Kansas 2: The Yellow Brick Road

by Soledad

Summary

The long-overdue sequel to Still Not in Kansas. Crossover with Star Trek Voyager. Slightly AU and getting more so as it grows. You have been warned.
Disclaimer: Babylon 5 belongs to JMS and Time Warner. Star Trek – Voyager belongs to Gene Roddenberry and whoever else keeps the rights at the moment. I’m just borrowing their characters to have a little fun. No harm intended and (alas!) no money made.

Timeline: Late Season 3 for B5 (before “And the Rock Cried Out No Hiding Place” to “Z’Ha’dum”), early Season 4 for Voyager, but Kes is still on board and has not evolved into an elated being.

Summary: Voyager discovers another wormhole/anomaly. Instruments state that it leads to the Epsilon Eridani system in the Alpha Quadrant. Everyone is happy, as this would mean they might end up somewhere near Vulcan. However, the anomaly leads to a different universe, and they end up right in front of B5. While they are waiting for the anomaly to reappear, they get involved in the life of the station.

A SHORT FOREWORD

This story is the direct continuation of my very first Babylon 5 fanfic, the one titled “Still Not in Kansas”. You really should read that one first, or many things in this one won’t make much sense.

This has become an independent story for the simple reason that I didn’t want “Kansas” to go on indefinitely. So I ended it with the mentioning of a distinct possibility that Draal and the Great Machine would be able to help the Voyager people to get back to their own universe. The sequel was originally meant to show how it would happen – if it would happen at all. However, the story gained a life of its own, growing so much that now it appears to have become the middle part of a trilogy, the getting home (or not) aspect being dealt with in the third and hopefully last part.

In most of my fandoms (save one) I write crossovers and AUs. This story is no exception. As I like both Babylon 5 and Star Trek, I tried to stay as close as canon as possible. Mistakes can always happen, of course, despite the ungodly amount of research I’ve done. Especially as I’ve been working on this story for almost ten years by now and it isn’t even half done yet. So, be prepared for a really long ride.

Also, since this is an AU, some things are different. But only those that were necessary for this story to work.

“The Yellow Brick Road” is, of course, another ‘The Wizard of Oz” reference. It seemed somehow fitting, despite of its silliness as a story title.

Updates will happen once a week, in the hope that in the meantime I'll be able to make considerable headway with the story. It is all plotted out up to 54 chapters, I just have to actually write more than half of it yet.

And now on with the fun!
This chapter (and the following ones) contains elements of the Babylon 5 episode “And the Rock Cried Out No Hiding Place”. However, I skipped the visit of the religious representatives, as it would have made me deal with too many protagonists. I focused on the Centauri storyline instead and simply assumed that Sheridan still had his sources on Earth.

Also, I’m aware that Barbie dolls probably won’t exist in the 23rd century anymore. But it’s a reference that 21st century readers will understand, so I decided to keep it. Besides, as teddy bears canonically do exist, I thought I could stretch a little the limits of credibility. *g*

PART 01

Commander’s personal log, December 7, 2260

There’s an old Chinese curse that says: May you live in interesting times! Well, the recent days have confirmed me that we must have upset at least half of all Chinese people living on Earth and on the various Earth colonies in our previous lives – assuming that the Minbari are right about this rebirth thing.

Babylon 5 has always been an… interesting place, but last week has topped everything I’ve seen here in the last two and half years… and that’s saying a lot. We have barely recovered from the loss of Kosh – the original one – and Jeff Sinclair in short succession, when Franklin left us, too. He’s still on walkabout. No one’s seen him for over a week. I hope he’s all right and will work this through, soon. We gonna need him back in MedLabs. Lillian Hobbs is an excellent doctor, but she has nowhere near the knowledge and experience when it comes to alien races that Franklin has.

With Jeff gone, Delenn of all people was chosen as the new leader of the Rangers – which led to great displeasure on Minbar, especially among the Warrior Caste who considered the Rangers as their own responsibility; not that they’ve cared much for them in the last thousand years or so. One of the Warrior leaders, Alyt Neroon, was determined to prevent Delenn’s initiation as Ranger One, and our resident Ranger, Marcus Cole, nearly gave his life to protect her. He’s still in MedLab, with three broken ribs and other severe injuries. As annoying as he sometimes can be, seeing him like this is not easy.

The strangest thing is, though, that he and Neroon seemed to have come to some kind of understanding. Neroon visited him several times before leaving aboard the Ingata, and when he finally did leave, he left his young nephew, Rastenn, behind – apparently to learn from Marcus. Wonders never cease to exist, it seems… especially considering the fact that Rastenn has apparently developed a friendship with Vir Cotto: a young, arrogant, impatient Minbari Warrior made friends with the meekest, most intimidated Centauri the Republic has ever bred.

Did I really say this was the strangest thing that has happened lately? Well, I was wrong. The really weird thing – more shocking even than the new Vorlon ambassador – was the appearance of Voyager. An Earth ship from the future as well as from a different universe; a ship that had crossed a
spatial anomaly and ended up right before our doorstep.

We’re trying to keep its presence as low-key as possible, but on Babylon 5 there aren’t really any secrets. Everything will be revealed sooner or later, just like the existence of a previously unknown level of Grey Sector, which Night Watch and other militant Pro-Earth organizations have used as their home base in all these years… and we hadn’t even known!

Now, aside from preparing ourselves for the next, probably disastrous battle against the Shadows, we’ll also have to deal with the captured Night Watch members and hunt down the ones still on the loose aboard the station. It won’t be an easy thing to do. We can’t know what other hidden places are there on Babylon 5, where more such enemies can be hiding – and we can’t trust the safety of our comm system, either.

Fortunately, Voyager is assisting us in this matter. She’s a small ship, but her technology is far more advanced than what even the Minbari have. Hopefully, her shields will prevent the freeing of the prisoners and an infiltration of the comm system. Also, her chief of security has offered to help us with the finding of further infiltrators.

Too bad that they can’t get actively involved in the upcoming war. In that, Captain Janeway was adamant, and to a certain extent I even understand her reasoning. They belong to a different universe, and getting involved with ours, it could cause devastating effects. Still, their presence alone is a wonder that gives us hope. In a different reality, Earth has managed to overcome the petty power struggles and become part of a large interstellar alliance. Perhaps, if we survive the current crisis, something similar can happen with us, too. Ivanova out.

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Four days after Ambassador Delenn’s initiation as the leader of the Anla’shok – or, as humans called them, the Rangers – Commander Chakotay, First Officer of the Federation starship Voyager (currently trapped in the past of an alternate Earth) left his ship to visit the MedLabs of Babylon 5. Or, to be more accurate, to visit the de facto leader of said facilities, a certain Dr. Lillian Hobbs, for whom he’d developed more than just a professional interest since their arrival.

Quite frankly, he was surprised himself by the speed with which he’d fallen for the pretty doctor; he wasn’t a young cadet anymore to have a crush at the first lovely woman coming his way. It even scared him a little – enough to almost ruin everything at the first date, out of caution. Luckily for him, they’d found the courage to talk about it, and things seemed promising once again. He was determined not to ruin his second chance with Lillian. As Sam Wildman had said, he needed a nice woman in his life, even though there were no guarantees how long they’ll remain in this reality. Command – even second-hand command – tended to make people very lonely, and he’d had enough from being alone.

Leaving the docking bay, he walked by Customs, where he saw quite a crowd lining up for departure. In the middle of the crowd stood Michael Garibaldi, Babylon 5’s chief of security, sorting through the waiting people and giving them individual destinations.

“Indira, Magda,” he read out, and a fragile, dark-skinned woman wrapped into a sari raised a slim brown hand, richly decorated with thin golden rings. “You’re with the Pak’mara,” Garibaldi told her.

She nodded and followed a weird-looking alien to Departure: a large, bald-headed, stooped creature with bulbous eyes and facial tentacles. Chakotay didn’t envy her. What little he’d learned about the carrion-eater Pak’mara wouldn’t make him wish to serve on one of their ships. Their stench alone could upset a sensitive stomach – and not just that of a vegetarian.
“Nakari,” Garibaldi turned to a curly-haired man with a vague Middle-Eastern look, “you’re to rendezvous with the Narn Resistance in Sector 40.” The man nodded and went on his way. Garibaldi thanked him and looked at the female Minbari next in the queue. “Ardiri, you and Glendora here,” he pointed with his chin at an exotic-looking older woman of uncertain origins, “are assigned to…”

At this moment he discovered Chakotay and handed his notepad to his deputy at once. “Zack, can you take over for me? I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Sure, Chief,” Zack Allen was used to such things and continued in Garibaldi’s stead without a beat. The security chief himself walked over to Chakotay. “Commander,” he said. “What can I do for you? Is there a problem with your… houseguests?”

He was referring to the captured Night Watch members, currently being held in Voyager’s brig, which was the only place their buddies won’t be able to find them. Chakotay shook his head. “No; I’m actually on my way to the MedLab to check on Marcus’ condition. Some of our people have grown very fond of him and are concerned about his well-being. I just saw this crowd here and was curious what’s going on.”

“We are shipping out telepaths as fast as we can to the races that have signed up against the Shadows,” Garibaldi explained. “Upon arrival, they’ll be assigned to warships already on patrol.”

“Right,” Chakotay nodded. “Captain Sheridan told us that these Shadow vessels are vulnerable against telepathic interference. They are steered by cyborgs, aren’t they?”

“Well, I wouldn’t exactly call them cyborgs,” Garibaldi sounded a little defensive. “It’s not so that the poor devils had chosen to be crammed full of implants, so that they can interface with those awful ships directly.”

“But their connection with the ships can be broken by telepaths, can’t it?” Chakotay asked.

“Exactly,” Garibaldi shuddered. “That’s why we’ve been hiring telepath volunteers for some time by now; we hope to even out the odds a little.”

“What exactly are those odds?” Chakotay asked quietly. “Can you really hope to stop the Shadows with the means that are at your disposal?”

Garibaldi shrugged. “Honestly? I don’t know. But we have to try, at the very least. Right now, Sheridan is coordinating the defence with what’s left from the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. He hardly ever leaves the war room anymore. He tries not to show it, but one can see the exhaustion in his eyes. But he’s still hoping, and as long as he does, we won’t give up, either. I wish I could help him, but I never understood much about tactics. Sure, I fought in the Earth-Minbari war like everyone else, but I was just a ground-pounder.”

“Perhaps I can help a little,” Chakotay offered. “I used to run seminars on Advanced Tactical Training at Starfleet Academy; and I have a great deal of experience in fighting against impossible odds.”

“You can try,” Garibaldi answered with a shrug, “although I can’t tell if he’s gonna accept. I hope he will, but I don’t know him the way I used to know Sinclair – and he won’t listen to me the way Sinclair did… well, sometimes.”

“But not always, did he?” Chakotay asked, with an understanding twinkle in his eye. That was the
eternal woe of people in the second line of command; something he, too, knew all too well.

“Not always; actually, more often not,” Garibaldi admitted. “But at least he listened, even if he went off to the direct opposite afterwards. The only one Sheridan listens nowadays is Delenn.”

“Then you should reach him through her,” Chakotay suggested.

Garibaldi gave him a baleful look. “You’re kidding, right? Have you ever tried to make a Minbari listen? That bonecrest isn’t the only reason they’re called boneheads, you know.”

“I’ve heard similar statements concerning Vulcans all my life,” Chakotay replied with a shrug. “Or Klingons. Or even Bajorans, who can be maddeningly stubborn sometimes. But when you take a closer look you’ll see that they are just people, like everyone else: good and bad, valiant and cowardly, stupid and wise... depending on what they have to face. As long as they are on your side, you shouldn’t give up the effort to try reasoning with them.”

“Is that what you do?” Garibaldi asked doubtfully.


They both laughed, then Garibaldi made an apologetic gesture. “I’ll need to go back to these guys in a moment, Commander. Have you heard anything about the… interviewing of your houseguest? I thought it would be done right after Delenn’s inauguration, but it has been four days already…”

“We’ve been waiting for Ms Alexander to get better,” Chakotay explained. “It’s clear that our… guests won’t say anything voluntarily, and Tuvok put his foot down concerning a forced mind-meld. He did it last time – extremely unwillingly, I must add – to get you people out alive from Grey 17, but he adamantly refuses to do so again. That’s a very strong cultural taboo with Vulcans and is considered on the same line as physical rape.”

“They’re right about that,” Garibaldi said, remembering the times when telepaths had simply intruded his mind without permission. Then he frowned as the whole statement made click. “Wait a minute, things like that happen with Vulcans, too? I thought they were all cold and restrained and stuff.”

“It’s very rare,” Chakotay admitted, “but as I said, they’re just people, like everyone else. And they’re a violent people, in the heart of their hearts. That’s why they undergo all that steel-hard discipline voluntarily. Because they know all too well how much they need it.”

“And still…” Garibaldi trailed off uncertainly.

“They’re calm and disciplined as a people,” Chakotay clarified. “There are always individuals who can’t quite rise to social expectations, though. Or those who’re simply gone mad for some reason. As I said: it’s extremely rare, but yes, such things do happen. Even on Vulcan. Not that you’d have anything to fear from our resident Vulcans,” he added smiling. “They’re all fairly stable. Starfleet screens its future members very carefully before accepting them; and T’Ral has been a close acquaintance of mine for years. I’d vouch for all three of them without a second thought.”

“Well if that isn’t a relief,” Garibaldi said sarcastically, making the other man understand that while he was grateful for the saving of his life, he still didn’t know them well enough to trust them unconditionally – if, indeed, he was capable of such trust towards anyone else but Sinclair. “Look, I really have to…”

Chakotay smiled. “You really have to return to your work, I know. And I’m expected in the MedLabs. Good day, Mr. Garibaldi. I’ll see you aboard Voyager, soon.”
The MedLabs were a welcome contrast to the hectic activity at Customs; they were calm, quiet and reasonably well-lit, which seemed to be a rare thing on Babylon 5. Chakotay wondered why. Starfleet space stations were, as a rule, as brightly illuminated as Starfleet ships – with the notable exception of Deep Space Nine, that is. Until now, he’d always dismissed the darkened look of DS9 as a result of oppressive Cardassian architecture. Now he began to wonder whether it was a typical trait for frontier stations, where resources had to be used with more care than in the heart of the Federation.

In any case, he found the room of Marcus Cole a reasonably pleasant one. The Ranger himself still looked like Death warmed over, but considering what he’d been put through during his fight with the older, much stronger Minbari Alyt, that was not surprising.

Neither was the presence of Voyager’s very own Harry Kim, who’d asked permission to visit his newfound friend less than an hour earlier. He’d even brought his clarinet, in case Marcus would feel like listening to some music, but was not currently playing. His instrument in his hand, he was busily staring daggers at the Ranger’s other visitor.

It was a young Minbari in full Warrior Caste regalia, which meant that he was wearing black on black… a fairly forbidding presence, despite his youthful face. Said face already wore the arrogant expression of self-proclaimed superiority so typical for Minbari warriors – at least according to Captain Sheridan who’d given the command staff of Voyager a crash course on the Warrior Caste, right after Delenn’s inauguration.

It was unpleasantly familiar to the expression Chakotay had seen on the face of Cardassian soldiers. As if the entire universe would belong to them by birthright, and everyone else ought to bend to their will. Like that young Gul who’d used to run the Lazon Two labour camp – until the bomb Ken Dalby had so carefully placed exploded into his face, blowing it away, together with that smug expression.

“Arrogant pup!” Chakotay murmured, not even sure if he meant the now dead Cardassian or the young Minbari warrior at Marcus’ bedside.

“Quite,” the warm voice of Lillian answered in agreement, and the lady doctor came to stand next to him, their hands brushing briefly. “but you must forgive him. Being the heir and nephew of Alyt Neroon, current head of the Star Riders Clan and once a member of the Grey Council that used to be the ruling body of Minbar, isn’t an easy fate. Especially for someone as young as Rastenn is.”

“How do you know?” Chakotay asked with a frown.

“That he’s young?” Lillian clarified. “Look at his bonecrest: it’s shorter than that of fully adult Warriors, which means he’s still growing – and so is his headbone.”

“Like the antler of a Terran deer?”

“Exactly. Lennier explained it to us when we realized that his bone is still growing, too. It’s an interesting phenomenon, actually.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Chakotay shrugged. “However, I meant where do you know so much about the boy’s family background?”

Lillian smiled. “He’s been telling about it – to Marcus, that is – for days. Apparently, Alyt Neroon has come to the conclusion that Marcus is id’Minbari…”
“Id… what?”

“A human with a Minbari soul,” Lillian explained calmly. “Minbari strongly believe in reincarnation, and when their numbers began to diminish, for a while they were greatly concerned about the fate of those seemingly lost souls. Until they realized,” she gave the word proper emphasis to signalize that she didn’t really believe all this, “that Minbari souls were reborn in humans.”

“Well, that seems a bit… far-fetched,” Chakotay said.

Lillian shrugged. “Their esoteric solution to a purely mathematic problem, I guess,” she said. “We should be grateful for it, though. It saved our entire race, after all.”

“How that?” Chakotay was more than a little bewildered.

“Minbari are not allowed to kill other Minbari,” Lillian explained. “There hasn’t been a murder case on Minbar since Valen’s Ban was declared – which was a thousand years ago, give or take a few, I’m told. So, since they mustn’t kill other Minbari, and since they somehow discovered that some humans have Minbari souls…”

“They called off the entire war on the brink of an overwhelming victory, just to avoid killing their own by accident,” Chakotay finished, putting the random pieces of information he’d heard and read so far together.

Lillian nodded. “According to Dr. Franklin, who knows a lot more about these things than most of us, it was a Religious Caste decision. The Warriors weren’t told the reason, and some of them still can’t forgive that they had to surrender to an already beaten enemy. As a former member of the Grey Council, Alyt Neroon was told, of course – but I don’t think he truly believed it; not until Marcus challenged him to a fight to the death.”

“Yes, I remember his speech in front of the assembled congregation,” Chakotay said. “He seems to be an honourable man, with strong principles. Unfortunately, such people often cause a lot more harm than simple criminals.”

“Simple criminals are opportunistic and value their own hide more than anything else,” Lillian agreed. “Men with strong principles often sacrifice more for the case, whatever that might be, than it is worth.”

“It all comes down to measure and discretion, I guess,” Chakotay said thoughtfully. “Anything can cause great harm if driven to the extreme… even valour.”

Lillian laughed. “You’re in a very philosophical mood today.”

“It happens after a spirit walk,” Chakotay replied with a shrug.

Lillian’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You practice the spirit walk?” she asked.

“You know this practice?” he asked back.

She shook her head. “Only from hearsay. But I’d like to learn more. Are you allowed to talk about it?”

“Not about things that happen during my own sessions, no,” Chakotay answered. “But I can teach you how to find your own path in the spirit world if you’re really interested.”
“I’m not sure,” Lillian said a bit reluctantly. “Is that even allowed? Or are you breaking some religious taboo?”

“The spirit world is open to everyone, regardless if they are of our tribe or not,” Chakotay said. “I’d gladly share the experience with you… although once I’ve guided you over the threshold, you’ll have to find your way alone.”

“I’d like to give it a try,” Lillian admitted. “I’ve always been interested in different spiritual teachings. I’m just… well, a little afraid, that’s all. I’ve never done anything like this.”

“There’s nothing to fear in the spirit world,” Chakotay said quietly. “But you don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. Some of my brothers never even tried. My oldest sister, on the other hand, is the spiritual leader of our people. Each person is different, and all have to find their own path.”

“How many siblings do you have again?” Lillian asked.

They’d briefly touched the topic before, but never went into detail. The loss of his family still weighed heavily on Chakotay’s soul, and he found it hard to talk about them. Now, though, he felt the sudden urge to share his memories with Lillian.

“I’m the seventh of ten children and have seven brothers and two sisters,” he said. Then a thought occurred to him. “When do you go off-duty? We could have dinner in my quarters and talk about family. I don’t have many pictures, but a few have survived our adventures; I’d like to show them.”

Lillian tilted her head to the side, her large, coffee-brown eyes laughing.

“Is that an invitation?” she asked teasingly.

Chakotay pretended to think, although it was really hard not to laugh.

“Sounded like one to me,” he finally answered, flashing his dimples at her.

Lillian closed her eyes, pretending to be blinded by his killer smile, and bowed playfully. “Then I accept,” she said. “I’ll go off-duty at seventeen-hundred… or so I hope. Give me half an hour to hit the shower, and I can be over at your place around six o’clock. Would that suffice?”

“I have the day off, time doesn’t really matter,” Chakotay replied. “I’ll have a briefing with the captain in two hours’ time, but after that, I’m all yours.”

“Promises, promises,” she teased, but her eyes were still laughing. “Now, go and visit Marcus before that starring match between his other visitors would escalate into something more… physical. I’ve got enough work here as it is.”

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Commander Susan Ivanova reached C&C some ten minutes after the official beginning of her duty shift – not that it would have been her fault. G’Kar had waylain her on her way to work, trying to persuade her of the necessity of assigning one of his Narn warriors to each telepath that got shipped out to the warships taking on patrol duty.

It was a fairly… exhausting conversation. G’Kar could talk a Pak’ma’ra into eating vegetables on a good day, and Ivanova’s argument that the safety of the telepaths had been guaranteed didn’t persuade him at all. He seemed to have come to the conclusion that only with Narn bodyguard would they be really safe, because the Narns would be willing to go into great danger and to sacrifice themselves if they had to, knowing that in turn they would serve their own people.
“If the symmetry were any more perfect, I should think one of us would break into tears,” he’d ended his argument passionately.

