes," he said. "In this, certainly."

"Marcus," said Neroon quietly.

"Yes?"

"Just..." Neroon pinched the bridge of his nose, below the heavy forehead ridge. "Just stop talking about it."

If Marcus didn't, then who would? Neroon wouldn't! So they would just go around and around each other, like this, forever? Never quite acknowledging this, never meeting it head on, trapped in some kind of strange romantic limbo? Because Neroon didn't have the courage to admit the truth of it?

If Marcus said that, and called him out on his cowardice, it was a good way to get a pike to the face. Well, Neroon wouldn't actually raise a weapon against him. He'd be hurt and insulted and that would be worse. Marcus had already gone far enough calling him out on his lies. He wouldn't go that far.

Besides, deception was one thing, which Neroon himself had heretofore admitted to, but fear - he'd never mentioned fear, and Marcus wondered if he knew it when he felt it.

"Fine," said Marcus. For now.

"You do not like it," said Neroon.

"Seems dishonest," said Marcus. "Seems dishonourable. But we won't talk about it." He turned around, wrapping himself in the emergency blanket, and lay down to curl up on the stone cave floor, facing the wall. He shut his eyes.

It was a very long time before Neroon spoke, but then again, Marcus still couldn't sleep, and he heard it all.
Marcus imagined Neroon knew that.

"I am ever picking my dishonour with you," mused Neroon, low and bitter. "I cannot kill you... so I break denn'shah. I cannot abandon the Shai Alyt... but he leads us out of a war that honour compels us to fight. I cannot -"

He huffed, and for a split second he faltered, but picked himself up and continued.

"I cannot admit the way I feel, so I lie to myself about it. You *don't know* what is at stake for me. I am not some invisible Night Walker, some libertine Moon Shield. My social position - my proximity to the Shai Alyt - the control I exert over him. I have sacrificed much, risked much to be where I am... So much that I'm not sure there is anything left to give you. All of that which I've done would be in jeopardy."

Did he think Marcus didn't know?

"And one look from you," Neroon added, "has me wondering to throw it all away. If that's the power of a look, I dare not kiss you and find out what *that* does."

There was silence.

"And yet I *did* kiss you," said Neroon.

Marcus, still awake, said nothing.

"I am too restless still," Neroon decided. "I'm going to scout a perimeter."

Marcus overheard the sound of him getting to his feet, and then moments later, steps walking away.

He turned onto his back, staring up at the cave ceiling, hoping for answers.

Here was the thing: the denn'shah did not last forever. Eventually Neroon picked his dishonour. Eventually he made a choice.

For Marcus, this whole episode on Zhabar, in the Drazi Freehold, had been a complete distraction from Susan, who didn't harbour any romantic feelings for him. That was fairly clear. Marcus had hoped to foster the same spirit Lennier claimed to have with Delenn: loving her from afar, supportive, asking nothing in return. That was quite courtly love of him. Noble. Marcus could do the same, couldn't he?

He could. But then, what was the point of it all? To wait for the right one, so that this long wait had happened for a reason? So that everything had meaning?

Some things didn't have to have meaning. Some things just happened. A hard truth Marcus had spent many years slowly learning, if in fact he had ever fully accepted it. (He hadn't.)

But ... that was a different kind of nobility, wasn't it? To take the slow road, with someone? And was it so bad to crave meaning in this? To make it so that he hadn't waited because he had been too busy, or too angry - no! Why, he'd waited because there was something special to work towards, and he wouldn't settle for anything less!

Then, he should wait for someone he really wanted.

But Susan didn't really want him, and *that* wasn't something he wanted. Was it? Was what he intended to wait for her until she did? To subtly encourage her thoughts that way? To linger around
while she thought it over seemed emphatically less romantic than Marcus was going for. He didn't want that, not in the least.

For a moment he forgot the reasons of waiting - that he'd waited because of outside factors, outside factors that he had been compelled into, that he'd had little choice in. He'd spent his life without any deep, prolonged, romantic attachments. Kissing two girls in his teenage years and a third during a surreal Earthforce mission didn't count. And it wasn't because he had always had that goal - he hadn't intended to wait. There weren't many people on any of the colonies he grew up on. He was too busy with the family company. He was too angry in Earthforce. He was too bitter as a demobbed company man, so bitter that he hadn't even considered Hasina as a prospect until too late (and should the CEO really date his employees, anyway?).

There were lots of reasons, and none of them were waiting for the right one. But looking back after a long enough time waiting, it made you want to do something right with it. You didn't save up money for years to blow it in one night at a casino - well, maybe some did, Marcus thought of the Centauri ambassador - but Marcus didn't. He wanted to save this for someone...

For someone who'd be worth it.

Was that really so wrong?

The problem was, that didn't narrow it down anymore.

Susan - the voice of the resistance, this figure at the centre of everything, this major player in the coming war. This symbol.

She was a person, though, not a symbol - Marcus had never asked what she wanted - Marcus didn't even know details of her romantic history.

But that was why it had to remain chaste, the way Lennier said.

But I don't want to remain chaste for the rest of my life, thought Marcus. (Bold of him to assume there was much life remaining, given this war.)

And now... there was Neroon. In a strange sort of way. If he was even really an option. Dark, powerful. There was not much chaste about this attraction. His position only applied to Minbar. On Babylon 5, he'd be just another Minbari - Warrior Caste no less, meaning he didn't even want to get into the war - so unlike Susan, he wasn't a symbol...

But on Minbar, he was such a symbol. He said it himself, deceptions served their leaders, and he should know, being one of them. If the Warrior Caste entered the war, he'd be a symbol too.

Idly, Marcus wondered if it'd be enough to promise himself to pull Neroon and thus the rest of the Caste in. - No, that was manipulative. He didn't wait all this time to throw it away on part of a mission to secure an alliance. Even if it would serve a purpose. (But what a purpose.)

Did he want chaste, noble, courtly love - a far off devotion to one of the most important and beautiful women he had ever met, or did he want to chase down a spark with an alien man who lied to himself about feeling anything for him, who could never publicly acknowledge him?

Susan may never want me, he thought. There was no guarantee. And Marcus knew that. He knew exactly where he stood, and there was great comfort in knowing.

Neroon, on the other hand. Neroon might want him badly enough to damn his entire culture for it. I
must really drive him mad, Marcus thought. Good - Neroon drove him mad. It was intoxicating, to think he was wanted so badly that someone would risk so much, just for a single kiss.

Marcus was probably in love with both of them. Two different kinds of love, but love nevertheless. They were both worth it. Because this wasn't just a spark, and Susan wasn't just a symbol. There was more.

He'll choose, Marcus thought. Like the denn'shah, Neroon would choose. It was only a matter of time.

He let his whirling thoughts capsize him into sleep. By the time Neroon came back, he was long since drowned, and he only resurfaced at dawn when Neroon shook him awake.

"I apologise for the disruption," said Neroon, in the early morning light, "but if I am reading the tracks the way you have taught me - Ka Phor was here last night."

Chapter End Notes

So the next chapter will be the last official chapter before the two end chapters (!!). One ending is canon-compliant, the other is canon-divergent. You can pick which one you prefer! And there will probably be something like an epilogue for both, but it will be a much shorter scene/chapter. That said, that's like 3ish chapters' writing that I have sketched out but gotta actually write, so I am probably skipping next Friday's update, and possibly the one after that (but I can't promise that). If you want to stay informed when this fic will update, subscribe for ao3 notifs, or come rejoin us June 7 when there will For Sure be an update.

sorry for the delay! ❤ thanks as always for your comments and support :D

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