By the end of the discussion Ivanova was in truth close to break into tears – although for an entirely different reason. Those would have been tears of frustration, not those of a soul deeply touched. She hadn’t been looking forward for today’s duty shift to begin with, and the argument with G’Kar had just been the last straw that broke the camel’s back.

She preferred to work in a tightly controlled environment, with a clear command structure. With people who already knew what she expected from them and what they could do without getting their heads bitten off. Yet today she’d have to endure one of Voyager’s engineering teams who were going to check the entire comm system for bugs and illegal access nodes and whatever other means Night Watch might have found to spy on them.

Ivanova hated having strangers in C&C, but even she had to admit that Voyager’s technicians were currently the only ones whom they could trust unconditionally. The only ones who certainly weren’t affiliated with EarthGov, the Shadows, the Centauri, the Minbari Warrior Caste, or any one of the dozen or so other forces that might want to gain access to Babylon 5 for their own shady purposes. Plus they had the superior technology that might found things her own techs would never even think of. So, it was a necessary thing – even if she didn’t like it. At all.

“We won’t interfere with their job in any way,” she told her crew in a tone that made clear that it was more than just a suggestion. “We’ll do our work and they’ll do theirs. Lieutenant Corwin, you’ll be our liaison. Should they have any questions, you’ll answer them. Other than that, it will be business as usual. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Commander,” the crew of day shift chorused demurely, and Ivanova slumped into the command chair.

This was going to be a very long shift.

Twenty minutes later the door opened, and the collective jaws of day shift hit the floor with an almost audible thud. Including Ivanova’s own.

She’d expected the volatile chief engineer of Voyager to send a colourfully mixed team – after all, half the crew was made up of various alien races. She hadn’t expected, however, a life-sized Barbie doll walking into C&C on such high heels that would make walking a deadly peril for everyone else, wearing a silver-coloured, form-hugging jumpsuit that left nothing to the imagination. Absolutely nothing.

With the sophisticated cranial implant above one brow and the strange exoskeleton covering her right hand, she looked like one of those love-bots featuring really bad holovids, born from the adolescent fantasies of certain male screenwriters. Only that she managed to transmit the cold threat of breaking anyone’s nose who’d be stupid enough to approach her without invitation.

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She was accompanied by one of those pointy-eared Vulcan people – and a fairly young one at that, by the looks of him – and a squarely-built alien with blue skin and a bald head with a bifurcated ridge running down the centre of his face. Ivanova remembered that those aliens were called Boliants; she’d already met a female one when visiting Voyager, although how an outsider would tell the genders from each other was a puzzle.

The Barbie doll ignored the salivating males around her and swayed over to Ivanova, looking at her with wide, very blue, very doll-like eyes.
“Are you the one currently in command of this facility?” she asked, blithely ignoring any such social niceties as greetings. Her voice, too, was cold and detached.

Ivanova nodded. “I’m Commander Ivanova, second-in-command of the station, yes. And you would be…?”

“Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero One,” Barbie told her matter-of-factly. “You may call me Seven of Nine. We’re here to check your communications system for possible external manipulations. Ensign Vorik and Crewman Chell will be assisting me.”

“I’ve assigned Lieutenant Corwin to show you everything you might need to see,” Ivanova replied, waving closer the young man who’d recovered enough to close his mouth. “The others will continue with their work as always,” she added in a warning tone that promised dire consequences, should that not happen.

Several still gawking technicians hurriedly vanished behind their consoles.

Seven of Nine nodded in a completely unperturbed manner. Perhaps she was already used to the overly hormonal reactions of her presence. Or perhaps she didn’t realize the effect at all. Interpersonal stuff didn’t seem to be her forte.

“That would be sufficient,” she said; then she turned to a suddenly beet read David Corwin. “Show me the way,” she ordered.

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Having finished dispatching the telepaths to their respective ships, Garibaldi returned to his office to check the files of all those security officers who’d joined Night Watch and had been sent away from Babylon 5. He congratulated himself for not having erased those files – at least this way they could have an educated guess whom they would have to look for.

“You really think they’d sent us back our own people? Well, our former people,” Officer Lou Welch corrected himself hurriedly. “Wouldn’t it be easier to smuggle in people we don’t know and so wouldn’t spot in a crowd?”

Garibaldi shook his head. “They might blend in better, but they wouldn’t know the station as well as someone who’d served here for years. Jack, Rishi and the others could have gotten everywhere as long as they kept a low profile.

“True enough,” Lou Welch admitted sourly. “Do we know how many of our former colleagues,” he emphasized the word to express his disgust more clearly, “might have returned to wreak havoc on the station?”

“Not yet,” Garibaldi admitted with a frustrated sigh. “We know that Armstrong must be still around somewhere; and that civilian who used to be Ivanova’s friend but turned out as a Home Guard representative.”

“Malcolm Biggs?” Lou Welch had been already aboard during Sinclair’s command and had the useful ability to remember every criminal they’d investigated in the last three years.

Garibaldi nodded. “Yeah, that one. Mr. Ayala says he was the one actually in charge of their base in Grey 17.”

“You think those four dead in Down Below, with their throats cut, also belonged to them?” Lou Welch asked. “It’s unusual for terrorists to get involved in simple murder or other petty crimes.”
“Oh, I don’t think that was a simple murder case,” Garibaldi said grimly. “Have you looked at their injuries closely?”

Lou Welch shook his head. People found with cut throats and without identicards in Down Below weren’t such a rare thing that he’d have paid the case special attention. Sad as it was, such things happened in semi-regular intervals there.

“Well, I have,” Garibaldi said. They were… interesting, to put it mildly.”

Lou Welch frowned. He couldn’t find anything interesting on the corpses when he took a fleeting look at them. “In what way?”

“They had broken bones and heavy bruises,” Garibaldi explained. “Also, the placing of the injuries was such that they’d cause great damage, to take the guys out quickly. The only weapon that can cause such injuries, given their form and position, is a Minbari fighting pike. I’ve seen enough such injuries during the war… and Marcus’ bruises do look very similar.”

“So, before he’d beat Cole to bloody pulp, Neroon had gone through Down Below and started a random killing spree?” Lou Welch asked doubtfully.

“I don’t think it was Neroon,” Garibaldi said grimly. “He wouldn’t have gone through Down Below without his guards in attendance – this happened well before the fight with Marcus, so he wouldn’t be on a secret mission, and his rank demands that he always have guards with him. Besides, he’s something of a legend among his own people. He could have killed the whole pack without cutting their throats. The pike would have been enough for him – but not for a younger, less experienced warrior.”

“But why would your hypothetical Minbari use a knife?” Lou Welch asked, clearly confused. “I’ve never heard that they’d fight with knives like the Centauri.”

“They don’t,” Garibaldi said. “That was what confused me, too, when we found the corpses. The cuts were ragged; nothing like what a knife would make. So I went to Marcus and asked him. He’s a pain in the ass, but he knows more about Minbari customs than any of us.”

“And what did he say?”

“He said that Minbari only use knives for ceremonial purposes; doing otherwise would be dishonourable, and we all know that honour means everything to the boneheads.”

“But those thugs had their throats cut,” Lou Welch pointed out the obvious. “Does that mean our killer wasn’t a Minbari, after all?”

“Oh, it was a Minbari all right,” Garibaldi said with a grim smile. “He just didn’t need a knife to cut those people’s throats. He used his damned bonecrest.”

It took Officer Welch a few moments before he could speak again.

“His bonecrest?” he all but squealed. “But isn’t that thing… erm… sensitive or what?”

“No more than your teeth or nails are,” Garibaldi grinned. “Lou, you didn’t fall for that idiot legend about the ‘horny bone’ did you? It’s what its name says: a bone, with the purpose to protect their skulls – and, as we’ve seen, to use it as a weapon if necessary.” He sobered again. “That’s why they’re so hard to kill in hand-to-hand combat, you know. It requires a very hard blow to shatter that bone.”
But why would Night Watch want to kill a random Minbari?” Lou Welch asked. “What could they hope from that?”

“I doubt that our killer was chosen randomly,” Garibaldi answered. “To kill four men with just a pike and his bonecrest, he had to be a Warrior, and a well-trained one. I think he was chosen to nurture the mistrust and hatred of the Warrior Caste towards humans. To undermine the alliance between Babylon 5 and Minbar – perhaps even to help deepening the rift between the Warrior and the Religious Caste.”

“And all that would be done by killing one Warrior?” Lou Welch shook his head. “Sorry, chief, but it’s just not bloody likely… as Marcus would say.”

“It depends who that Warrior is,” Garibaldi said.

“But we’ve just ruled out Neroon…” Lou Welch trailed off, understanding finally beginning to dawn in his eyes. “Oh. I see now. Rastenn.”

“He’s been seen on Babylon 5, at least a week before Delenn’s inauguration,” Garibaldi said, “strangely enough, in the company of Vir, of all people. Then he suddenly disappeared, right after that bar fight with the Voyager crew involved. Why?”

“Either because he got into the spotlight, which he wasn’t supposed to do, or because he run into the thugs and killed them in self-defence,” Lou Welch now had the full picture.

Garibaldi nodded. “Plus, since Lennier had known him for a few years, he had to be worried about his cover.”

“So, what are we gonna do with him?” Lou Welch asked.

“Nothing,” Garibaldi replied with a shrug. “Oh, I’m sure we could learn the details if we set Vir under a little pressure – someone had to help Rastenn clean up and get off the station unseen – but what good would it do to us? If those guys were Home Guard or Night Watch, which I’m sure they were, Rastenn did us a favour. Besides, as you said, it was self-defence.”

“Are you sure about that?” Lou Welch clearly wasn’t.

Garibaldi nodded. “A Minbari Warrior never attacks without provocation, or so Marcus tells me. We’re used to see them as blood-thirsty monsters, because of the war, but I bet Marcus knows them better. He’s lived among them. Besides, why would a lone Minbari attack four armed men, even if they were just the usual scum of Down Below? It just doesn’t make sense.”

“So they’ve picked Rastenn because he’s Neroon’s nephew?”

“Not just his nephew, according to Lennier, but also his heir. Neroon’s family is an old and well-respected one, apparently. And Neroon is famous for his hatred towards us. Killing his nephew might have sent him on the warpath again; at the very least, Minbar would have stopped supporting Babylon 5, which would be fatal for us.”

“And in the worst case scenario?”

“The Warrior Caste would have sent those ugly warships of theirs to shoot us to atoms,” Garibaldi said grimly. “That was how the war had begun all those years ago: with the death of a single important person. And it’s in the nature of the boneheads that had they once started on a path, it’s almost impossible to stop them. Even if it would cause their own deaths.”
Lou Welch shuddered involuntarily. “That was a close call.”

“Too close,” Garibaldi agreed. “We’re lucky that Rastenn had been trained so well – and that Neroon obviously didn’t want to explain us what his nephew was doing here, disguised as a simple cook.”

“What else? At least now he’s doing it openly. And while we let him believe he’s managed to fool us, we can keep a discreet eye on his activities.”

Lou Welch looked at his boss with unveiled admiration.

“You’re a sneaky bastard, Chief,” he stated.

“That’s my job and my personal talent,” Garibaldi replied agreeably. Then he pulled a face as his comm link beeped. He activated the thing. “Garibaldi. Go,” he barked.

“This is Morishi, Chief,” came the answer. “You should come to Brown Sector, to the control room of the fusion reactors. There’s something I’d like to show you.

“On my way,” Garibaldi replied and deactivated the comm link. Then he exchanged grim looks with his aide.

Morishi was their bomb squad investigator. If he wanted to show him something, that could only have meant one thing.

He had found a bomb.

After a moment of hapless rage, Garibaldi shook himself and made a mental checklist of all the things that needed to be done.

“I’m gonna take a look,” he said. “Find Zack, Lou, and prepare everything for a possible evacuation of all the alien dignitaries, but don’t do anything until I’ve seen what we are dealing with this time.”
PART 02

Time seemed to stand still for Michael Garibaldi until the core shuttle finally reached the end of Brown Sector, where he could access the fusion reactors. Not directly, of course, but that was the closest thing, unless he wanted to put on an EVA suit and take a look from the outside. Which he most empathically didn’t. Zero-G environments always made him sick. The only place where he could bear the lack of gravity was the cockpit of a Starfury.

Morishi, a short, wiry man in his late thirties, whose harmless appearance belied his true strength, was waiting for him in the small fusion control cubicle. His hawkish features showed definite concern, and that made Garibaldi nervous. Morishi wasn’t one who’d panic easily.

“So, what do we have?” Garibaldi asked.

Morishi moved to the side to let him take a look at the control screen of the external sensors.

“It seems to be a bomb all right,” he said, "and a cleverly hidden one, at that. We’re lucky that Voyager’s technicians were checking out the C&C comm system and picked out the low-level electronic emissions, or we’d have only realized what was going on when the fusion reactor went off like a supernova.”

Garibaldi tried to make out details of the explosive device, but with little success. The picture was too dark and even blurred a bit on the edges. Still…

“It seems familiar somehow,” he said.

Morishi nodded. “Yeah, looks very similar to the one that whathisname, that crazy character used a few months ago.”

“Robert Carlson?” Garibaldi suggested.

Morishi nodded again. “Yeah, that one. We’ll have to try tracing the explosive’s molecular code to identify the manufacturer and the buyer, but with most our contacts to Earth gone, it won’t be easy.”

“Could the Home Guard or NightWatch be involved this time?” Zack Allen, who’d just arrived to the crime scene, asked.

Morishi shrugged. “It sure as hell wasn’t the same crazy guy. This time, there might be political motivations, yeah.”

“Well,” Garibaldi said. “You’re our demolition expert. Do you think you can disarm this bomb?”

“I can’t tell it from here,” Morishi replied. “I’ll scramble a zero-G team and check out the fusion
reactor. It helped last time; perhaps it will work again.”

“As long as you don’t want me to get into one of those claustrophobic suits, it’s fine with me,” Garibaldi said. Then he activated his comm link, which – like all those of the senior staff – had been synchronized with Voyager’s comm system. “Garibaldi to Ayala.”

“Ayala here,” came the answer promptly.

Garibaldi chose his words very carefully. In theory, this channel was supposed to be secure, but after the recent events, they couldn’t be sure about anything anymore.

“Greg, we’re having a… situation here,” he said. “and could use some help. You told me about that guy of yours who used to work for spaceport security…”

“You mean Dalby?” Ayala clarified.

“I can’t remember the name,” Garibaldi admitted. “But whoever it was, we could use his… expertise. Preferably an hour ago.”

There was a moment of silence at the other end of the connection.

“I see,” Ayala finally said, the deepening of his voice revealing that he’d already figured out what the problem was. “Yep, Ken is the guy you need. I’ll check it with the Captain and send him directly to you… not necessarily in that order. Ayala out.”

Garibaldi released a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Directly” meant that Ayala would “beam” his bomb expert over, or whatever they called the use of their amazing particle transporter device. They might actually be able to deal with this bomb in time.

Moments later the sizzling golden column of a transporter beam flickered up in the small chamber, releasing a human male with a hard-bitten face, clad in a black-and-gold uniform.

“I’m Ken Dalby,” he said. “Greg meant you needed help?”

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In the surprisingly opulent quarters of Londo Mollari – opulent in Babylon 5 terms, that is; the ambassador himself was usually referring to them as “that fetid hole where I have the indignity to live – Vir Cotto was preparing dinner for his boss and himself. It was a rather… colourful affair, as if someone had captured the rainbow and broken it to food-sized pieces. Practically every colour of the spectrum was represented in the form of foodstuffs – with the exception of red.

Red foodstuffs, while generally present in the Centauri cuisine, were considered unworthy the table of a man of importance – assumedly because it reminded people with delicate stomachs of the barbaric times when their ancestors hadn’t tamed the fire yet and were forced to eat their butchered prey raw… including their enemies. How many of those outrageous legends were actually true, no one could tell in these days. Nonetheless, Centauri servants were cautious not to serve any red foodstuffs – or raw meat – to their masters. Such mishaps could result in the loss of a hand… if they were very fortunate.

Vir wasn’t a servant, of course, but since Londo couldn’t afford servants on Babylon 5 (mostly because he didn’t have the nerve to watch all the time whether they were trying to poison him or not), such small tasks usually fell to him. He didn’t really mind, most of the time. He genuinely liked Londo (most of the time), he liked his life on Babylon 5, and was grateful to Londo for keeping him here, far from the murderous intrigues of the court. He had more freedom here than he’d ever dreamed of; and here he even had friends.
Lennier for example. Or Rastenn, however, unlikely it seemed. Or that friendly blonde lady from *Voyager*, with the little girl. And having friends meant that he might do certain things on Londo’s behalf.

The lady officer – Sam, he corrected himself, as they’d reached first name basis early on – had kept her word. She’d got permission to invite Vir to a visit aboard *Voyager*, and she’d talked Commander Chakotay, the executive officer of the ship, into having an interview with Vir during that visit. Vir hoped fervently that he’d be able to make the First Officer understand how important it would be for Londo to be invited to *Voyager*; how important it was that Londo kept his position at court, however insecure that position might be.

Perhaps he would succeed. Commander Chakotay seemed a reasonable man; one with considerable influence. Perhaps he could persuade Captain Janeway to meet Londo. That would strengthen Londo’s position at court – and take the wind off at least one of Lord Refa’s sails.

He arranged the coloured crystal plates, bowls and calices on the table according to protocol. He’d cooked Londo’s favourite dishes, in the hope that good food would lift the ambassador’s mood. Although, considering their current lack of success to get an audience with Captain Janeway and the upcoming visit of Minister Virini, Vir seriously doubted that all the delicacies of the universe could do that.

There was a buzz at the door, which perplexed him a little. Had Londo forgotten his own code, or was he being deliberately bothersome? Well, there was only one way to find out…

“Open,” he ordered, and the computer obediently opened the door.

But it wasn’t Londo who stood on the doorstep. It was a young Minbari, in full Warrior regalia.

“Greetings, Vir,” Rastenn of the Star Riders said calmly. “Do you have a moment? We need to talk.”

Outside the station, a crew of four in EVA suits had just opened the 12x24-foot hatch in the side of a long, narrow tail section that housed the fusion reactor. Garibaldi was grateful for the security cameras they had installed after the most recent bombing, back in September, as they enabled him to watch the progress of the zero-G team from the relative safety of the control cubicle.

“Be careful,” he warned them. “This part of the hull isn’t pressurized and does not rotate. One wrong move, and you’ll find yourselves floating in space.”

Morishi’s men didn’t need the warning, of course, but *Voyager*’s Crewman Dalby wasn’t familiar with the station, and Garibaldi didn’t want any accidents. Especially ones that would involve guests from an alternate universe.

“Take it easy, Chief,” the grin was audible in Morishi’s voice. “We know what we’re doing.”

“I hope so,” Garibaldi replied, “because I’m so not interested in a small-scale reproduction of the Big Bang.”

The technicians floated inside the tail section, using their suit thrusters. They had so much practice in that sort of stuff that they didn’t even bump against the hull. Once inside, they fanned out with scanning devices to search for the bomb. The security cameras had been placed in a rather weird angle, to oversee as much of the section as possible, so that the transmission wasn’t much help.

Dalby’s small, handheld device – he called it a tricorder – beeped first, and he honed on to its signal.
“I’ve found the bomb,” he repeated calmly. “It’s fastened to the reactor housing, and it’s big enough to blow straight to its core.”

Morishi floated up to him to take a look. “It’s exactly the same place where Carlson’s bomb was,” he said. “Someone’s playing a macabre game with us; someone who knows exactly where that bomb used to be.”

“Perhaps,” Garibaldi said. “Or perhaps they just want to make us believe that it’s Carlson on the loose again, should we manage to find the bomb in the first place.”

“It must have been one of those who left us to join NightWatch,” Morishi speculated. “We never made it public where the bomb actually had been.”

“Possibly,” Garibaldi said. “If we’re lucky, he might even have left behind his DNA for us. But let’s deal with first things first. Can you remove it from the reactor housing?”

“Not this time, I’m afraid,” Morishi replied. “It may look like Carlson’s handiwork, but in fact, it’s a lot more sophisticated. What if it’s outfitted with a motion trigger?”

“How likely is that?” Garibaldi asked.

“Very likely, in fact,” the voice of Dalby answered. “It doesn’t have a timer – at least none that I could recognize, and I’ve seen my fair share of those things – so it must be detonated via remote control. The bomber wouldn’t risk letting it be removed.”

“So, what are we doing, then?” Garibaldi asked.

“I’ll try to interrupt the electronic emissions of the bomb,” Dalby replied. “That might take some time, so I’d suggest that the others return to you… just in case I fail.”

“If you fail, it won’t really matter where we are,” Morishi pointed out logically. “Just try to get done with it before the bomber pushes the button, and we’ll all be fine. How are you gonna do it anyway? We don’t even know the right frequency.”

“I’ll send a record of the emissions to Voyager,” Dalby explained. “Engineering can analyze them and suggest the best method to interrupt them. That would be the fastest and most secure way – unless you want Seven of Nine assimilate the bomb, that is.”

The joke was completely lost on Garibaldi and the rest of the Babylon 5 crew, of course. Dalby shook his head, murmured something like “never mind” under his breath and started with the recording.

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“To talk about what?” Vir demanded nervously. “Can’t it wait? Ambassador Mollari can return for his dinner any time now, and he will be most displeased – and very vocal about it – if he doesn’t find everything in readiness. Can we talk later, perhaps?”

“It depends,” Rastenn answered calmly.

“Depends on what?” Vir had reached the phase of nervous hand-wringing by then.

“Whether you can give me any information about a certain Mr. Morden,” Rastenn said. “I have just had the most… interesting conversation with him; and it is my understanding that Ambassador Mollari has been associated with him – perhaps still is.”
Vir deflated within a second and practically collapsed onto one of Londo’s overstuffed chairs. Morden on Babylon 5 again! That never meant any good. And so shortly before the arrival of Minister Virini and Lord Refa… No, that wasn’t good, not good at all!

“What did he want from you?” he asked tonelessly.

Rastenn raised a hairless eyebrow. “Now that is an interesting question, my friend. In fact, the very same question that he asked me: What do you want?”

“Oh, Great Maker!” Vir was nauseous with anxiety already. “And what did you answer?”

Rastenn shrugged. “I told him it was none of his business. That a Minbari Warrior is well capable of getting what he or she wants on their own. That the only thing he can do for me is to get out of my way and leave me alone.”

“Oh, good, good!” Vir nearly passed out from relief. “Listen to me, Rastenn, that is a question you should never, never answer when it’s being asked by Mr. Morden… or any of his associates.”

That hairless eyebrow was lifted again. “Why not?”

“Because you’ll get what you want,” Vir replied, deadly serious now, “and the price would be a horrible one. Look what happened to the Narn… and that genocide, too, had begun with that simple question.”

“I fear I don’t understand you,” Rastenn admitted.

“And I can’t tell you more, not now, perhaps not even later,” Vir replied. “Ask Lennier about the creatures your people call the Sher'shok Dum – the Shadows. Ask him about the fate of Babylon 4, and where Valen truly came from. And for Minbar’s sake, try to persuade that brick-headed uncle of yours not to cross Delenn right now, because that could have terrible consequences. Not for Minbar alone – for us all.”

“I don’t understand…” Rastenn began.

“And I can’t tell you more,” Vir interrupted. “Perhaps even this is too much. But you warned me before Delenn’s inauguration, so it’s only fair that I’d warn you, too. Please, leave now. The Ambassador must not find you here. Talk to Lennier. Talk to your priests – and then make your own conclusions. You will understand.”

The sleek little ship – black against the eternal blackness of space – followed the luxurious Centauri shuttle transporting Minister Virini, Lord Refa and the rest of the Centauri delegation from their ship to Babylon 5 into the docking bay. The station’s sensors couldn’t discover it, with its cloaking device activated. Even if they had been able to pick up any readings from it, they couldn’t have identified it. The C&C crew would write the readings off as anomalous echoes.

Once within, the little ship touched down in the darkened corner of the docking bay, released a lone passenger, and then lifted off again, staying in floating mode right below the bay’s ceiling. No one would be able to discover it by running into it by accident.

The passenger – a bald-headed human male, wearing a long black cloak and holding a strange-looking staff in his hand – remained in the shadows until the Centauri cleared the docking bay. Then he upheld his free hand, and a translucent globe, seemingly made of pure red light, appeared in it – or, to be more accurate, floating just half an inch above his palm.
“Hello Lennier,” he said to the tiny image of Delenn’s aide appearing within the globe. “I just wanted you to know that I’m here… and watching, in case you should need help.”

“I must respectfully admit that I do not know who you are, sir,” Lennier replied in confusion.

“Have you forgotten me so soon?” the man asked in a tone of genuine sorrow. “Sad… but that’s the way of the world, I suppose, so it doesn’t matter. You’ll need me, so I’ve come.”

“But I have not called you,” Lennier said, even more confused.

“Not yet,” the man said cryptically, “but you will. Expect me when you see me.”

He closed his hand around the globe of light and it vanished.

“Well,” he said to himself. “So far, I have followed my teacher. I thought I had an obligation. But now my mentor is gone, and I see no reason to remain uninvolved any longer.”

With that, he whirled around and merged with the shadows.

In his modest quarters in the Green Sector, Lennier of the Third Fane of Chu’domo knelt on the floor, wondering what it could mean for a Minbari to hear disembodied voices… and if he was about to lose his mind.

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Most of the time, Lieutenant Joe Carey was a fairly competent engineer; confident enough to deal with things on his own. After all, he’d been considered for the position of the chief engineer at the beginning of their odyssey.

But when Dalby called in, telling him that he needed a thorough analysis on the electronic emissions of a bomb that could turn the whole station into a miniature sun at any given moment, Joe didn’t feel up to the challenge. So he called Torres to Engineering. Disarming bombs – or placing them to be completely honest – was something the ex-Maquis were more familiar with than simple, run-of-the-mill Starfleet officers.

“Okay, don’t panic, folks,” Torres said. “We can do this; it won’t be the first time. Hogan, start the analysis and look for parallels in the technical database. Where’s Harry? We’ll need him at the transporter.”

“He went to the MedLabs, to visit his Ranger friend,” Sue Nicoletti told her.

Torres said something in Klingonese that sounded positively menacing. Then she hit her comm badge.

“Torres to transporter room. Locate Ensign Kim and beam him directly to Engineering. Preferably yesterday.”

“But the captain told us not to use the transporters, unless it’s an emergency,” Lieutenant Rollins, currently on transporter duty, protested.

“I don’t know what you consider an emergency, Rollins, but in my book, the possible explosion of a fusion reactor would count as one,” Torres retorted snidely. “Now, could you just stop whining and beam me Harry over? Time’s something of an issue here, you know.”

Rollins wisely shut up, and moments later a shimmering transporter beam released a slightly confused Harry Kim in Engineering. Torres debriefed him in short, clipped sentences, mindful of the
fact that some ruthless terrorist could push the deadman’s switch at any moment.

“Can we risk to simply beaming the bomb out of there?” she asked then.

Harry shook his head. “I wouldn’t do it; not while we know nothing either of its components or of its construction. The transporter beam running interference with its emissions could trigger the explosion prematurely. There are simply too many unknown factors.”

“Just what I’ve feared,” Torres sighed. “All right, let’s do it the old-fashioned way. Hogan, how far have you gotten with your analysis?”

“Almost there,” Hogan, a young, gentle-faced human engineer with haunted eyes, was working frantically on his console… then he stopped and stared at the screen I surprise. “That’s odd…” he said.

“What’s odd?” Torres asked impatiently.

“Remember that Cardassian outpost Sveta’s cell wanted to blow up, just before we got hurled into the Delta Quadrant?” Hogan asked back.

“The one where the bomb didn’t go off because of some interference of a nearby ore processing facility?” Torres clarified.

Hogan nodded. “This bomb seems to have very similar emissions. So, if we can recreate those of a Cardassian ore processing plant…”

“… we might prevent an explosion and remove the bomb safely,” Torres finished for him. “All right; look into it. This could actually work. Harry, do we have any detailed information about non-military Cardassian technology in our databases?”

“Is there such thing as non-military Cardassian technology?” Harry asked, voice dripping with sarcasm, but was working on the problem already. “Ask Dalby to send me more info about the bomb. It might be similar to the one you were talking about, but it’s most likely not exactly the same. We can’t afford any mistakes in this.”

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Captain Kathryn Janeway had spent the entire morning in her ready room, leaving the bridge of Voyager in the capable hands of his Vulcan security officer, Lieutenant Tuvok. Studying the history of this alternate Earth fascinated her to no end… and frightened her at the same time.

“Whatever happens to us, we must not get involved in the internal struggle of the Earth Alliance,” he said to Chakotay, who had just returned from the MedLabs of the station.

Chakotay nodded. “I agree. The current situation is volatile enough as it is. Have you managed to get a clearer picture about the balance of power between human-inhabited worlds?”

“Interestingly enough, there seem to have been tensions between Earth and the Mars Colony in this universe, too,” Janeway said. “A perhaps meaningful parallel between our realities.”

“Perhaps not so surprising,” Chakotay interjected. “Perhaps it was the natural consequence of the early colonization period in both universes. Like England and North-America all over again… just in space. It’s understandable that new colonies, as soon as they become self-supporting, begin to resent the colonial powers. It’s only human – and we both are humans, them and us.”

“Perhaps,” Janeway allowed. “In any case, the First Mars Colony of this universe was founded
shortly before 2100, but was soon destroyed by a sneak attack.”

“Destroyed by whom?” Chakotay asked.

“That’s been an unanswered question ever since, although the best guess would be some isolationist group of Earth-bound terrorists,” Janeway replied. “The Second Mars Colony was founded fifty years later, and that’s the one still in existence.”

“Have they terraformed the planet as well?” Chakotay asked.

Janeway shook her head. “Apparently not. They don’t seem to have the proper technology for terraforming. They live under large biodomes on Mars. They tried to become independent early on; for example, Mars was untouched in the Earth-Minbari war. However, getting self-supporting must have proved more problematic than they had thought, as just after the war they experienced some tumultuous food riots.”

“I heard Mr. Garibaldi mentioning something about that,” Chakotay nodded. “He also spoke of various resistance groups with the strong intention to separate Mars from the Earth Alliance.”

“As far as I can tell, there have been two major groups fighting for independence in the recent decades,” Janeway said. “One is the terrorist group called Free Mars, the other the Mars Resistance: An organization with a broader base and more… temperate methods.”

“It sounds as if civil war would be a very real danger within the Earth Alliance,” Chakotay commented grimly.

“Actually, it has already started,” Janeway said. “A major revolt occurred just two years ago, in October 2258 as they count time. After that, a provisional government was appointed by Earth. This government was still in charge when President Morgan Clark declared martial law for the entire Earth Alliance.”

“When did that happen?” Chakotay asked.

“Less than six months ago, on the eight of April this year.” Janeway replied.

“I assume the colonies didn’t take it well,” Chakotay said.

Janeway shook her head. “No, they didn’t. Provisional Governor Xavier Montoya refused to enforce Clark’s decree. As a retaliation, five days later Clark ordered EarthForce to bombard the Mars Colony.”

“What?” Chakotay cried out, not wanting to believe it.

Janeway nodded grimly. “I’ve seen the news feed with my very eyes. Three moths later, Earth Alliance troops landed on Mars, and the main cities, New Vegas and Slimtown, were besieged.”

“Unbelievable!” Chakotay shook his head. “And I thought we had it bad, being abandoned by our homeworlds and all that. How did the other Earth colonies react to that?”

“Proxima III and Orion VII declared their independence from the Earth Alliance upon the bombarding of the Mars Colony,” Janeway replied. “Captain Sheridan followed suit and declared Babylon 5 independent as well.”

“That was courageous of him,” Chakotay said. “A dedicated step in the right direction.”
“Was it?” Janeway asked dryly. “He’s promoted himself from a military commander to a military dictator, including creating his own uniforms and his own laws. Tell me, Chakotay – what is the difference between him and Morgan Clark? Aside from the fact that President Clark was actually elected, that is?”

“You can’t be serious!” Chakotay exclaimed.

“Oh, but I am,” Janeway replied. “I understand that you sympathize with their case – and I won’t deny that President Clark’s politics can’t be condoned – but it seems to me that on his own way Captain Sheridan is no less of a tyrant than President Clark.”

“Wasn’t it you who once said that one can’t run a starship like a democracy?” Chakotay asked mildly. “That there has to be a clear command structure and proper discipline, if we want a chance to survive?”

“I did say that,” Janeway agreed. “But I run a single starship with a small crew and a simple purpose: to get us all home, eventually. ‘I’m not responsible for a city in space, with a quarter million inhabitants, a great many of whom aren’t even humans. And I at least consult my officers before making any decisions that would have a profound effect on the lives of us all – which doesn’t seem to be a practice of Captain Sheridan, if what we’ve heard so far is any indication.”

“But when everything is said, it’s still your decision to make,” Chakotay pointed out, “regardless if we others agree or not. Like when you chose to keep Seven on board.”

“It proved to be the right decision, didn’t it?” Janeway asked.

“So did Sheridan’s so far,” Chakotay retorted promptly.

Janeway shook her head. “I’m not that sure about that, Chakotay. And that’s why we must not get involved in the internal affairs of the Earth Alliance… or those of an entire alternate universe. This is not our fight.”

“But we’re already involved,” Chakotay said. “We’ve got involved in the moment when Ayala got trapped with Mr. Garibaldi in Grey 17. We’ve got even more involved when Tuvok chose to go in with a security team to help them. Or when we agreed to keep those captured Night Watch people in our brig. We’re already in knee-deep, and we can’t undo it again.”

“True,” Janeway said. “But we must make a clear distinction between the events concerning station security – and nothing else – and an open confrontation with EarthGov. Any direct action from our side could seriously endanger the balance of power and lead to a bloody civil war.”

“But what if the two are the same?” Chakotay asked. “And what about those Shadow creatures? Whatever you might think of Captain Sheridan personally, there seems to be general consensus about them being evil, malevolent and genocidal. How are we supposed to deal with them?”

“Not at all,” Janeway replied. “We’re supposed to avoid them if we can, because we don’t belong to this universe and therefore can’t take sides in this conflict.”

“And if we can’t avoid them?” Chakotay asked. “What if we can’t return to our universe? What if we’re trapped in this nightmare and can never get out? Wouldn’t that make us part of this universe? Wouldn’t it be our duty to help defend mankind against these Shadows?”

For a long while, Janeway didn’t answer, just sat there, rubbing her temples against a building headache.
“Perhaps that is what will happen eventually,” she finally said, her voice tired and raw with sorrow. “But I’m not giving up hope just yet. I still count on that alien machine on the planet below us. Perhaps if its keeper recovers his strength, we might be able to contact him. Perhaps he’ll be able to open us a way back to where we truly belong.”

“I wish with all my heart that to come true,” Chakotay said with quiet compassion. “But until that does happen – if it ever will – we’ll have to take our chances with these people here. I agree that we can’t – mustn’t, in fact – take any active role in the human civil war; but it’s our duty to take our share in defending the station against those Shadows. A quarter million lives are at stake just here – and who knows how many more elsewhere?”

Chakotay couldn’t find the right answer to that. She knew that Chakotay was right in much of what he’d said; but as likeable as she’d found Captain Sheridan when they’d been invited to dinner to Delenn’s quarters, she could not condone the way he’d made himself the judge and the law on Babylon 5 – perchance even the executioner?

Before she could have thought of something to say, her comm badge beeped.

“Tuvok to Janeway.”

She touched the badge. “Go on, Mr. Tuvok.”

“Captain,” the Vulcan said with his usual impeccable calm, “Lieutenant Torres has just informed me about some unforeseen events happening on Babylon 5. I believe you and Commander Chakotay should go down to Engineering and take a look.”

The captain and her executive officer exchanged identical blank looks. Then Chakotay shrugged.

“We won’t figure out anything by standing here,” he said. “Let’s go to Engineering.”

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Leaving Ambassador Mollari’s quarters, Rastenn went to one of the several contact points in the Brown Sector to meet his uncle’s informant. This time, his contact was Nidell, a young female of the Star Riders clan; a warrior herself, just a few cycles older than him. She was also a delicate beauty with an exquisitely formed bonecrest, with eyes as dark as the depths of space – and with absolutely deadly hands. Trained in the ancient self-defence art of **Tha’Domo**, she could break the neck of a man twice her size with only moderate effort – a skill that had already saved her life a few times since having taken up residence on Babylon 5.

“I’ve learned disturbing things today,” Rastenn told her. “I need you to have someone carefully watched around the clock: a human male by the name of Morden. He approached me in an empty corridor and asked me a strange question.”

“What question?” Nidell asked.

“He asked me what I want,” Rastenn answered.

“That’s a harmless enough question,” Nidell said with a shrug.

Rastenn shook his head. “Not according to Vir Cotto, and right now, he seems to be the authority in the matter. He told me, that was the very question this Morden had trapped Ambassador Mollari with. The thing what started the recent Narn-Centauri war.”

“Not if this Morden person is an agent of the Sher’shok Dum,” Rastenn said grimly.

Nidell gasped in shock. “Did Vir Cotto say that?”

“Not directly, no,” Rastenn answered. “But he did tell me that I should never answer that particular question; and that this Morden is very dangerous. Then he told me to talk to Lennier.”

“Delenn’s aide, the priest?” Nidell asked in surprise.

Rastenn nodded. “I think Delenn knows more than she’s told our leaders when she warned them about the return of the Ancient Enemy. I think she even knows more than she’s willing to tell Starkiller. And what she knows, Lennier probably knows as well.”

“Perhaps,” Nidell allowed. “But will he tell you anything? If he’s as loyal to Delenn as I think he is, and if Delenn isn’t even willing to tell Starkiller everything, why would Lennier be willing to tell you?”

“Because I am the heir of Alyt Neroon,” Rastenn answered simply. “If he can persuade me about the return of the Sher’shok Dum, I would have the right to ask for the ships and warriors of my Clan and my Caste to fight them.”

“Would you?” Nidell asked. “Would you step forth and demand that our Caste forget its grievances and fight in a war on the side of Starkiller? And even if you do – would Alyt Neroon listen? Would the heads of the other Warrior Clans listen?”

“I hope so,” Rastenn said grimly. “Because if Vir is right, if Delenn and Lennier are right, then our only chance to survive would be to unite our strength and follow the one who has the vision to lead us through fire… as our ancestors have followed Valen a thousand years ago.”

“That is true,” Nidell admitted. “But what if they are wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Rastenn sighed. “I would call it madness myself, had I not met this human… this Morden myself. There was an air about him that made me shiver with fear. And I’ve seen the same fear mirrored in Vir’s eyes. But I need to learn more before I make my move.”

“Learning more is always good,” Nidell agreed. “We shall observe the human as you have ordered. What else do you want us to do?”

Rastenn thought for a moment.

“Send my uncle a detailed report,” he said. “Ask him for a digital copy of Valen’s Book, so that we may look up what there is to know about the Sher’shok Dum… just in case Delenn and her allies are right. And tell him he might want to return to Babylon 5, soon. I am too young and too inexperienced to deal with a case of this magnitude.”

Nidell bowed in what was almost Religious fashion.

“It shall be done as ordered,” she said.

Whether she agreed with his conclusions or not was irrelevant. He was the heir to the leader of the Star Riders; his word was law, and she would obey, unless Alyt Neroon himself would tell her otherwise. As the priests said, understanding was not required – just obedience.

She left as unobtrusively as she’d come. After a moment, Rastenn followed suit to hunt down Lennier. There were still many questions he wanted to ask.
In the empty room, a bald-headed man with a long, black cloak and a staff in his hand emerged from the shadows and stared after them for quite a while.

“And so it begins,” he intoned softly.

Chapter End Notes

Terms and expressions in Minbari:
(...for the slightly more geeky among us. Most of them are from jumpnow’s Minbari dictionary, one or two from BainAduial’s story, “A Minbari Courtship”.)

Alyt = roughly “Captain”, but specific to a member of the Warrior Caste who commands a Sharlin-class battle cruiser.

Anla’shok = “The one who watches the enemy”, a quasi-military organization that primarily operates behind the scenes as spies, messengers, and rescue personnel. Charged by Valen with watching for the return of the Shadows. Although a common misconception exists that the Anla’shok are associated with the Religious Caste, they are in fact completely separate from all three Castes, both by tradition and by law.

Id’Minbari – Minbari Soul. Used to indicate humans who are believed to carry reborn Minbari souls.

Sher’shok Dum – “Ancient Enemy”, the Minbari term for the Shadows.

Tha’Domo – a fighting order of the Religious Caste, known to accompany the Warrior Caste into battle in the ancient past. Now primarily a monastic order. The fact that Nidell is trained in this particular fighting style indicates Religious background. As Minbari are generally allowed to follow the calling of their heart when they choose the Caste they want to belong to, it is, at least theoretically, possible for the child of a Religious couple to become a warrior... or vice versa.
PART 03

Londo Mollari, ambassador of the great Centauri Republic on Babylon 5, returned to his quarters in an exceptionally foul mood. Not that that would have been something new. He’d been in such a dark mood ever since the death of Adira Tyree, the last, late-blooming love of his life. Little else could faze him anymore in these days. Not even the fact that his star was sinking dangerously at court. Again.

Which didn’t mean he’d give up easily. No Mollari had ever retreated from a battle of wills and wits – or from any other battle, in fact – and Londo did not intend to be the first. He had nurtured his grievances for a very long time, and was determined to execute his vengeance not only for Adira’s death but also for those of Prime Minister Malachi – a dear old friend of his – and, even more importantly, for Urza Jaddo.

Oh, Urza! Dear old Scowltura, his best, closest friend, his sworn brother in the Koral Pridho! The fact that Urza hadn’t seen any other way to save his family than to die voluntarily in the Murago, by Londo’s hands, of all people, was the last straw for the ambassador.

The ones responsible for these atrocities would pay. By the Great Maker, they would pay dearly! No matter what the vengeance would cost Londo personally, he would make them pay.

Humans had a strangely fitting concept about someone selling his soul to the Devil to achieve an important goal. Londo wasn’t sure the human concept of a soul matched that of the Centauri, but one thing was sure: the… associates of Mr. Morden were as close to the Devil as one could imagine, if he’d understood rightly what humans meant under that name. This time, however, Londo had found a way to reach his goal without them getting involved, and that knowledge made the foretaste of vengeance the sweeter.

He strode into his quarters with the determined look of the future Emperor he’d been foretold to become one day and saw with satisfaction that dinner had been prepared in proper fashion. Vir might have been completely unfit for courtly life – and the perspective that he, too, was supposed to become Emperor one day, according to the same prophecy, promised a sad, sad future for the Republic – but he had his uses.

For starters, he was willing and able to do the work of a literal army of servants around an ambassador’s person. Plus, he was more loyal than any Centauri ought to be – a personality flaw, no question about that, but it made him very valuable. With him around, Londo didn’t have to keep a satchel full of broad-band antidotes on his person all the time as most Centauri nobles saw necessary to do.

Strangely enough, the thought that Vir might one day poison him didn’t even occur to Londo. Even knowing that Vir would one day follow him on the throne. That just wasn’t in Vir’s nature… not that
Londo would consider it a good thing for Vir, but it certainly was a good thing for him.

Somewhat mollified, Londo took his favourite chair, accepted the first course from Vir, and told his aide in an off-handed manner:

“I have decided that G’Kar must be dealt with.”

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Down in Voyager’s Engineering, the captain, her executive officer, the chief engineer, several other engineering technicians and the chief of operations were standing in a wary circle around a melon-sized item, surrounded by a Level Ten forcefield. Accompanying them were Michael Garibaldi and Morishi, who’d been beamed over from the fusion reactor control chamber, together with the bomb. Morishi and Ken Dalby were still in Babylon 5-issue EVA suits, having only removed their helms.

To say that Captain Janeway was not pleased would have been an understatement.

“Care to tell me how a bomb of unknown origins and configuration has ended up in our engine room?” she asked icily.

“That’s a long story, Captain,” Torres began, but Janeway interrupted her with a look that could have frozen Vulcan’s Forge over.

“Make it short,” she ordered.

“Mr. Garibaldi’s people found this bomb attached to the station’s fusion reactor,” Torres began.

“Actually, it was Seven who discovered its emissions while checking the comm system of their command core,” Hogan supplied helpfully.

Torres silenced him with a quelling look. She didn’t like being interrupted.

“Mr. Garibaldi called in for help,” she continued, “and Ayala dispatched Dalby because he knows the most about bombs and how to disarm them.”

“And the thought to inform me first – or Chakotay, for that matter – never occurred to you?” Janeway asked.

Torres looked properly contrite. “To be honest, Captain… I completely forgot about protocol. Dalby reported that it’s a remote-controlled bomb; we were running against time to disable it before the bomber could push the button. We’d have blown up as well if it went out in the fusion reactors of the station!”

“I see,” Janeway’s tone clearly suggested that the matter wasn’t quite finished yet, but she wanted to deal with the matter of the bomb first. “Are you sure it’s not going to explode in the middle of Engineering?”

“Fairly sure,” Torres replied. “I’ve sent the specifics – as far as we’ve been able to figure them out – to Tuvok’s station, and he agrees that the risk is minimal. But we’ve put it under a forcefield anyway, just to be sure.”

“Why not beam it into space and blow it up in safe distance from the station?” Chakotay asked.

“That was our first thought, too,” Torres admitted, “but Mr. Garibaldi asked us not to do so.”

“We hope that the bomber would return to the fusion reactors to check his handiwork if he can’t
make it explode,” Garibaldi explained. “That would help a lot to unveil this conspiracy and flush out most of the sympathizers.”

“If you say so,” the captain said dryly. “I must admit that I’m still not happy with the solution. I don’t like people endangering my ship just because they’re unable to deal with their problems on their own.”

“Frankly, I agree,” Chakotay added. “I hope Ms Alexander will recover soon enough, so that the people in the brig can be thoroughly investigated. I’m not adverse helping Captain Sheridan keep the station in one piece – it’s in our interest, too – but I don’t want our ship to become a target for his enemies.”

“So what if we do?” Torres asked with a shrug. “We’ve got far superior technology than Earth humans of this period.”

“Perhaps,” Chakotay said, “although that is by no means certain. We can’t know what they have up their sleeves. Besides, even if what you said is true, they still have the numbers. We’re not invulnerable, B’Elanna… and we must consider our options very carefully, or else we’ll end up changing history in this universe.”

“I wonder if it wouldn’t be a change for the better,” Garibaldi muttered. Then he looked at the Klingon. “So, what next?”

“We’re all but done with the scans,” Torres replied. “If we find a safe way to dismantle the bomb, we’ll do so, and send the parts to you.”

“You better send them to Morishi,” Garibaldi nodded in the direction of the ponytailed man in the EVA suit. “He might even make heads and tails of it.”

“Will do,” Torres promised.

“But what if you can’t dismantle it?” Morishi asked.

“Then we’ll beam it into space and blow it up, as Chakotay suggested,” Torres answered absently, her mind already weighing the possibilities.

“Very well,” Janeway said. “Let’s give it a try. And B’Elanna?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Do something like this without my knowledge again, and you’ve been chief engineer on my ship for the longest time,” Janeway warned. “This will be consequences… as soon as you have dealt with the bomb.”

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Rastenn tracked down Lennier to Red Sector, in the hollow interior of the rotating section that was called the Garden. The main purpose of this area was to provide food and oxygen and water reclamation for the station. But there were also parts separated for entertainment purposes of the station inhabitants: a hedge maze, a Zen garden, various sports fields, a recreation lake, a rotunda, a mosque, a pavilion, and the high class Fresh Air Restaurant.

Needless to say that the place where he actually found the young priest was the Japanese stone garden: a small one, not larger than a little pond. Lennier was sitting on a low bench encircled by the brick-like walls of a small, U-shaped enclosure, contemplating the waves of fine sand encircling the strategically placed flat stones.
“This used to be the favourite place of Entil’zha Sinclair,” he said without turning his eyes away from the peaceful sight. “He once told Delenn how difficult it had been to segregate even this small patch for a garden made of stones and sand. Room is invaluable on a space station, after all, and they needed the land for the hydroponic props and oxygen reclamation. But he had fought for it, and finally succeeded.”

“What is the purpose of such a place?” Rastenn asked, coming closer. “It’s barren – even though aesthetically so.”

“Look at the waves: each moving on its own order – predictable, unchanging… until you drop in a stone. Do you see how the pattern changes? Everything around the stone is altered – arranged into a whole new order. Delenn once said that all the ancient, holy books on Minbar cannot demonstrate the power of one mind to change the universe as well as this modest little place,” Lennier paused, then finally looked up at his fellow Minbari. “What can I do for you, Rastenn of the Star Riders Clan?”

“I require information,” Rastenn answered bluntly. “Vir suggested that I ask you about the Sher’shok Dum. He said if I did I would understand the true danger represented by the human whom they call Morden.”

Hearing that name Lennier stiffened involuntarily.

“You have dealings with that man?” he asked.

“No,” Rastenn said. “But he did approach me today, and perhaps he will do so again. I must know who – or rather what – he is, in order to deal with him properly.”

“You may be a trained Warrior, but you could never deal with that human on your own,” Lennier replied grimly. “He is what humans call a Shadow agent – a representative of the Sher’shok Dum. They speak through him, and at least one of them accompanies him all the time. He and two Shadow warriors were those who killed the first Ambassador Kosh, after the Vorlons had dealt the Sher’shok Dum their first defeat.”

“And Starkiller still allows him to stay on the station?” Rastenn asked in surprise.

“Captain Sheridan,” Lennier emphasized pointedly, “could not do anything. We had no proof. Besides, it would have been a grave mistake to reveal to the Sher’shok Dum that we can discover their presence. This station is imperilled enough as it is.”

“So the Ancient Enemy has indeed returned,” Rastenn said slowly. “Just as Valen has foretold a thousand years ago. Just as Delenn has warned the Council.”

Lennier simply nodded. What else could he have said; Rastenn had apparently figured out the truth without his help. The question was now, what the young Warrior intended to do with that truth.

“And that is why the Religious Caste is building ships in great secrecy,” Rastenn continued. “Not to establish their power all over Minbar as Shai Alyt Shakiri is trying to make us believe. You are preparing to fight the Sher’shok Dum.”

Lennier nodded again. “Someone has to,” he replied simply. “The Warrior Caste leaders refused to believe. The Grey Council refused to believe. The Markar’i Minsa refused to believe. So we had to turn to the Anla’shok – and to the humans, yes. Because weak as they might be on their own, humans have the unique ability to build communities. That is what Babylon 5 is all about. And this time, with most of the First Ones long gone, we shall need all the allies we can find.”
“And we of the Warrior Caste dishonour ourselves by letting others fight our battles,” the realization was a painful one for Rastenn. He had always been so proud to be a Warrior. He had never doubted that his heart called him to walk that path – and now he was supposed to leave the fighting to priests, workers… and aliens?

“That is a question I cannot answer for you,” Lennier said quietly. “But I do know that in this fight everyone will be needed – even the Warrior Caste. Especially the Warrior Caste.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have been trained to protect our people all your life. You have the weapons and you have the skills. If only you could find the willingness in your hearts as well! Since Valen’s times, there had never been a danger as great as this one. Not for our people alone – for all free peoples of the universe!”

“Alas, I doubt that you would be able to make Shai Alyt Shakiri to see that,” Rastenn said. “But my uncle also has great influence within the Caste.”

“That is true,” Lennier agreed. “Will he see the dire need of these times, though?”

“I do not know,” Rastenn admitted. “I do know, however, that he has had a change of heart since he fought denn’shah with the human Anla’shok. Perhaps he would listen this time. I sent word that he should return to Babylon 5.”

“And will he come, at your word?” Lennier asked. “I know you are his heir, but you are not fully adult yet.”

“Neither are you,” Rastenn pointed out. “And yet, would your family – or, in fact, even Delenn – not come if you asked? My uncle has left me here to learn; but also to be his eyes and ears here and alert him when his presence is needed. He will come.”

“And you will try to make him listen?” Lennier asked, still a bit doubtfully.

Rastenn shook his head. “No, I will leave that to Anla’shok Cole. I believe he has the better chance.”

“Better than you who are his heir?” Lennier couldn’t quite imagine that. “As much as Neroon has come to respect Marcus – and I do believe that he has – he can dismiss a human easily. He cannot dismiss his own heir, through.”

“That is true,” Rastenn admitted. “But as you have said, I am not fully adult yet. Besides, it would be better for us all if my uncle decided to join your forces of his own will: because he believes in the case, rather than having him simply give in to his heir’s demands.”

“You do have a point,” Lennier allowed. “Very well; do it your way. Perhaps if Alyt Neroon truly has a change of heart, other Warrior leaders will follow.”

*Londo’s statement – that he would have to deal with G’Kar – startled Vir considerably. He couldn’t believe that Londo would want to waste his time with that old personal vendetta; especially right now, when so much was at stake – for Londo personally and for all people living on Babylon 5 generally. Half the races were at war, and even though the Republic was uninvolved – this time! – it didn’t mean that the storms of war won’t wipe over them at one moment as well. And then there was the matter of Lord Refa and the presence of Mr. Morden on the station… However, he knew that speaking up openly against that plan would only inspire Londo to speed up*
his efforts in the matter. So Vir chose the indirect approach.

“I suppose you will have to, eventually,” he said as neutrally as he could. It seemed, though, that he hadn’t fooled his mentor.

“No, not eventually!” Londo retorted. “As quickly as possible!”

Vir sighed. This wouldn’t be a simple argument, he could already see it.

“Londo, did it occur to you that this might not be the right time for that?” he asked carefully. “Your enemies at court are moving on against you; your reputation…”

“Don’t preach me about my so-called reputation!” Londo interrupted. “Had you been more effective in getting me access to the human ship from the future, I might not be in this undesirable position. If I think about it – it is all your fault!”

Vir ignored the unjust accusation. He was used to Londo taking out his frustration on him and didn’t really mind. He’d been treated a lot worse by his uncle Jeraddo all his life.

“I’m working on it,” he replied. “The executive officer of the ship has agreed to a private audience. I’m sure I’ll be able to get you on that ship, soon.”

“Great,” Londo replied with a definite lack of enthusiasm. “In the meantime, I’ll deal with G’Kar – once and forever.”

Vir refrained from rolling his eyes in exasperation – with considerable effort. It would be wasted on Londo anyway.

“I really believe that we have a lot bigger concerns than that,” he said carefully. “Like figuring out what to do about your enemies at court. Or about all the other races that are at war. Are you really so concerned about G’Kar?”

Londo raised a lecturing forefinger and Vir groaned inwardly. That gesture always meant a lecture in brilliant unlogic that, for some strange reason, always ended with him looking like a fool.

“Big concerns grow from small concerns,” Londo pontificated. “You plant them, water them with tears, fertilize them with unconcern. If you ignore them, they grow! I have ignored this particular problem long enough.”

“Perhaps,” Vir still tried to sound reasonable, although in the heart of his hearts he knew all too well that it was a lost case to try reasoning with Londo in his current mood. “But Sheridan has given him sanctuary. There’s nothing you can do against him as long as he’s here.”

“Yes, as long as he’s here,” Londo repeated slowly, as if instructing a backward child. “Which means, all I have to do is to find a way to get him away from here and back to Narn, where he can be arrested, detained and executed!”

He grabbed one of the blue crystal calices, tried a spoonful of the machari pudding and made a sour face.

“This by you well done?” he demanded. “Machari pudding should be honey-sweet!”

“Sorry,” Vir exchanged the dessert in question with the one in the other calyx. He preferred his machari pudding less sweet, and with a touch of mint; he must have mixed them up in his anxiety during Rastenn’s visit.
Londo tasted the other portion and nodded in satisfaction. “Good. This is what machari pudding is supposed to taste like. Well, you’ll be happy to hear that I have found a way to get G’Kar back to Narn.”

Vir looked up from his dessert that suddenly tasted like fresh spoo. “You have?”

“Yes,” Londo replied, and there was so much evil delight in his voice that it made the younger Centauri shiver. “And you, Vir, are going to help me.”

Vir Cotto had never lost his appetite quite so fast before.

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Lennier returned from the Zen garden strangely comforted after his unexpected encounter with Rastenn. He almost (but not quite) forgot about the disembodied voice speaking to him in his quarters earlier. He briefly contemplated the idea of telling Delenn about it, but in the end decided not to do so. Delenn had enough concerns without worrying about her aide possibly losing his mind.

Besides, he wasn’t sure that he was, indeed, getting crazy. That voice sounded mildly familiar. If he could only remember where he had already heard it!

He was fairly certain it hadn’t happened on Babylon 5. So it must have been back home, at the Temple, as he had spent his entire life there, until coming to Babylon 5. But no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t remember. Which was strange, considering that he possessed the Minbari version of eidetic memory. But no matter how hard he tried, he kept coming up empty-handed.

The thought of returning to his own quarters where he might hear voices again appalled him. He went to Delenn’s instead, to see whether he could be of assistance with her work. To his surprise, he found Commander Ivanova there, drinking tea with Delenn amiably.

“Oh, Lennier, good,” Delenn said, seeing him. “Commander Ivanova has come to me with a problem and a suggestion. We were just about to discuss it. Take yourself a cup of tea and sit with us – I’d like to hear your opinion on the matter.”

Lennier demurely took his usual place, helped himself to a soothing cup of herbal tea and waited patiently. He knew that Ivanova would skip social niceties and cut right to the core of the problem; this tendency of hers, although it stood in direct opposite to Minbari custom, could save a lot of time.

He wasn’t disappointed in his expectations. Ivanova wasn’t even halfway through her own tea when she addressed the problem.

“It’s about the captain,” she blurted out. “He’s always in the war room. He isn’t eating properly, he hasn’t slept well since Kosh’s death, and he’s carrying on cranky. I think he might be suffering from nightmares, too, although he won’t tell me. We need to do something. We need to get him away from the war room, at least for a short time; to distract him. Enough is enough!”

“Do you have a suggestion how we are supposed to solve this problem?” Lennier asked. “While I agree that Captain Sheridan is… how do you humans say? Oh, yes – he is working himself into an early grave; but I seriously doubt that he’d listen to our arguments, no matter how well-meant they might be.”

Ivanova nodded, frustration clearly written in her face. “I know; I’ve tried. So I thought to invite the command crew of Voyager to an official dinner. To spend a pleasant evening with our command staff, to discuss things in a less formal manner. I’d like to invite you as well, Ambassador,” she looked at Delenn, “and, to be honest, I hoped you could talk the captain into coming. If he listens to
anyone, that would be you.”

“Well… if you think so,” Delenn said, a little doubtfully.

Ivanova nodded. “I know it,” she said and rose. “Well, thank you for the tea. I’m going back to C&C and make the necessary calls.”

“I thought your duty shift would be over,” Lennier said; he knew the duty roster of C&C by heart; it came in handy sometimes when he needed to find someone quickly.

“It is, but I don’t want to leave Corwin alone with the Voyager technicians,” Ivanova replied with a grim smile. “He’s a responsible young man, but that cyborg lady has… assets that would make the heads of most men spin. Human men, I mean,” he added with an apologetic glance in Lennier’s direction. “Good day, Ambassador. I’ll see you in the evening. The official invitation will be sent to you within the hour.”

With that, she left, leaving two slightly confused Minbari behind.

“What did Commander Ivanova meant by ‘carrying on cranky’?” Lennier asked. He spoke English well enough, but slang still escaped his understanding.

“I have no idea,” Delenn admitted. “But we do have a virtual dictionary somewhere, do we not? Perhaps we should look up the word ‘cranky’, hm?”

Lennier was already shifting through the electronic notepads and held up the one with the language database triumphantly. He switched it on, typed in the word in question – and then looked at Delenn in utter confusion.

“It says ‘grouchy’. I do not understand. Should it not explain the word, instead giving us another one we cannot interpret?”

“Look up ‘grouchy’; perhaps we shall get the real meaning then,” Delenn suggested, but with a hint of doubt in her voice.

Lennier did as he had been told – and looked even more confused by the results.

“It says ‘crotchety’ now,” he said. Something here does not make any sense. This cannot be a word – can it?”

“No wonder humans have such an eccentric culture,” Delenn commented. “None of their words have their own meaning. You have to look up one word to understand another… then another… then another… It never ends! Just like their discussions about completely insignificant matters that they actually find humorous.”

“So, do we know what ails Captain Sheridan or not?” Lennier had now completely lost any possible perspective about the matter. He hated that feeling. He was a scholar and a diplomat’s aide – he was supposed to understand things!

“I am not certain what all those colourful expressions truly mean,” Delenn admitted. “But based on what Ivanova has told us, I think the captain is frustrated, overworked and in a foul mood. Three excellent reasons to drag him out of his hiding hole.”

“I agree, but how do you intend to do it?” Lennier asked. “Captain Sheridan is a very stubborn man.”
“True, but also one who takes honour seriously,” Delenn replied with a sly grin. “I shall tell him I have already agreed in his name to have dinner with the Voyager officers – which is the truth. Then I shall tell him that since Minbari do not lie, except to save another, I would be publicly dishonoured if he said no.”

“And that will work?” Lennier asked doubtfully.

Delenn’s grin thinned a little and became calculating... almost menacing for a moment.

“He knows he must stay in our good graces,” she said. “After all, we are the only major power that still supports him. Besides, once I have dragged him out of the war room, he would love to discuss things with the Voyager officers – his only fellow humans he could be honest with.”

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In a shadowy, abandoned area of DownBelow, two men – humans, by the looks of them – wearing long black cloaks and strange-looking staffs, finally found together.

“So, here have you been hiding all these years,” the younger, the one with the bald head and almost electric blue eyes, said.

The older, silver-haired and more portly one shrugged.

“We always have to be somewhere,” he replied. “This place seemed to be as good as any... so far.”

“But no longer,” the younger one said. It was not a question.

The older one shook his head. “No, no longer. In one thing the others were right, you know. We cannot allow our secrets to fall into the wrong hands – which is why I need to get out of here; metaphorically, metaphysically and literally. I’ve been here for too long; the Shadow agents might stumble over my trail any time now. I’ve counteracted their actions as well as I could while still hiding... perhaps I have done too much.”

“And what are you going to do now?” the younger one asked. “Follow the others beyond the Rim?”

The older one shook his head again. “No; aside from the fact that they would never welcome me back, what would be the end of it? With Elric gone, there’s nobody left who would at least be willing to listen. No, I will relocate to some nice, far-away planet and sit out this war.”

“And do nothing?” there was a slight accusatory tone in the younger man’s voice.

The older one shrugged. “I am but one man, and what one man can do, I’ve already done. Together, we could have made a true difference, but the others decided that the sorrows of the rest of the universe do not concern them and went into hiding.”

“They are afraid,” the younger one replied with a shrug of his own. “Fear makes wise man foolish, or so it is said.”

“Well, let’s hope that in your case, it makes fools wise,” the older one replied. “You must take over guardianship over this place. Whatever the others might believe, we do have an obligation towards our own race.”

The younger one shook his head again. “I go my own way, Alwyn – you know that. I always have. I cannot be responsible for others.”

“Yes, you can,” the older one retorted. “This time, you must – because there is no-one else who
could do it.”

“I have already been penalized for helping other people,” the younger one said. “The others already believe that I am having too much contact with the outside world. They say, I am endangering them. That I risk exposing our hiding place. If I get involved any further, they might ask me to leave – for ever.”

“That is a very real risk, knowing the others,” the old man by the name of Alwyn admitted. “And only you can decide whether you are willing to take that risk – it is your choice and nobody else’s.”

“Yet you think I should take the risk,” that, again, was not a question. “May I ask why?”

“The humans and their allies are gathering their forces to make their move against the Shadows,” the older one said. “As long as the Shadow agent is on the station, there is no chance for them to succeed. The element of surprise is the only advantage they might have – but you know as well as I do that there are no secrets while the Shadows are present. However, they cannot move around the station without their agent – they exist out of phase and can’t operate standard equipment on their own.”

“So, if I… persuade their agent to leave the station, they would be forced to leave with him,” the younger one finished the thought.

“Right.”

“Why are you not doing so yourself, then?”

“I’ve tried,” the old man said, “but I’m too old and too powerful. Each time I tried to corner their puppet, they discovered my approach and moved him to a place with too many witnesses… or possible victims. Too many innocent onlookers would have been harmed – or even killed – by an open confrontation.”

“I see,” the younger one said after a moment of consideration. “So, you are too strong to chase them away, while I, young and insignificant enough as our kind goes, might – just might! – succeed. But what if I am too weak?”

“You could be killed,” the older one admitted, “or forced to destroy yourself in order to prevent your secrets to fall into their hands, yes. That, too, is a risk that you must take if you want to… to do something, as you have so eloquently put it. Again, it’s your choice. Yours alone.”

“I… I have to think about this,” the younger man said.

“Then think quickly,” the older one replied, “because we’re running out of time. The Shadows are on the move. They have been herding refugees into Sector 83 for months. Soon, they will launch a devastating attack – just as they have done against the Kaikeen Confederacy less than a month ago.”

“I understand that,” the younger one said. “But there are several aspects of this problem that need to be taken under consideration.”

“Then consider them carefully,” the old man replied, “and make your choice, soon. Or this sector of space will go the way of the Kaikeen Confederacy.”

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The invitation to meet Babylon 5’s command staff for a formal dinner came as a surprise.

“Did you know about this?” Janeway asked his executive officer.
Chakotay shook his head. “No; in fact, it’s something of an inconvenience for me. I already had plans for tonight.”

Janeway gave him a wink and a conspiratory grin. “I see. A private dinner with the lovely Doctor Hobbs?”

“Something like that,” Chakotay confessed. “Of course, as she’s the acting chief medical officer of the station right now, she would probably be invited as well. I’ll have to clear with her, though. When will this dinner take place?”

“In two standard hours,” Janeway replied. “It’s a little late, perhaps; but not too late for a few quiet hours afterwards.”

Chakotay grinned at her. “Playing matchmaker again, Captain? You just can’t help doing it, can you?”

“Well, we all need a hobby; besides, today’s event clearly showed how short life could be,” Janeway said, sobering quickly. “Any news from Engineering? Since we haven’t blown up yet, I assume things are going smoothly.”

“They’re working on taking the bomb apart,” Chakotay informed her. “Dalby and that Morishi person from Mr. Garibaldi’s people seem to have the time of their lives. I think there’s another beautiful friendship coming together.”

“Based on explosives and deadly peril,” Janeway shook her head in mild exasperation. “How terrific. Do they really know what they’re doing? Is it safe to play around with the device?”

“Tuvok seems to think so, and that’s good enough for me,” Chakotay shrugged.

“For me, too,” Janeway said. “However, Commander, we need to discuss disciplinary measures. What Lieutenants Ayala and Torres did today was irresponsible, unacceptable and against proper protocol. They acted without thinking, without consulting their superior officers, and endangered the entire ship with their actions. Than must not happen again.”

“Agreed,” Chakotay said. “I was surprised myself how easily they’ve fallen back to the old Maquis pattern, just because we’re not alone anymore.”

“Are we not?” Janeway asked. “These people might be humans, and Earth might be within easy reach, but this is not our Earth – and frankly, after what we’ve learned so far, not an Earth where I’d wish to live.”

“Neither would I,” Chakotay admitted.

“Which is the exact reason why we can’t allow discipline to fall apart and people to act on a whim of their hearts as they please,” Janeway pointed out.

Chakotay nodded. “Again, I agree. What would you suggest? Are you giving them an official reprimand or busting them down to ensigns?”

“That wouldn’t work,” Janeway sighed. “As ensigns they couldn’t keep their current positions, and let’s face it, we need them exactly where they are. I’ll give them that official dressing down, of course, but I also want you to talk to them. They used to be your people; the chance that they’d listen to you is a fair one.”

“I already planned to,” Chakotay said. “To be honest, the idea of beaming a bomb aboard has
shocked me a bit. I know B’Elanna is spontaneous, but that was plainly and simply a stupid thing to do. We’re not that desperate anymore.”

“Does that mean you actually did such things in the Maquis?” Janeway asked, more than a little stunned.

“We did a lot of desperately stupid things in the Maquis,” Chakotay replied with a shrug. “Including harvesting Cardassian ships and weaponry whenever we could. We didn’t really have the chance to order weapons and spare parts from Starfleet, you know. We had to take what we found, even if it sometimes got blown up into our faces. Such old reflexes are hard to break sometimes.”

“Perhaps,” Janeway allowed. “I don’t want such lapses to happen in the future, though. They are unnecessary and dangerous.”

“And I already said that I agree,” Chakotay answered. “I’ll keep a closer eye on my former comrades, just in case more old Maquis reflexes start kicking in.”

“Good,” Janeway said emphatically. “Well, now that this is settled; whom do you think I should leave behind in charge while we are at dinner with the station’s senior staff?”

“Perhaps Tuvok wouldn’t mind to escape all too human small talk,” Chakotay suggested. “Lieutenant Rollins has the necessary qualifications, too, of course, but I’d rather have the ship in more experienced hands. With most of the command staff abroad, it would offer an ideal target for infiltrators… or worse. Unless…”

“…unless Tuvok is watching,” Janeway finished for him. “That’s a good idea. Besides if I know Tuvok – and I think I do – he’d prefer a peaceful duty shift to having to listen to idle human conversation.”

“That would be the logical deduction, yes,” Chakotay deadpanned; then he rose. “Well, Captain, if that would be all, I have dinner plans to change.”

“And I have promised Tuvok to relieve him for an hour, so that he can pay Sickbay a long-overdue visit,” Janeway replied, stepping with him into the turbolift cabin.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Lyta Alexander was experiencing a level of peace in Voyager’s Sickbay the like of which she had not experienced for a long time. The design of the facility was simple, yet not as impersonal as she was used to from Earth-issue hospitals, and the company was… restful. Voyager’s doctor was a hologram without any brain patterns she’d have to shield her mind from, and the only nurse, a sweet-faced, small-boned, sprite-like creature, was of a telepathic race with strong natural shields. In the safety of the drydock, there were barely any patients, save for the occasional working accident, and what was an added bonus, here she was safe from Ulkesh. Having been bested by the seemingly fragile Ocampa nurse had sent the Vorlon sulking in his quarters for days, and when he’d emerged again, Lyta had been already injured and brought to Voyager. She knew Ulkesh would never risk entering the ship by force – not yet, anyway, not without the support of his own kind. He’d been beaten in his own game, and now he was waiting and watching, like a spider in the middle of its net. Lyta could only hope that Kes was truly as strong as Tuvok seemed to believe, because an embarrassed Vorlon was a dangerous foe. They were an extremely old race who kept grudges for an extremely long time.

She had no idea what would come next. The long-winded plans of the Vorlons, the secrets they were keeping – some of which she was now privy to and wished fervently that she weren’t – filled her
with dread. As long as the old Kosh had still been alive, she could at least hope that they were, indeed, fighting for a just case. But now, since she’d been forced to carry Ulkesh within her, she had the sinking feeling that it was all a big lie. That the younger races, desperately fighting form mere survival, were nothing but chess pieces in a big, circular game that would never end.

In her moments of clarity, she sometimes asked whether it was truly worth the struggle. Whether it hadn’t been better to simply give up and embrace death as the only way of escape on a personal and genetic level. At least in death, they all would have peace.

A gentle tug on the border of her consciousness alerted her to the presence of another person – another telepath. The well-tamed storm of violent emotions kept under tight control revealed that person to be Tuvok. Lyta smiled, without opening her eyes.

She’d come to value the company of the Vulcan. She liked his dark elegance, his measured economy of words and gestures, his well-ordered thought patterns. In his own way Tuvok was also a restful person to be with. Lyta had never considered finding a partner, but she’d come to understand that if she wanted one, it would be someone like Tuvok. Someone calm. Someone disciplined. Someone safe.

She knew it wouldn’t be possible, of course. Aside from being a hundred-year-old alien from a foreign universe, Tuvok was also married and the father of four grown children. And Vulcans, like Minbari, mated for life. She understood that. She respected that. She just couldn’t help feeling some regret about might-have-beens.

Tuvok took the chair standing next to her bed and gave her a long, thorough look.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

Lyta swallowed before speaking. Several times. The meds made her mouth dry like sand all the time. It was not a pleasant feeling.

“Better,” she finally answered. “Still weak, but better.”

“Do you believe you are up to some mental exercises?” the Vulcan asked. “The stimulants you were given right after your injury have taken their toll on you – that is why you are weaker than you should be right now.”

Lyta nodded. “I can do it,” she whispered. “I need stronger shielding. Soon, I’ll have to return… to Ulkesh… and he will want to know… everything.”

“Actually,” Tuvok said after a moment of consideration, “I was thinking of something different.”

“Different… in what way?” Lyta asked.

For a while, the Vulcan didn’t answer, as if still uncertain whether he was planning to do the right thing.

“I thought you might benefit from learning how to induce the Vulcan healing trance,” he finally said. “It is my understanding that Captain Sheridan wants the captured Night Watch members scanned. However, you are still not strong enough to perform several deep scans… and will not be for quite some time yet. The healing trance could cut back your recovery time by half.”

“Isn’t it also… dangerous?” Lyta asked.

Tuvok tilted his head to the side in an almost bird-like manner. It was a strangely endearing gesture
from a man like him.

“It would never occur to me to teach it to a mere human,” he said. “Not even to the average human telepath. Yes, there is considerable risk involved – but you have the mental strength to manage it. Otherwise, I would not suggest it.”

“I see,” Lyta weighed the pros and cons against each other. “And it would cut back recovery time, you say?”

“Considerably.”

“And you will be here to help me when I come back to myself?”

“Of course. You will need my help to come out of the trance.”

“Very well. Show me how it is done.”

Chapter End Notes

**Centauri terms:**

(About the spelling I'm not entirely sure, as I have seen these words spelled at least two different ways, each. I simply go with the version from the online B5 encyclopedia)

*Koral Pridho* = Centauri duelling society. Both Londo and Urza were members.

*Scowltura* = Urza’s nickname in the *Koral Pridho*

*Murago* = duel to the death. According to the rules of the *Koral Pridho*, the winner had to take the family of the loser’s into his own.

*Machari* pudding = imaginary Centauri dish, made up by me. Think of a pudding made of something akin to macadamia nuts.
Sorry for the belated update. I've decided to post "Out of Legends" first, since that story was already finished. From now on, I'll try to post a chapter a week again. Thanks for your patience.

Oh, and before anyone tries to lynch me: yes, Harry Kim is canonically a Christian. There’s even a crucifix hanging on the wall of his cabin aboard Voyager. Even though that’s the only clue to his spiritual orientation

PART 04

Marcus Cole, Babylon 5’s only resident Ranger, was bored out of his head. His recovery was slower than he had expected, and that made him grumpy, itchy, impatient and generally a pain in the backside of the poor, overworked medical staff. He just couldn’t understand why it was taking so long. He had been injured before – Ranger training wasn’t for the fragile in body or mind and besides, he had served in the Earth-Minbari war as a very young man. Unlike some human Rangers, he was not an inexperienced greenhorn. He should have dealt with the aftermath better.

Although, if he thought about it, never before had anyone damaged him quite so deliberately and thoroughly as Neroon had done.

Not that Neroon could have been the only one to blame. Marcus knew that. Neroon had offered him a way out, and Marcus also knew that the Minbari would never have spoken about his chickening out. Minbari Warriors were mindful about one’s honour – even about that of their enemies. Marcus could have gotten away relatively unharmed… but that would have meant bloodshed during the inauguration ceremony, and, as a result, possibly civil war on Minbar.

To be perfectly honest, Marcus didn’t really care who was leading the Rangers, as long as they fulfilled their purpose: to guard the innocent against the upcoming darkness. But Delenn had been Sinclair’s choice and, for Marcus, Sinclair had been and would always be the One for whom he was willing to die. He had challenged Neroon to denn’shah to defend Sinclair’s legacy; he would die for Delenn, because Sinclair had chosen her to fulfil that legacy.

It was that simple.

All those highly idealistic considerations did nothing to ease his current pain, however. Or his current boredom. It had been fun to watch the glaring match between Harry and Neroon’s young, hot-headed nephew a couple of hours earlier, but unfortunately, it had not lasted long. Rastenn had left to meet someone – presumably one of Neroon’s spies. Marcus knew Minbari tactics well enough to assume that the various Clans of the Warrior Caste had all quite a number of informants on Babylon 5. Knowledge was power, after all.

In any case, Rastenn had left quite early, and soon thereafter Harry had been “beamed out”, in the middle of the lame joke he had been telling, and never came back.

Marcus knew that some sort of crisis had to be happening on the station. He had had his suspicions
when the *Voyager* people had used their particle transporter to snatch Harry directly from his room. They didn’t flaunt their superior technology unless they absolutely had to – which, in Marcus’ opinion, was the intelligent thing to do. If they thought it was necessary, then something had to be up.

When Susan hadn’t dropped in at her usual time to visit him, Marcus realized that the crisis had to be a fairly major one. Susan *never* missed her appointments. She was as meticulously ordered and punctual as the station’s main computer. And the fact that B’Elanna Torres hadn’t come to visit him as promised after her duty shift ended, could only mean that they had a serious apocalypse coming. One that affected both *Voyager* and station personnel.

The medical staff couldn’t tell him anything, but that wasn’t really a surprise. Stephen had always complained that the MedLabs were the place where news arrived the latest. So he had no other choice than to wait – with growing impatience – until someone would finally remember that he was still there.

He was ready to crawl up the walls when Dr. Hobbs finally came to his room.

“Your latest results are promising,” she told him. “I think I can release you in three days’ time. But until then… do you feel like socializing a little?”

“It depends,” Marcus replied carefully. “What am I supposed to do?”

“Commander Ivanova organized a formal dinner for *Voyager*’s senior staff,” Lillian explained, “and apparently, Delenn has somehow blackmailed the captain into participating. They would like you to be there, too.”

“What for?” Marcus frowned. “Do they need a guinea pig to show that they are not poisoning anyone?”

The doctor gave him a stern look full of reproval.

“I assume they want to discuss some serious issues in a private circle,” she said. “And since you’ve been a key figure in several recent events, they need your input. Although,” she added thoughtfully, “it’s sometimes truly hard to withstand the urge to poison you.”

Laughing was still way too painful, Marcus decided. His mending ribs apparently preferred him in a more… dignified mood.

“Very well,” he said. “Could you have my uniform brought here? There might not be a dress code, but I seriously doubt that sleeping garments would be acceptable, even if I arrived in a wheelchair.”

*Londo Mollari was standing in front of the large mirror in his quarters, admiring himself in his best coat. Yes, he still looked dashing and dignified – and those who considered him and his position a joke and thought they could best him easily would experience the surprise of their lives – and not necessarily a pleasant one.

They thought him a broken old man; an aged predator with no teeth left to bite. Well, they were going to learn otherwise.

His plans had already been set to motion. Guards loyal to his House – men whose fathers and grandfathers had served House Mollari faithfully for generations – had been assigned to Refa’s entourage. The proof pointing in Refa’s direction has been gathered and recorded. G’Kar would play his part, as he had been promised a price he could not refuse.*
Now all depended on his innocent, most faithful ally; an ally who had no idea how he would be used and why. To a certain extent, Londo even regretted having to do so; but there was no other way. Vengeance was coming within his reach, and he would not let it slip through his fingers again.

Right on clue, Vir came through the door, agitated.

“Londo!” he exclaimed. “I just heard! Lord Refa is…”

“Londo waved him off. “Lord Refa is here with Minister Virini. Yes, I know. I am on my way to see them. You will meet me there.”

“I will?” Vir repeated with a frown. “I’m not going with you?”

“Oh, you will,” Londo bared his fangs in a shark-like grin, making Vir cringe involuntarily. “After you’ve run an errand for me.”

Voyager’s team of technicians finished their comm system check and let C&C to return to their ship. The Vulcan and the Bolian went straight back, that is; but Seven of Nine decided to take the scenic tour… or so it seemed. Strolling through the corridors of the docking area randomly, she finally stopped in the middle of one in a rather abrupt manner.

“Show yourself and state your intention!” he demanded coldly.

“Such aloof manners… such cool distance from all the mundane struggles of mankind!” a light tenor voice answered, and a bald-headed man in a long, black cloak emerged from the shadows. “Quite admirable, actually. But you do not need to worry about me; I mean no harm.”

“I am not worried,” Seven declared. “You are but a human; I am Borg. You are no match for me.”

“Oh, but appearances can be deceiving, can’t they?” the man said with a very satisfied expression. “Perhaps I am much stronger than I look. Perhaps I have hidden powers you can’t even imagine.”

“Unlikely,” Seven replied coldly. “If you believe that I cannot spot the implants under your clothes, you are mistaken. My cranial implants react to all sort of technical equipment embedded in human flesh – that is how Borg drones recognize each other.”

“Oh, but do you also know what they are capable of?” the man asked, irrationally amused by her answer. “Do you know the magic they can work?”

“’Magic’ is a mere product of immature human imagination,” Seven declared. “that can’t yet understand the hidden connections of science and natural law. Pretending that you are capable of wielding magic only proves your lack of true scientific understanding.”

“Does it?” he asked, even more amused than before. “Can science teach you the big secrets, the truly important ones? Can it teach you the fourteen words that make someone fall in love with you forever? Or the seven words that make them go without pain? Or what to say to a friend who is dying? Can science help you to rediscover dreams that life has stolen from you?”

Seven raised the eyebrow without the cranial implant.

“Love, as humans understand it is irrelevant,” she stated coldly. “It is merely a biochemical reaction, fuelled by the species’ reproductive instinct. Pain is also irrelevant – once its function for the individual’s survival is fulfilled, it will pass.”
“And what about death?” the man asked. “Is death irrelevant as well?”

“It is, if you are lucky enough to be Borg,” Seven replied calmly. “If you are part of the Collective, your memories, your individual distinction are added to the whole. What happens to the hull you inhabit,” she made a sweeping gesture down her body, “no longer matters. It is part of the whole, too, and utterly exchangeable.”

The man gave her a strange look. “Is that what you thrive to achieve?” he asked.

“That is what has been taken from me,” Seven answered matter-of-factly. “I understand that Captain Janeway believes she has ‘helped’ me to regain my individuality. That her intentions were what humans call ‘noble’. But in the end, intentions are irrelevant, too. What counts are facts. And the fact is that she has taken me from the Collective where I had my place and my purpose and forced me to lead a life that has long become alien to me.”

“Do you resent what she did?” the man asked.

“What I might feel about it is, too, irrelevant,” Seven replied with an elegant shrug. “This is my life now, and I have to learn how to live without hearing the others in my mind.”

“It must be a lonely existence,” the man said.

Seven shrugged again. “It is what it is.”

“But it was not your choice,” the man said.

“Neither was being assimilated by the Collective,” Seven pointed out logically. “In that, Captain Janeway was right. She believed that she has ‘rescued’ me from being part of a hive mind where individuality has no place. She never asked herself – or me – whether I wanted to be rescued. She has made that choice for me, just as the Borg had done when I was a child.”

“But if you had a choice,” the man said, “which way of existence would you choose?”

“Contemplating impossible choices is irrelevant,” Seven replied.

“Perhaps,” the man said. “Perhaps not. Since you are an individual now, it gives you the questionable privilege to make your own decisions. And so I ask you again, Seven of Nine, you who once used to be a human child – which way of existence do you choose?”

Seven considered the question for a moment. “I would choose not to be alone,” she finally said.

The man bowed to her in a somewhat theatrical fashion. “Then, maybe, there will be a way for you – one that you can accept as your own.”

Seven raised the unimplanted eyebrow again. “You are a peculiar creature.”

“Why, thank you!” the man actually seemed pleased. “I have been called many things in my life, but peculiar… this is a first!”

Seven had had enough from his mind games.

“You will give me your designation and your function on this station,” she demanded forcefully. “You will tell me now!”

The man shrugged. “Why not? My name is Galen – and I am a friend. That is my only function – though some people seem to think that it is enough.”
“A friend of whom?” Seven asked.

“Of all who wish to survive the upcoming great storm,” the man named Galen replied. “Take care, Seven of Nine from the Starship Voyager. We shall speak again, when the time is right.”

With that, he bowed again and merged with the shadows. Seven scanned the area with her tricorder, but there were no readings whatsoever that could have proved that he had been there at all. Not even the usual residues that would have been by a holographic projection.

It was apparent that the man – assuming he had been real, not just the product of a malfunctioning cranial implant – knew a method to blind the tricorder. Deciding to search the station’s database for people like him, Seven turned on her high heels and went back to Voyager. She had been up and about for thirty-eight standards hours. It was time to regenerate.

She stepped into the small chamber in the cargo bay and initiated the regeneration cycle. Her body and mind went into dormant mode immediately, so she could not longer see Galen, who stepped out of the shadows to watch her for a while.

“Yes,” he murmured thoughtfully. “Perhaps your way is the one that can save us all. I believe you will serve nicely as the Nexus.”

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Once again, Rastenn of the Star Riders had donned his Worker Caste disguise before going to infiltrate the diplomatic section of Green Sector. Even with all those Minbari priests, clerks, Rangers and spies around Delenn coming and going all the time, a Warrior would have drawn unwanted attention. And attention was the last thing he would want when trying to outsmart the ruthless, paranoid and very experienced Centauri agents.

His task was particularly difficult today. Minister Virini and Lord Refa, two Centauri dignitaries who had arrived to Babylon 5 somewhen during the day, had been known as two of the major warmongers at Emperor Cartagia’s court. Whatever they were up to, it would affect other people as well – especially as Refa, too, had been seen in the company of that human Shadow agent, Morden.

So when he had seen them coming through Customs, Rastenn knew at once that his uncle would like to learn as much about their agenda as possible. It was a risky thing, as Centauri had no problems whatsoever with killing suspicious people on the spot – or capturing and torturing them, for that matter – but Rastenn was a trained Warrior and an experienced spy. Besides, he hoped that he could still count on Vir to help him.

Hacking into the station’s computer to find the quarters assigned to the Centauri nobles had been the easy part. Staying out of the eyesight of the numerous guards had been an inspiring challenge, but he knew he’d be able to do so, in the end. Part of his extensive training had been to learn how to shield his mind, so that the telepaths Centauri nobles usually took with them to their travels would not be able to sense his presence.

All those minor tasks achieved, he was now lurking within eyesight to Minister Virini’s quarters, trying to figure out a way how to infiltrate them. That was a hard one, and he’d already spent there some time, wracking his mind over the problem, when the door opened and Londo and Vir stormed out.

The younger Centauri began to argue with his boss as soon as they were out the door. Fortunately, High Centauri was one of the languages Rastenn had learned during his training.

“I don’t believe this!” the young aide ranted. “Is that why you’re doing this? To win favour at the
Royal Court? How can you do this to me?"

Londo stopped and tried with a gesture to shut him up, but it didn't work. Vir simply continued to rant, regardless of who might have overheard them.

“‘To have G'Kar imprisoned or killed just to – to elevate your position?’ he asked accusingly.

Now the Centauri ambassador was getting truly angry. “You're young, Vir!” he snapped. “You don't understand, but you will!”

With that, Londo continued down the corridor. Vir puffed under his breath for a while to vent a little steam before he could bring himself to follow. But in the end, he did follow – as always. Unlike any other people who had ever anything to do with Londo Mollari, his devotion seemed to be unwavering.

As soon as they were both gone, one of the guardsmen standing at the door of Minister Virini’s quarters left his post and hurried off in the opposite direction.

That left Rastenn with a difficult choice. He could go to the former Narn ambassador and warn him that whatever ambassador Mollari planned was a trap. Or he could follow Londo and Vir and try to figure out what it was exactly that Londo planned. What little he had heard didn’t sound good – and if Vir was so upset about it, perhaps Rastenn didn’t know half of it yet.

Deciding that more detailed knowledge would give him a better opinion to make the right choice, Rastenn followed the two Centauri, careful to remain covered all the time.

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The official dinner, organized by Ivanova, had been set up in the middle of the chapel, with Brother Theo’s consent, meaning that the leader of Babylon 5’s Cistercian monks was also present. Sheridan seemed to have recovered a little from his exhaustion and welcomed his guests with genuine delight. Delenn and Ivanova, sitting on his left and right, respectively, exchanged satisfied little grins, seeing that their plan to drag him away from his concerns for a while has worked out quite nicely.

The senior officers of Voyager had chosen to come in civilian garb, which offered the Babylon 5 crowd fascinating insights into the clothing fashion of an alternate future Earth. Captain Janeway looked particularly elegant in her cream-coloured, three-piece trouser suit, with the matching silk blouse, and her long hair in a loose French twist. Commander Chakotay in light grey looked equally appropriate, although, as Lieutenant Paris commented, that kind of high-collared suit jacket he was wearing had been out since the 22nd century. Paris himself came in a Hawaiian shirt that was so brightly coloured that it hurt the eyes, and Lieutenant Torres was wearing something matching in style, though a lot less colourful. Young Ensign Kim was clad in a rather traditional fashion, like Chakotay, and seemed to feel a little out of his element among all those high-ranking officers.

The senior staff of Babylon 5 – wearing their black uniform – looked like a flock of ravens next to them... with the sole exception of Lillian Hobbs, who adamantly refused to come to dinner in uniform. Especially as this whole issue had ruined her long-planned date.

“Private life isn’t something we’d have a lot of on Babylon 5,” she explained, pushing in the wheelchair of Marcus, who’d put on his Ranger uniform to honour the event.

Harry and B’Elanna – who was still recovering from the thorough dressing down she’d received from Chakotay and was avoiding the executive officer’s looks as well as she could – promptly made place for the Ranger between the two of them. They were eager to learn more about the fine points of a Ranger’s life; Harry out of romantic interest, B’Elanna because she wanted to compare them
with the life in the Maquis.

Sheridan introduced Brother Theo to the Voyager officers, explaining them that the old monk was the one who was coordinating the gathering of vital information back on Earth, with the help of his fellow clerics from several different confessions.

“His work is of the greatest value for us,” Babylon 5’s captain added. “With all our ties with EarthGov cut off, and ISA putting out nothing but propaganda, we can’t get reliable news about what’s going on on Earth.”

“I assume EarthGov propaganda doesn’t speak too friendly about you,” Chakotay said from where he was sitting next to Dr. Hobbs.

“No,” Ivanova replied darkly. “Usually, they say that we’re a bunch of renegades… or, better yet, that we’re pirates and traitors, working with aliens to subvert Earth.”

“And people are actually buying that crap?” Paris asked, his sympathies clearly lying with the Babylon 5 crowd. It didn’t surprise anyone who’d known him for a while. He did have his own problems with authorities, starting right away with his father.

“Well, the fact that they’ve fired on their own ships might have to do something with that,” Janeway commented.

“We didn’t start it,” Sheridan said tiredly. “They were the ones who fired at us first; the ones who tried to take over the station and give it to Night Watch and other paramilitary organizations to use it for their own purposes, regardless of the wishes – or the safety – of a quarter million people living here… most of whom aren’t even human.”

“I understand that,” Janeway replied. “I’m not sure the average Earth citizen does, though. Especially when they’re not given the whole truth.”

“Just like the average Starfleet officer doesn’t understand why the Maquis don’t accept the Federations/Cardassian treaty in our time,” Chakotay pointed out. “All they know is that there was a treaty that had finally ended the hostilities with Cardassia – and now some insignificant border zone colonies are endangering it… and the peace of the entire Federation.”

Janeway shot him an exasperated look. “This is not exactly the same, Commander!”

Chakotay didn’t even flinch under her reproving glare. “Looks pretty similar to me, Captain,” he replied. “But that is our problem, and irrelevant right now, as we, too, are efficiently cut off from home.”

“For the moment, perhaps,” Janeway said. “But I’m still hoping that he… how do you call it? That mysterious construction under the surface of Epsilon 3?”


Janeway nodded. “Yes, thank you. I hope it would be able to open for us a way home, as soon as things have calmed down here.”

“So do I,” Chakotay said. “I want to get home as much as you do, Captain. But I’m afraid things won’t be calming down here quite yet.”

“No, I don’t think so, either,” Brother Theo said, his usually so jovial, round face darkening with concern. “At least no on Earth. The real problem back home is that folks have been conned into
thinking they can’t change the world. That they have to accept what is.”

“But isn’t that what priests have preached for over two thousand years?” Harry Kim, who happened to be a practicing Christian, asked in confusion. “That we have to take everything from God’s hand with gratitude and grow under the burden?”

Brother Theo gave him a reproving look.

“If that would be the essence of Christian beliefs, young man, our Lord would not have died on the cross,” he replied tartly. “But He knew that the world is changing every day; and that we need to change with it. Because if we allow others to do all the changes, we will be responsible for the direction those changes take. Even if we had only been sitting on the sideline and watching.”

“And that is only the situation back on Earth,” Sheridan added. “We’ll have to deal with that, eventually. But our first, most urgent concern right now are the Shadows.”

“I heard they are on the move already,” Chakotay said. “I assume you are certain that sooner or later they will be targeting the station, too.”

Sheridan nodded. “The problem is, their tactic just doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “They keep attacking random targets, in a completely illogical manner. I can’t find any pattern in their attacks. It’s... it’s frustrating!”

“I’m sure it is,” Chakotay said. “What happens once they are engaged?”

Sheridan shrugged helplessly. “Then their tactics are very successful... not to mention devastating. It’s a contradiction.”

“Perhaps,” Chakotay allowed. “Perhaps those random attacks are logical in some way, though, and you just haven’t yet figured out how.”

“That is exactly what I told him when I found him sitting in the war room, thinking logically about illogical possibilities,” Delenn declared with twinkling eyes.

“Or thinking illogically about logical possibilities,” Ivanova added.

The two women exchanged sly grins again, congratulating each other for the obvious success of this particular evening.

“Perhaps what you need is a fresh perspective, Captain,” Ivanova continued; then he turned to Chakotay. “Commander, Garibaldi tells me that you used to lead seminars in advanced tactical training for Starfleet officers once. Is that true?”

“That was years ago,” Chakotay replied, “and in a very different context of galactic powers. But yes, it is true.”

“You did?” Sheridan asked, his interest suddenly piqued. “Would you mind to go through the intel with me then? Perhaps Susan is right and a fresh perspective will be helpful.”

“I can’t guarantee anything,” Chakotay replied with a shrug. “I’m not very familiar with the situation. But we can give it a try.”

“Commander,” Janeway intervened, disapproval clear in her voice, “I thought we agreed not to interfere with the natural development of history in this universe.”
“No, Captain,” Chakotay corrected. “We agreed not to take sides in the internal conflict within the Earth Alliance, and I still stand to that. But I can’t just lean back and watch as these… these Shadow things flatten entire planets and massacre helpless people by the millions, if there is the slightest chance to help prevent genocide. I’m sorry, but that just wouldn’t do.”


“…doesn’t apply here. We’re not speaking about some primitive pre-Warp civilization here… although, frankly, I’ve always found it horribly hypocritical to leave such cultures without help because the Prime Directive. This is a situation no Starfleet regs can give us clear guidelines how to handle it. This place… this reality might very well become the only one we’ll know for the rest of our lives. And that makes it our responsibility, too.”

Janeway shook her head. “I can’t condone this, Chakotay.”

“By all due respect, Captain, you can’t prevent me from doing so, either,” Chakotay replied, now a bit more forcefully himself. “You can throw me out of Voyager, of course; but I think you know as well as I do that in that case I won’t be leaving alone.”

Janeway stared at him as if he’d hit her in the face – and quite hard, at that.

“Chakotay, why are you doing this?” she asked, visibly shaken. “I thought we had an understanding.”

“We did – and we still do,” Chakotay answered. “I’m sorry if you have to believe that every time I disagree with you I’m turning against you. I am not. But there are certain things I can’t allow to happen with good conscience – and not helping all those endangered people is one of those things. I might not be able help much; I might not be able to help at all. But I have at least to try – or I won’t be able to look into the mirror anymore.”

There was a long, tense silence around the dinner table; the Babylon 5 people realizing that this was a conflict between captain and executive officer that had been a long time coming, and that the confrontation might be changing a great many things in Voyager’s command structure. Finally, Sheridan cleared his throat and asked with forced brightness.

“By the way, where the hell is Garibaldi? I thought he wanted to join us for dinner – if only to criticize the skills of the cook from the vantage point of a self-declared gourmet chef.”

“That I had,” the security chief replied, coming through the door just on clue, “but I was delayed… by G’Kar.”

“Oh?” Delenn frowned; G’Kar’s actions, despite the Narn’s unwavering loyalty to their alliance, could be somewhat… eccentric at times. “What did he want from you?”

“Oh, nothing major, just a little favour,” Garibaldi slumped onto the empty chair next to Ivanova and eyed the presented dishes with a suspicious eye. “He needed something smuggled into the Narn homeworld, that’s all.”

“And what would that be?” Sheridan asked, clearly a little worried. “I hope not some weapons of mass destruction. Another Narn-Centauri war would be the last thing we could use right now; not to mention that the Narns wouldn’t have a rat’s chance in an open confrontation.”

“Nah,” Garibaldi replied; then he took a spoon and began to eat rather speedily as if he’d wanted to catch up with the others who were already at the second course. “Just himself.”
Rastenn had no difficulties following Vir to the transport tube undetected. The young aide was upset and distracted and obviously paid his surroundings very little attention. He didn’t even give the Centauri guardsman already in the car as much as a glance when shuffling in.

Rastenn, on the other hand, did recognize the guard as the same one who’d been standing at Minister Virini’s door just a few moments ago and didn’t believe in a coincidence for a second. He didn’t like how this was going; and even less so when he spotted the communicator in the guard’s hand, and how the man was fingering a button in the very moment Vir joined him.

This looked awfully like a trap, but Rastenn knew he wouldn’t be able to rush into the transport tube in time. He needed to find another option.

Very few people knew about the emergency stairways of Babylon 5, hidden in the maintenance tunnels, but they did exist, of course. Maintenance crews had to get from one level to another in case the transport system was malfunctioning. Fortunately for Rastenn, the spies of the Star Raiders had not only mapped all those stairways years ago, the data he’d secretly copied in Sheridan’s office two weeks ago had also contained the access codes for the maintenance crews, and he had both maps and access codes imprinted into his near-perfect memory.

Taking the educated guess that Vir was returning to his own quarters, Rastenn took the closest such stairway and rushed to the right Green level. He found it an unusual way of getting from here to there – not to mention tiring – but he was a Warrior; and he was young. He could do this.

And in fact, he almost made it in time. He arrived in the very moment when Vir stepped out of the car – just to see four dishevelled types rush him back into the car, right into the grasp of the guardsman. The tube doors closed behind them at once.

Rastenn hit the bulkhead in anger and sheer frustration. He only missed them by ten seconds or so! Then he took a few deep breaths to calm down. If he wanted to help Vir, he needed to think.

The four types seemed like the usual folks who populated DownBelow – people who had come to Babylon 5 in the hope to find their luck… and failed. The humans called them “lurkers”, and it was a known fact that they would do just about anything for money.

So the question was – who could have hired them in the first place?

Rastenn let the events of the last hour go through his head again and believed to have found the only possible answer: Lord Refa. The Centauri nobleman had visited Babylon 5 repeatedly during the previous months, and it was no secret that he and Ambassador Mollari were embittered rivals. Considering Lord Refa’s high position in the court of Emperor Cartagia, it was not hard to determine which one had had the luckier hand lately.

However, the short argument Rastenn had overheard between Vir and his employer revealed that the ambassador must have found a way to elevate his position in the Royal Court again – most likely to Refa’s disadvantage. That was something Lord Refa would not like. But to thwart Londo’s plans, he had to know what exactly those plans were, had he not?

The key to this knowledge was obviously Vir. Vir, who was privy to most of his employer’s plotting and planning… and who was unwaveringly loyal to the scheming ambassador.

In Rastenn’s opinion, that was an admirable loyalty wasted on an unworthy person, but if Lennier was right, Vir obviously considered it the calling of his hearts to take care of Londo Mollari, and who was he to interfere with someone else’s calling?
Which did not mean that he would be sitting idly and letting the idealistic young Centauri – and was that not a contradiction in itself? – getting killed, or at least seriously hurt, as a result of said misplaced royalty. He was going to rescue Vir… if he could only find him in time.

As it stood beyond doubt for him that Lord Refa had been behind Vir’s abduction, the courtier would probably want to speak to the young aide – preferably somewhere private. Rastenn went to the next computer terminal to find out where Lord Refa’s quarters were. That was where he would start; and hopefully, Refa would lead him to the place where Vir was being kept.

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Garibaldi’s casual declaration about G’Kar’s plans caused a mild shock by Babylon 5’s command staff.

“Is he bloody insane?” Marcus demanded. “There’s a standing warrant for his arrest back on Narn. If he goes home, he’ll be stuck in prison – if he’s very, very lucky. Shot at first sight would be more likely, in fact.”

“I told him the same thing,” Garibaldi shrugged, “but he didn’t listen – nobody ever does. All he said was that he had to go, no matter what the risks were.”

“Why?” Ivanova asked incredulously.

Garibaldi rolled his eyes. “I have no idea! ‘A personal matter’, he said. He left half an hour ago.”

“For Narn?” Sheridan asked with a frown. “What ship would still choose that route since the planet has practically been levelled by the Centauri?”

“The Rangers can bring him in quietly,” Marcus said, “and wait for him in a hidden place until he returns. It is doable. But once there, he would be on his own. We are not allowed to interfere.”

“You guys can really smuggle him in?” Tom Paris looked at the Ranger with newly born respect. “That would require some damn fine piloting, if the reports I’ve seen so far are accurate – and a great deal of madness to try doing so in the first place.”

“We are Rangers,” Marcus quoted the Anla’shok mantra with a shrug and a smile. “We walk in dark places no others will enter. We stand on the bridge and no one may pass! We live for The One, we die for The One,” he added, smiling at Delenn, who smiled back at him.

“Yeah, but do you have to die stupidly?” Paris grumbled, the cynic in him not quite buying into the whole Ranger philosophy.

“Stupidity,” Marcus replied in a dignified manner, although his eyes were twinkling, “is entirely a matter of perspective. One person’s madness is another person’s great revelation.”

“But most likely the same madness anyway,” Brother Theo commented, and everyone laughed.

“Speaking of which,” Brother Theo added, “we have a delegation of the True Gospel Mission Baptist Church visiting right now; in truth, they were the ones smuggling in all those data crystals from home. They wish to offer an open church service for everyone who might be interested – to show the aliens a more… joyous alternative of Christian beliefs, as they said.”

“You wouldn’t mind…?” Sheridan asked. Brother Theo was a useful ally whom he didn’t want to antagonize.

The old monk shrugged. “The chapel is for everyone, and far be it from me to prevent any interested
aliens from getting the shock of their lives,” he replied. “You might warn those of sensitive hearing to take earplugs with them, though. Members of this particular church interpret the Scripture’s encouragement of ‘making a joyful noise unto the Lord’ quite literally I’m afraid.”

Everyone laughed again. It was hard not to do so. Bother Theo had an almost infectious way to take everything with a pinch of good humour.

“Well, I think it’s a good idea,” Sheridan said. “We all can use a little joy right now, even if it’s the… erm… noisy version of it. What about your crew, Captain?” he looked at Janeway. “Would they like to attend, too? We’re a little tight for space right now, but if they use the chapel, a few dozen people more won’t count, I think.”

“Some of the human crew would doubtlessly want to,” Janeway said thoughtfully, and so would I, to be honest. It would be a taste of home – something we haven’t had for over two years.”

“Your homes must be fairly noisy places, then” Brother Theo commented sarcastically – then he flashed at her a grandfatherly smile. “But you’ll be most welcome, of course. The service will take place tomorrow, at twenty hundred hours.”

“I can take over Gamma Shift, Captain,” Chakotay offered. “I assume Tuvok would find such a ceremony… fascinating.”

It was the Voyager crew’s turn to burst out in laughter now; their hosts exchanged blank looks.

“Never mind,” Paris chuckled. “You’ll understand once you’ve spent more time in the company of Vulcans.” He looked at Chakotay askance. “And you really don’t want to be there, Commander? No nostalgic feelings whatsoever?”

“I’m not from Earth to begin with,” Chakotay reminded him, “and I’m not even nominally Christian. I can take my spirit walk whenever or wherever I want. You go; you’ll need it more than I do.”

“Well, if you think so,” Paris said doubtfully.

Chakotay nodded. “I do.”

“We should get back to Voyager, then,” Janeway said. “It’s getting late, and most of us are on Alpha Shift tomorrow.”


“It’s the first duty shift of the day, which is from oh-six-hundred to fourteen hundred hours,” Harry explained readily. “Usually, the senior officers are on duty during Alpha Shift, with one replacement crewmember each, in case of emergencies. Beta Shift is from fourteen hundred to twenty hundred, and Gamma Shift is the dog watch – it lasts all night.”

“Ensign, I don’t believe Captain Sheridan wanted such a detailed answer,” Janeway said. She didn’t add that the duty roster of the ship was not the business of outsiders, but the warning was clear enough.

Harry blushed in embarrassment. Even after more than two years in the Delta Quadrant, he sometimes turned back into an over-eager cadet. As Paris had put once, he just couldn’t stop babbling, and although he knew Tom hadn’t meant it to be a reprimand, he also knew that it was a habit he had to break eventually.

“There’s nothing wrong with a detailed answer,” Marcus intervened smoothly on his behalf. “Details
are good – they make senior officers happy. Especially when ordered neatly in a properly written report. Fortunately, the Rangers are not required to fill in written reports,” he added, and the others grinned involuntarily.

“That’s it: you belong back to the MedLabs,” Dr. Hobbs declared sternly. “You’re having too good a time – it can’t be healthy for your recovery.”

The others laughed again. Harry and B’Elanna offered to help wheeling Marcus back to his sick room, but Chakotay waved the offer away.

“I’ll do it,” he said. “Dr. Hobbs and I have things to discuss anyway.”

Sheridan glanced at the lady doctor who looked particularly lovely in her prune-coloured skirt and jacket, and realized for the first time that there was something going on. He broke into a grin that nearly split his face in two.

“Discussing things; that’s what they call it nowadays?” he drawled. “I must definitely lack a private life being so far behind the current vernacular in euphemisms. Well, have a good time, you two.”

“Thank you, Captain, I’ll do my best,” Chakotay replied, completely unfazed. Then he looked at Janeway. “I’ll see you on the bridge, Captain, around the end of your shift.

Janeway nodded in agreement, and shortly thereafter the Voyager officers left the chapel to return to their ship, Lillian and Chakotay were the next to leave, pushing Marcus’ wheelchair in front of them.

“They’d make a nice couple,” Garibaldi commented. “Too bad that the whole thing has no future – what, with them belonging to different universes and stuff.”

But Brother Theo shook his head thoughtfully. “Who knows, Mr. Garibaldi, who knows…? Our Lord leads us on strange paths sometimes. Well, good night, everyone. I still have Compline to pray with my brethren, and tomorrow there will be more work.”

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In the diplomatic area of Green Sector, Rastenn of the Star Riders was hiding in a maintenance tunnel opposite Lord Refa’s quarters and waited, with the patience only a sphinx – or a very determined Minbari – could maintain.
I was a bit surprised how easily Vir seemed to have gotten over the forced telepathic scan in “And the Rock Cried Out, No Hiding Place” – and frankly, I’m not buying it. He ought to have been much worse for the wear afterwards. So I’m trying for a more realistic approach here.

The word *brachiarti* (sing. *brachiarte*) for the Centauri tentacles is the invention of the wonderful Andraste and first appeared in her story “Certamen”. Credit be given where credit is due.

I pushed Tuvok’s promotion a little further down on the Voyager timeline, so he is already a Lieutenant Commander here. Not that a few months would truly matter, just to be mindful of canon.

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**PART 05**

Rastenn’s patience got rewarded after about twenty standard minutes; he got used to human time units, as Babylon 5 ran by them and it was easier than calculating the Minbari equivalent in his head all the time. Lord Refa left his quarters in the company of another Centauri, whom Rastenn recognized as a telepath – he had been trained to spot them – and clamped down his shields at once. While not a mind-reader himself, he was born with the latent ability to detect telepathic scans instantly; a useful trait that had been trained and nurtured all his life.

Now he understood Lord Refa’s intentions. In his devoted loyalty to Londo, Vir might withstand physical torture till death. He looked soft, but he could be surprisingly resilient if he had to – Rastenn had already learned that much. So these two were going to rip his mind apart instead, take what they needed and then discard him like some broken, useless tool. It would save them time and ensure that Vir wouldn’t be able to warn Londo.

Rastenn was not going to let that happen, if he could help it. Mind-rape was detested among Minbari; although, to the shame of many among them, it had been used during the war to gather much-needed information. But that had been in wartime, when their leaders had been truly desperate. For even though they had been winning the war, due to their low birth rates, the loss of life had taken a terrible toll on them as well. Ending the war – and quickly – had become very urgent after a while.

What Lord Refa was planning now, though, was utterly detestable. Vir was not his enemy – he was a good, decent, and ultimately harmless person. And yet he was being used ruthlessly as some sort of pawn, both by his employer and the opposing faction. Rastenn found that outrageous. The weak should have been protected, not exploited. There was no honour in that – although he began to suspect that the Centauri concept of honour was something no Minbari would agree with.

He didn’t know what Londo had demanded from Vir, but he could take it from Vir’s reaction that it must have been something the younger Centauri despised. Still, he would keep it secret, for Londo’s sake – if he could. Such was the nature of his hearts.
Unfortunately, the choice would not be his.

Rastenn let Lord Refa and the telepath pass his hiding place. Now that he had figured out what their intentions would be, he did not need to follow them too closely and risk being spotted. All telepaths were scanning their surroundings constantly, looking out for potential dangers – it was a light surface scan, similar to the manner non-telepaths were keeping their eyes and ears open, without consciously choosing to do so. But Rastenn’s ability enabled him to track down an active telepath using that scan, and – unlike in the case of true telepathy – he didn’t even need to be in a clear line of sight, as long as he did not put too much distance between himself and his target.

As soon as Lord Refa and his telepathic lackey vanished in the transporter cabin, Rastenn sprinted down the corridor, hot on their heels. Tearing off the housing of the control panel, he inserted a small tracking device into one of the free ports – similar to those the maintenance crews used during work – and prayed to Valen that no-one would come his way before he got what he needed.

After a few moments, the device indicated that the transport tube had halted on a level of Brown Sector where cheap, one-room temporary quarters were situated. An ideal place to remain unobtrusive while doing shady business. That made sense.

Rastenn removed the device, put the housing back to place and called the transport tube back. Now he knew where to look for Vir – and the Centauri telepath would lead him the rest of the way, without even knowing it. There was a certain poetic justice in that.

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Ulkesh, ambassador of the Vorlon Empire on Babylon 5, was still seething in his quarters. After a fairly short time on the station, he had come to the conclusion that all these inferior specimen of the younger races had been tainted by the Shadows. How Kosh had not realized that fact was unfathomable.

Like many others in the Council, Ulkesh had opposed that the Vorlon fleet entered the war at this early phase. It had been well before proper time. The younger races should have proved their worthiness first. But Kosh had insisted, and since he had been the one closest to the actual events, the others had finally given in.

It had been a terrible mistake.

Granted, they had beaten the Shadow fleet – but at a very high price. Kosh had paid with his own life for that mistake – the first Vorlon to be killed for uncounted millennia – and nothing of him had survived. Absolutely nothing. That useless vessel of his, disguised as his human aide, had been out on some errand, and Kosh had nowhere to hide when the Shadows came for him.

Ulkesh had already punished the incompetent vessel, of course, and intended to keep punishing her. Severely. She had to learn that mistakes of this magnitude were not tolerated from someone who had been granted the privilege to serve a Vorlon as his vessel. She still had long, hard lessons before her. Lessons she would not forget for till the end of her pathetically short life.

Right now, however, he could not reach the vessel. Those strangers from a chaotic, alien universe had taken her to their ship. Under normal circumstances that would not keep a Vorlon from getting whatever he wanted, but his previous encounter with the seemingly fragile alien creature had forewarned Ulkesh to be very careful.

He was not afraid of the creature that she was now. She had caught him unaware last time; she would not have that advantage at their next encounter. But he could feel an incredible, almost limitless potential in her and feared that by breaking her fragile shell, he could unleash an
uncontrollable wild power into this universe; a power no-one might be able to tame.

The creature had no idea about her own powers. She did not seem to know that the shell she was wearing now was not her true, her ultimate form. That her strange race was so short-lived, even with the measure of other short-lived mortals, because it was merely a cocoon, meant to break up and release her true self one day.

Hers was a race unparalleled in this universe. Vorlons had needed a million years, as most younger races counted time, to evolve from their once corporeal form to the beings of pure energy that they had been for the last twenty or so millennia. This seemingly insignificant little race managed it in a mere nine years!

And even while in their mortal shell, they had incredible mental powers. Ulkesh had been given a taste of that already. It had not been pleasant.

The irony was that they did not even know. During their brief struggle, he had read the girl’s unprotected mind and learned that back home, they practically never used their abilities, and as a result, those powers were slowly drying up in them. They had such potential – and wasted it, vegetating in that ridiculous underground city of theirs, shut away by a visiting alien that had damaged the surface of their planet through ignorance.

Ulkesh would have loved to get his hands on the creature, metaphorically speaking. To take her to the homeworld, have her examined by the best scientists and bind her to his own kind. She could turn out a useful servant, if her powers were trained and carefully channelled.

But he could not make his move, not yet. There were other telepaths on that ship, strong and well-trained ones. He could not be sure he would be able to take them on, all together, and still emerge from the fight victorious. Especially as Kosh’s rebellious vessel seemed to bond with them way too quickly.

Yes, he might be able to subdue them – but that would most likely require killing one or more of them. And while he was not above killing – in fact, he found the act strangely calming, if it served to restore order in a chaotic universe – it would have been a criminal waste. They could make useful servants, too, if dealt with properly. All he had to do was to wait for his kind to arrive.

Ulkesh, like all Vorlons, despised waste. It insulted his sense of order.

Besides, he had more urgent things to do at the moment. The Council had to be informed that Kosh had been wrong. That the younger races had been tainted by the Shadows, every single one of them. The Centauri were the worse, of course, allying themselves openly with the enemy, but the others weren’t much better.

Even the humans of the station, who pretended to be against the forces of darkness, had used Shadow biotechnology to their advantage. Ulkesh could feel its presence. The individuals whose bodies harboured it were in cryogenic suspension somewhere in the MedLabs, but he could sense it, even in its dormant mode.

That was another problem he would have to deal with. Should those dark vessels ever be revived, he would have to go in by force and destroy them – if he could. Their ability to merge with any available technology made them extremely dangerous, even for a Vorlon.

Again, this was something that would better wait till the others arrived. For that, though, he had to send a message to the Council. Make the others realize that there might not be any other choice than end this circular conflict, once and forever.
It was a drastic step, one that both sides had avoided so far. Perhaps it was time to change that now. All the other players had long left the field – perhaps the field itself was no longer needed, either.

Lifting off from behind the half-transparent glass panel obscuring his resting place, Ulkesh returned into his encounter suit. It was time to pay his ship a visit.

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Chakotay, true to his promise, helped Lillian to wheel a visibly tired Marcus Cole back to his sick room. MedLab was quiet and peaceful in this late hour. Thankfully, there had been no emergencies on the previous day, so there were no other patients at the moment. Dr. Maya Hernandez, a short, middle-aged doctor had night shift, assisted by a somewhat younger male Japanese med tech named Kiriyama.

Officially, Dr. Hernandez no longer belonged to the medical staff of Babylon 5; she had requested a reassignment to Io after two years, where she had worked with Dr. Kyle until his death. She’d been visiting when Babylon 5 had severed ties with EarthGov and stuck here. Sure, she could have left when the Night Watch people had been booted out, but decided that she was more needed here – a sentiment with which Lillian couldn’t have agreed more. Especially after Dr. Franklin had left to go and find his lost self. She would have drowned in work otherwise.

“You look flustered, young man,” Hernandez told Marcus sternly. “Too much fun apparently doesn’t agree with your condition.”

The Ranger made a long-suffering face and looked at Chakotay as if expecting support from him.

“Why do all doctors have to say that?” he complained. “Is this some kind of conspiracy to make the lives of their patients miserable?”

“Nonsense, muchacho,” Dr. Hernandez patted his shoulder in a motherly manner. “Consider it simply payback for all the grief you have given us every time you were in our care. Come now, Mr. Kiriyama will help you get ready for bed.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever again feel ready for bed,” Marcus grumbled. “I’m sick and tired of this place.”

“Trust me, it wasn’t more fun for us, either,” Lillian replied dryly. “Behave, and you might be allowed to leave in two days.”

Marcus still seemed fairly unhappy with the idea to spend another night in MedLab, but allowed the med tech to take him to the bathroom. Lillian gave Dr. Hernandez a grateful smile.

“Thank you, Maya. You are a treasure. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Dr. Hernandez smiled back at her. “You’re the one who has to shoulder the most burdens here. Now, be gone, the two of you! Shoo! I’m sure you’ve got better things to do with the rest of your evening… whatever’s still there of it.”

Lillian admitted that it was indeed so, thanked her again and left MedLab, with Chakotay in tow. But she did not continue towards the docking bay where Voyager had been placed. Instead, she glanced in the direction of Blue Sector where the quarters of station personnel were located.

“Chakotay, I was thinking,” she said. “It’s late, and I have to get out early tomorrow…”

“You want to cancel our evening?” Chakotay had a hard time to hide his disappointment; in truth, he doubted that he was very successful.
She gave him a heartbreaking smile. It was the same smile that had swept him away at the first time they’d met: during that blind date Sam Wildman had arranged for them, thinking they would be a good match.

“Oh, no!” she protested. “I just thought there wouldn’t be enough time for what we’ve originally planned.” She paused, then added a little shyly. “Perhaps you’d like to spend the night with me instead. In my quarters.”

“I’d love to,” Chakotay answered and felt a familiar, though almost forgotten heat beginning to pool in his belly. “I just… I don’t want to rush things, you know. This… this is important…”

“I know,” she said, still smiling. “And under normal circumstances, I would agree with you that we should take things slowly. But these are not normal times, my heart; we don’t have that luxury now. If we miss our chance tonight, who can tell whether we will get another one again? I don’t want to die tomorrow or a day after, when the Shadows or EarthGov make their move against us, knowing that we could have had something beautiful but missed it because we were too afraid. Can you understand that?”

“Of course I can,” Chakotay took her hand and kissed her palm.

She was still smiling at him, but those lovely, coffee-brown eyes of hers were shining with unshed tears. “Then give me this tonight. Please.”

“Whatever you want; whenever you want,” Chakotay replied, deeply touched by her artless honesty.

She nodded and squeezed his hand. “Come with me, then. I promise you, it will be beautiful.”

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When Rastenn reached his destination, Lord Refa and his pet were nowhere to see, but he did not let that fact disturb him. He had taken the possibility into consideration. In truth, it was better so – he would not hesitate to beat up a Centauri nobleman to protect Vir, but it could have caused an unpleasant diplomatic scandal. Dealing with things more discretely was better for everyone involved.

Especially for poor Vir, who could have been accused of conspiring with the Minbari Warrior Caste against a member of the Royal Court – a capital offence that could have led to his execution. With the Centauri, one could not be careful enough. They practically lived for lies, betrayal, backstabbing and intrigues. How such an innocent creature as Vir had been able to survive among his own people so far was something Rastenn often wondered about.

As he looked down the corridor stretching out in front of his eyes, though, he was confronted with an unexpected problem: there were too many doors opening left and right. His gift, while useful, was not one hundred per cent reliable. He could feel the presence of the telepath somewhere in this corridor, but he could not locate him more precisely. It could have been any of the three dozen rooms.

He took a deep breath and stomped down the short bout of panic. This was not the time for losing control. He was a warrior – he would find a solution. If he had to, he would open every single door; search every single room in this cursed corridor. He would find Vir, no matter what.

He only hoped it would not be too late by then.

The first couple of doors turned out to be uninteresting. He could hear human, Drazi, even Pak’ma’ra voices – well, noises in the case of the Pak’ma’ra – through the closed doors. Unless Lord Refa was playing some falsified voice records during his investigation, Vir had to be somewhere else.
The next few rooms were quiet – either empty or their occupants were absent or already asleep. In theory, Lord Refa could have used a white noise generator, of course, but that was rather unlikely. Firstly, it would have hindered him in hearing anything from the outside, and secondly, he would have needed to know in advance that he would require one. One could not simply by such things on the Zocalo at the whim of his heart.

So Rastenn decided that Vir would not be in any of those quiet rooms and moved on with his search-and-rescue mission. There were still depressingly many possibilities before him – he had been searching this corridor for fifteen minutes already, and in a quarter of an hour a skilled telepath could do horrible things to a mind as unprotected as Vir’s was.

Rastenn gritted his teeth and forced himself to continue methodically. Patience had never been his forte, but he knew he could not afford to overlook any possible hints.

In the end, however, it was sheer dumb luck that helped him. He could hear the heavy steps of booted feet from afar, and soon, two Centauri guardsmen marched by him, both at least two heads taller than him and twice his width. They wore the insignia of the Royal Court, and Rastenn recognized one of them as Vir’s abductor.

They paid the Minbari wearing the modest brown robe of the Worker Caste no attention at all – a common mistake of soldiers serving in noble houses. One that came in handy right now. Rastenn pretended to have just left one of the supposedly empty rooms and strolled slowly after them, as if going after his own business.

Nine doors further down the corridor, the two guardsmen stopped, and Vir’s abductor signalled someone with his communicator. The door opened without any questions being asked from within, and the two guards vanished behind it.

Rastenn gritted his teeth again. Now he knew where to find Vir, but it did not help him much. He could easily beat the guards in hand-to-hand combat – Centauri soldiers relied on brutal strength rather than skill and usually underestimated opponents half their size – but they had shotguns with them, and so did, most likely, Lord Refa. Vir could get killed in the crossfire if Rastenn tried to force his way into the room.

No; he needed the element of surprise to fulfil his mission. With the proper scanning device, he could have stored and reproduced the signal from the guardsman’s communicator and be let in as a possible co-conspirator. Unfortunately, he did not have such a tool among the useful little things he carried in his Worker Caste tool belt. He had to think of something else – and quickly. Who knew what those oversized apes were doing with poor Vir while he was wasting his time here?

Luck came to his aid again. Just a few minutes later, that door opened again, and out strolled Lord Refa, with an eminently satisfied expression on his unpleasant face, his telepath in tow. One of the guardsmen – the one who had orchestrated Vir’s abduction – stepped out with them and remained standing at the door.

“Watch him closely,” the Centauri nobleman instructed the guard, “but don’t kill him just yet. He might provide more useful information – he’s Mollari’s only confidant, after all.”

There could be no more doubt that Vir was indeed kept in that room… and Lord Refa had just eased Rastenn’s way in. Folding his hands, the young Minbari bowed respectfully to the nobleman who did not waste as much as a fleeting glance at him, and then continued his way towards Vir’s temporal prison.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to the guard, while removing the closed denn’bok from his tool belt; “but I
always wanted to learn more about these helmets of yours. The design is intricate – does it serve any other purpose than protection?"

The guardsman looked down at the small, seemingly simple Minbari as if he were a rat or some other lower life form.

“Get lost, little troll,” he growled. “I have no time to play with you.”

“That is unfortunate,” Rastenn glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Refa his and entourage were gone; then he made a step back to create more space for his next move. “It would have been less painful for you. But it is your choice."

He squeezed the middle piece of the *denn'bok*, and the pike sprang to full length. Grabbing it with both hands for maximum effect, he whirled around, and before the dumbfounded guard could have reacted, he delivered a stunning blow at the man’s midsection, right where the *brachiarti* – the tentacle-like male organs of a Centauri – were wrapped around his torso when not in use. Then he made an upward twist with the pike and rammed one end into the man’s throat with brutal force.

The big man went down as if struck by lightning, and Rastenn smiled in grim satisfaction. It paid out having studied the anatomy of alien species. That was one down, another one to go. He opted for the direct approach with that one and began to bang on the door loudly with his pike.

The other guard came out angrily to see what the ruckus was about. He barely spotted his fallen comrade when the end of the *denn'bok* connected with his face; the sickening crunch of shattered bones could probably be heard up to the C&C. Rastenn kicked the body out of his way and went in, *denn'bok* at the ready, in case there were any further guards within.

There were none. Only a bruised and dishevelled Vir, slumped on a chair in the middle of an otherwise empty room, and sobbing like a child, hand pressed against his mouth, as if he were ashamed for it.

Rastenn leaned over him and shook him gently. “Vir? Vir, can you hear me? It’s me, Rastenn.”

Vir was sobbing too hard to give any articulate answer. He just nodded repeatedly, his haircrest trembling with the intensity of the gesture.

“All right,” Rastenn said. “Listen, we need to get you out of here. I have knocked out the guards, but that would not help us much should Lord Refa decide to come back with more of them. Come on… can you stand?”

“I… I think so,” Vir hiccupped. He accepted Rastenn’s help and tried to get to his feet. It was not an easy task, but with much support from Rastenn, he finally managed – only to sway on his feet dangerously.

Rastenn adjusted Vir’s arm over his shoulder, grabbed the young Centauri around the waist and dragged him out of the room, towards the transport tube. He had to take the still sobbing Vir to MedLab, but he knew it would be hard. He was strong, but Vir was heavy – and currently dead weight in his arms.

“Vir, pull yourself together!” he said sternly. “I can’t carry you all the way – you are too heavy for me. We need to reach the transport tube; after that, we will be reasonably safe.”

“I… I’ll try,” Vir was making heroic efforts to keep up with him. Rastenn could only hope that it would be enough.
Ulkesh stood in Docking Bay 13 and stared at his ship in disbelief. He had tried to reach the ship through their special link – after all, it was part of him; had been for millennia, and it had never happened before that it would shut him out so completely. It was, at least in theory, impossible. The ship was under his control; it had been grown to be his servant, his companion… his vessel on the long journeys among the start. It was its very purpose.

On the other hand, the ship was alive – and sentient. It did have its own will, to a certain, limited extent. Also, it was old, almost as old as he was. It could learn, develop new skills. He had never taken that possibility into consideration. Apparently, it had been a mistake.

Still, he needed the ship to get away from the station; to seek out the fleet and deliver his report to the Council. He could have forced it to obey – it was well within his powers, and ultimately, the ship would have no other choice than do his bidding – but a deep disturbance in their semi-symbiotic relationship could have proved fatal later. So he formed a question and sent it along their link. He needed to know what the ship wanted.

The answer came instantly. It was a single image: that of the powerful little creature, standing in front of the ship, staring at it with wide, curious eyes. For the ship, she was a melody in the great music of things it had never encountered before. Something new. Something fresh. Something unknown and infinitely interesting.

For a moment, the ancient Vorlon could barely comprehend the fact that his equally ancient ship was actually sulking because he had not allowed it to learn more about the creature. Yet it was apparently so. And if he wanted the ship’s unlimited cooperation, he had to make certain allowances.

Perhaps it would prove useful, in the end. He was interested in the creature as well, and she seemed to be drawn to the ship. It could be a beginning.

Deliver the message, he sent alone the link. I might allow contact later.

For a while, there was no answer. Then finally, reluctantly, the ship signalled its consent.

Marcus was still awake when Rastenn stormed into MedLab, practically carrying a completely broken Vir. The Ranger had been suffering from insomnia for some time and usually spent half the night with reading, the enforced lack of physical activity having disturbed his sleep patterns. So he was the first to see them come in and was fairly shocked by the state in which Vir was. He could only see them from afar, through the glass wall, but that was enough.

He knew the doctors would be mad at him, but he just had to know what happened. Carefully, slowly, he got out of bed and made his way into the examination room where Dr. Hernandez was already hurrying towards the newcomers.

“Mr. Cotto,” the doctor asked in concern. “What happened to you?”

Vir was still sobbing uncontrollably, so it was Rastenn who answered, making Marcus wonder how he had gotten involved into the whole mess.

“He had been subjected to a forced telepathic scan,” he said. “I do not know how deep it was, but it had to be bad. I found him in this state in Brown Sector.”

And just what were you doing there? Marcus thought, suspecting that Neroon had left his nephew behind to gather information, among other things. He decided not to interfere, though. Not yet.
“I’ll alert Mr. Garibaldi,” the doctor was already turning to the comm unit, but Rastenn stopped her with a raised hand.

“Please, Hela’mer, do not. This is an… unfortunate episode of internal Centauri politics; he would have no jurisdiction in the matter. Besides,” he added dryly, “it could get me into trouble. I had to remove certain… obstacles from the way to get Vir out.”

“Are those obstacles dead?” Marcus asked, finally reaching the door, although not without some effort. If yes, that would cause even more trouble. The Centauri did not take it lightly if someone killed their people – not even in defence of one of their own. Especially not in defence of one of their own.

Rastenn honoured him with a short, Warrior-style bow – both fists pressed to his chest – while Dr. Hernandez helped Vir onto an examination table.

“Anla’shok Cole,” he said in polite recognition. “No, I do not think they are dead. It was not my wish to kill them. I just wanted to get Vir out safely.”

“Why?” Marcus asked in a clipped tone that would have made a Warrior Alyt proud.

Rastenn shrugged. “He is a friend,” he replied simply. “Besides, Lord Refa ordered the guards to keep him for further investigation. I have little doubt that he would have been… removed afterwards.”

“Refa,” Marcus repeated slowly. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, it does not,” Rastenn agreed. “I do not know what kind of political game Ambassador Mollari and Lord Refa are playing, but I did not want Vir to get killed as collateral damage.”

“It would be a shame indeed,” Marcus nodded. “He is a decent guy.” Then he looked at Dr. Hernandez. “How’s he doing, Doc?”

“Physically, he is not too badly hurt,” the doctor answered, injecting Vir with something. “The bruises are fairly superficial. His mental state, on the other hand… I don’t know what I could do for him, other than sedate him heavily to calm him down. For the rest, we’d need the help of a psychiatrist, or that of a skilled telepath. Only that we don’t have any of those on Babylon 5.”

“What about Lyta Alexander?” Marcus asked.

Dr. Hernandez shook her head. “Still recovering aboard Voyager. Mr. Tuvok taught her some Vulcan healing method that seems to help a great deal, but it also renders her unconscious for the time being.”

“Then Voyager it is where we should take Vir,” Marcus suggested. “They have advanced medical technology… and they have telepaths. Strong ones, according to what I have heard.”

“Perhaps, but will they be willing to help?” the doctor asked doubtfully. “Their captain has a very isolationist attitude.”

“Which is the reason why I’m going to ask someone else,” Marcus looked at the med tech. “Mr. Kiriyama, would you mind to fetch my belt pouch for me? It would save us time.”

“Sure,” the med tech nodded and returned with the item in question a moment later.

Marcus took one of those arrowhead-shaped brooches the Voyager crew used as communicator from
the pouch and activated it. "Voyager, this is Marcus Cole from Babylon 5. I’d like to speak with Mr. Tuvok, please."

"Tuvok here," a calm, precisely accentuated male voice replied almost immediately. "How can I be of assistance, Mr. Cole?"

"It depends," Marcus said. "Are you trained to deal with victims of a forced telepathic scan?"

"Yes," the Vulcan replied simply. "All Vulcans in Starfleet are, to a certain extent, in case members of the crew suffer a telepathic attack. How deep is the damage?"

"We don’t know," Marcus admitted. "That is why we need your help."

There was a moment of silence while the Vulcan considered his options, and Marcus began to worry, knowing how adverse Captain Janeway was to her crew getting involved in the matters of the station. On the other hand, he had been told that Vulcans considered life every bit as sacred as Minbari did, so there was still hope.

"Very well," Tuvok finally said. "I will be soon needed in Sickbay anyway, so I can take a look at your victim. Is he human?"

"No," Marcus said. "Centauri. Would that be a problem?"

"Not at all," the Vulcan replied. "Medical information concerning Centauri has already been downloaded into our databases. I shall have Kes consult them briefly before I do anything. She will know what to look for. Can your victim walk on his own?"

"Barely," Marcus said.

"Give him the comm badge, then," the Vulcan instructed, "so that the transporter room can get a lock. I shall have him beamed directly to Sickbay."

"Not without me," Rastenn said. "He will need a familiar face when he comes out of shock."

"That is acceptable," the Vulcan answered. "I will be in Sickbay in approximately four point six two minutes. Tuvok out."

By now, many of the Babylon 5 personnel knew what a particle transporter was and had been informed about the basics of its working. Dr. Hernandez was still a little anxious about her patient, though.

"Is that not dangerous?" she asked Marcus.

The Ranger shrugged. "No more than any other technology we use on a daily basis. In Voyager’s universe, it has been used for more than two hundred years, and I’m told that accidents are extremely rare."

"And this Tuvok person… do you think he’ll be able to help Mr. Cotto?" Hernandez asked. "Is he a doctor at all?"

"No," Marcus replied. "But he is an old, strong and experienced telepath. I’ve heard stories how he’d saved Lieutenant Paris from getting insane and dying from a telepathic programme that had been planted into his mind by an alien species, so yeah, I think he could help Vir." He looked at the digital clock embedded into the bulkhead. "Our four minutes are up. Rastenn, take the comm badge, and take hold of Vir, too. Good. Now push the badge."
Rastenn did as instructed. Marcus raised his voice just enough for the comm badge to catch it.
“Marcus Cole to Voyager. Two to beam directly to Sickbay. Energize.”

In the next moment, Vir and Rastenn were enveloped in the golden sparkling transporter beam and vanished from MedLab. Marcus looked at Dr. Hernandez and grinned.

“Wasn’t that cool?” he asked. “I’ve wanted to say that since the day I saw them beam someone out for the first time. Never thought I’d get the chance, though.”

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“Regeneration cycle finished,” the impersonal voice of Voyager’s main computer announced.

Seven of Nine opened her eyes and stepped out of the regeneration chamber with the elegance of a ballet dancer. She felt strangely unsatisfied… almost exposed. As if she had been watched during regeneration.

“Computer; has there been anyone else in this room during my regeneration cycle?” she asked.

“Negative,” the artificial female voice answered.

That was odd. She usually did not suffer from delusions, yet she had the very strong feeling that someone had been there with her in the room. Perhaps that Galen person knew a way to interfere with the internal sensors. To that, no so-called ‘magic’ was required… just a bit of advanced technology.

Nonetheless, it was time for a little investigation. She would find out who – or what – this man named Galen was and what he wanted from her. She disliked unsolved questions. They were most dissatisfaction – and could prove dangerous.

She left the cargo bay and rode the turbolift to the bridge. To her surprise, she found Harry Kim sitting in the command chair.

“Ensign Kim,” she greeted him coldly. “I thought this was Commander Tuvok’s duty shift. Were you not invited to dinner with Captain Sheridan and his staff?”

“We’ve just gotten back,” Harry explained, “and Tuvok’s gone down to Sickbay. Ms. Alexander is expected to come out of that healing trance just about now.”

“I see,” Seven dismissed the topic as irrelevant. She had no interest in the telepath woman. “Since you are already here, Ensign, I will require your assistance.”

“With what?” Harry asked in surprise. He was an operations officer and thus good with computer systems, but he really couldn’t compare himself with Seven.

“I need to search the Babylon 5 database according to certain parameters,” Seven answered. “You will assist me with that.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “One of these days we’re gonna teach you the significance of the world please in human society,” he said. “Very well; tell me what you need.”

“I am looking for information about a human male named Galen,” Seven replied. “Between thirty and forty, pale skin, bald head, very blue eyes. He was wearing a long black cloak and carried a staff, the purpose of which remains unknown. I want to know whether he – or others like him – have visited Babylon 5 before… and what they wanted here.”
Harry shot her a curious look. “You met this guy while on the station? What did he do?”

Seven did not answer immediately, as if considering how much she should reveal to him.

“He asked me questions no-one had bothered to ask before,” she finally said. “I found that… intriguing.”

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Vir and Rastenn materialized in what must have been the medical area of Voyager. Vir was so out due to the strong sedatives given him by Dr. Hernandez that he didn’t entirely realize what was happening to him, just blinked owlishly. At least he had stopped crying.

Rastenn found the experience – strange at best. It had happened within seconds, and all that remained was a fleeting disorientation. He supposed that one could get used to it, given enough time; and he could not deny that it was a highly efficient way to get from here to there.

This being his first time aboard the strange Earth ship, he looked around with great interest, trying to imprint as many details into his memory as possible. They have landed in what seemed to be a treatment area. Three oddly-shaped beds – more akin Minbari sleeping platforms than the usual human beds he had seen so far – stood there, equipped with alien machinery the purpose of which he couldn’t even guess. They were most likely diagnostic tables.

Through the glass wall, he could see a smaller room, in which an even more elaborately designed diagnostic bed stood. It had a cylindrical device arching above it, like some sort of clamshell – probably another diagnostic instrument – but was empty at the moment. It might be a surgery room or an intensive care area.

On the other side, with large windows looking to both treatment and surgery areas, was a small room that could only be the doctor’s office, with a semi-circular, computerized desk, and beyond it further medical areas he could not see from his vantage point. Everything seemed streamlined, highly functional and aesthetically pleasing: clean forms and watercolours everywhere. Yes, this was a ship that would match even Minbari standards.

On one of the diagnostic beds Rastenn recognized Lyta Alexander, Babylon 5’s resident telepath and aide of the Vorlon ambassador. She seemed unconscious and was treated by the dark-skinned, pointy-aired alien who Rastenn knew was the ship’s security officer and a short, fragile, sprite-like girl, also with pointed ears, but those also had ridges.

It was the girl who turned around at hearing the whining of the transporter beam and came to greet them.

“You are a little early,” she said in a low-pitched, surprisingly mature voice, “Tuvok is still occupied. But we can run preliminary scans on the patient, if you can help me to get him seated; he is too heavy for me.”

That Rastenn could believe; she looked barely more than a child. So he helped her to steer Vir to a comfortable seat into which the young Centauri slumped in relief, utterly exhausted. The girl gave him a compassionate look.

“The doctor will take care of you in a moment,” she promised. Then, raising her voice just a little, she said. “Computer, initiate Emergency Medical Holographic Program.”

To Rastenn’s mild shock, the image of a short, balding man blinked into life right after that, wearing a blue-and-black uniform. The man had an animated face and an almost manic gleam in his eyes.
“Please state the nature of the medical emergency,” he said; then he recognized the girl and blinked. “Oh. Kes. What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

“I am all right, Doctor, thank you,” she replied in that kind voice of hers. “But we have a patient with possible neural damage from a forced telepathic scan.”

“Oh,” the obviously artificial man said. “Mind-rape. Where is the world going? Really, there seem to be no ethical rules anymore. Are you the patient?” he glared at Rastenn. “Why are you standing around?”

“He’s not the patient, Doctor,” the girl, whose name was obviously Kes, steered the irritated physician towards Vir. “He is.”

“I see,” the doctor grabbed some small, hand-held instrument from a nearby table and began to scan the young Centauri with it. “Preliminary scans show no neural damage, although his vitals are rather low at the moment.”

“Well, he’s not human…” the girl began tentatively. It earned her an irritated look from the doctor.

“I’m aware of that. Medical data about the main alien species of this universe have been downloaded into my database. I should have a very serious malfunction to mistake a Centauri for a human!” he snapped.

“A malfunction?” Rastenn mouthed to the girl, confused.

She smiled at him. “The Doctor is a holographic program,” she explained. “Self-aware, programmed with the knowledge of two hundred of the best Federation physicians…”

“…but, unfortunately, without any proper bedside manners,” the blond human male – the one Vir had cleared from unjust accusations right after Voyager’s arrival – added upon entering the room.

“Very funny, Mr. Paris,” the doctor said acerbically. “May I ask what you are doing here? Usually, you are not so eager to appear for a duty shift in Sickbay.”

“Tuvok called me to assist him with Ms Alexander,” Paris explained. “She’s about to come out of the healing trance.”

“The doctor hugged, clearly insulted. “I would be more than capable of assisting Mr. Tuvok.”

“Yeah, but she wouldn’t be able to sense anything from you, and for a telepath, especially a disoriented one, that is a frightening prospect,” Paris replied; then he spotted Vir and his eyes widened. “Vir? What are you doing here? Are you hurt?”

“Later, Tom,” Kes interrupted. “You are needed with Ms Alexander right now. I will tell you everything later. I promise.”

Paris looked from her at Vir, then back at her, and finally nodded. “All right. I’ll hold you to that.”

With that, he picked up the tricorder and hurried over to the biobed, where Tuvok was watching the instruments above Lyta Alexander’s head.

“What is this healing trance they are speaking about?” Rastenn asked from the girl, but it was the doctor who answered, with a rapid-fire of detailed information.

“The Vulcan healing trance is a form of self-induced hypnosis used for healing damaged organs,” he
– it? – said. “It is a way to concentrate all one’s strength, blood, and antibodies onto the injured organs. Vulcans use it all the time, but this is the first time I heard about anyone else being capable of entering it.”

“Can she hear them?” Rastenn wondered, seeing that Tuvok was talking to the seemingly unconscious human telepath in low, even tones… too low even for his keen Minbari hearing to figure out the words. “She seems… well, out of it.”

“Low bioreadings are normal during the trance,” the doctor explained. “Actually, the subject remains semi-conscious during this time, even though there is no outward sign that they are. They know when people are near and also what is being said, but they can’t afford to take their mind from the tissue which they’re fighting to heal.”

“And it works?” Rastenn asked doubtfully. “What if they do not wake up again?”

“That is a real danger with this technique,” the doctor admitted. “When the bioreadings begin to fluctuate, which, in Ms Alexander’s case, began about an hour ago, someone must be with the patient at all times. The injured person must wait until the last possible moment, and then fight their way back to consciousness. At the first sign of consciousness a trained physician should be called… or someone familiar enough with the technique to know what to do. Look, they’re starting now,” he added with great professional interest. Watch; it will be most educational.”

With a fleeting glance at the completely indifferent Vir, Rastenn stepped just a little closer to the biobed, so that he could see better. Lyta Alexander’s eyes were open, but she seemed not to react to her surroundings. Had something gone wrong?

The blond human scanned checked the readings on the screens above her head, nodded and said something to the Vulcan in a medical jargon Rastenn could not understand. Tuvok nodded, too, and together they brought Lyta into a sitting position. The human supported her back, trying to talk to her, but she still showed no reaction.

The Vulcan shook his head – then, to Rastenn’s utter shock, he slapped her in the face. Hard. As she did not react, he slapped her again. And again,

Rastenn cried out in dismay and lunged to stop this, but the holographic doctor grabbed his arm. For a hologram, his grip was surprisingly solid… in fact, it was like a vice.

“Stand down,” he said. “He’s not harming her. He’s trying to help her to come out of the trance.”

“By hitting her?” Rastenn asked incredulously.

The doctor nodded. “Bringing a patient out of trance often includes striking them very hard since the pain helps them regain consciousness quickly. This is imperative since there is only a limited amount of time to regain consciousness once they enters this stage.”

“It is still… barbaric,” Rastenn murmured.

“Perhaps; but it is also very efficient,” the doctor said. “Vulcans have been using this technique for millennia. Tuvok has taught Ms Alexander how to use it to speed up the healing process. Look!”

Rastenn looked and saw Lyta Alexander shook her head and become self-aware again.

“Thank you, Tuvok,” she said quietly.

The Vulcan nodded. “You should rest,” he said. “The healing trance has drained your strength. But
you will be fully healed by tomorrow.”

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

A few minutes – and a thorough scan – later Lyta was in bed again, sleeping deeply, and the two men returned to the others who were waiting in the front of the treatment area.

“She will be all right now,” Paris said to the doctor. “The healing trance worked like a charm, hard as it is to believe. She will be up and running in no time.”

“And now,” the Vulcan added, “I will take a look at our other patient. However, for that, I will need privacy.”

Rastenn shook his head. “That is out of question. Vir has just been violated by a telepath. I will not leave him alone with another one. He will panic.”

“He seems calm enough to me right now,” Paris commented.

“Because he has already been given a strong sedative,” Rastenn retorted. “He was trembling and sobbing uncontrollably when I found him.”

Paris nodded in understanding. “He is traumatized. It’s not surprising. But… excuse me, who the hell are you again? I remember having seen you with him before.”

“My name is Rastenn,” the Minbari said. “I am his friend.”

“Good, because after this, he will need all the friends he can find,” Paris said grimly. “Look… Rastenn. I know what mind-rape is like. I had the pleasure myself. So trust me when I say that Tuvok can help him more quickly and more efficiently than any therapist.”

“I do believe you,” Rastenn said. “I cannot promise that he will, though.”

“Let me talk to him,” Paris offered.

Rastenn shrugged. “Be my guest.”

Paris crunched down in front of Vir’s seat. “Hi Vir,” he began in a calm, even voice, not unlike the one the Vulcan had used on Lyta. “Do you remember me? I’m Tom Paris; you’ve helped me, right after our arrival. You gave testimony to clear me from the accusations of that Brakiri, remember?”

Vir looked at him with bleary eyes, and after a while he nodded wordlessly.

“Good,” Paris said. “Now, listen to me. I know what’s happened to you. It happened to me, too, a couple of years ago. I know it’s really bad… But Tuvok can help you. He helped me, too.”

Vir looked from Paris at the Vulcan, then back. “How?”

“Vulcans have a method called the mind-meld…” Paris began.

Vir shivered. “More scans?”

“No,” Paris replied hurriedly. “No scans. It’s completely different. It serves the healing; puts up walls between you and what’s happened… makes it easier to bear. And when something like that happens again, you’ll be able to defend yourself better.”

For the first time, something akin hope seemed to glimmer in Vir’s eyes. “It will help?” he asked tentatively.
Paris nodded. “It will, I swear. But he needs to focus for that. We’d only disturb him…”

“No!” Vir cried out in great distress. “Don’t leave me alone with him!”

“We won’t,” Paris promised. “We’ll be right there, just beyond that glass wall. We’re not gonna abandon you – we just don’t want to break Tuvok’s concentration. Do you think you can do it?”

Vir looked at the stoic Vulcan again… then at Rastenn… then back at Paris. He did not seem sure about it at all.

“Will it really help?” he asked again, in a pitifully small voice.

“It will,” Paris nodded.

“And you will be right over there?”

“We will,” Rastenn touched his shoulder encouragingly. “You have my word as a Warrior.”

Vir looked at the Vulcan again. “And you will stop when I can’t… when I can’t any longer?”

“Of course, Mr. Cotto,” Tuvok said calmly. “I can only do this if you cooperate. Shall we give it a try?”

Vir hesitated for a while; then he closed his eyes with determination.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Do it, please.”
Part 6

Chapter Notes

Lt. Corwin’s family background is my invention. Technician Robertson is the Dome technician (played by actress Marianne Robertson) who appeared in practically every episode in Season 1. Siarann is borrowed from BanAuial’s fic “A Minbari Courtship”, simply because I liked the idea of Neroon having a female XO.

Vir’s past was already established in “Still Not in Kansas”.

PART 06

Tuvok pulled up another chair opposite Vir who was trembling with fear. Kes gestured to the others to retreat with her to the Doctor’s office, and everyone obeyed – except Rastenn.

“I will stay here,” he said stubbornly. “I will be quiet; but I will not leave him alone.”

Tuvok ignored him. Taking a deep breath, the Vulcan reached out and laid his fingers gently on the young Centauri's pale, sweaty face, seeking for the kwi’lari, the focal points of the body's bioelectric field at the sides of the skull that would enable him to establish contact.

“My mind to your mind... your thoughts to my thoughts,” he murmured the ages-old Vulcan mantra. Eyes closed, body perfectly still, gentle fingertips resting on Vir's tear-streaked face, Tuvok carefully sought to gain a connection to the young Centauri's troubled thoughts.

At first, there was resistance. Memories of the most recent violation made Vir struggle against this new intrusion. He retreated into himself further and further, so that for a moment Tuvok began to doubt that he would be able to reach him at all.

Still, he held out patiently, and after a while he began to “hear” the faint echoes of Vir’s inner voice. He could feel an incredible sense of anguish in Vir's mind; the young Centauri was clearly in agony. Full of fear, shame and self-loathing. A continual mental wail echoed through his thoughts.

I failed... I failed... I failed...

Slowly, carefully, Tuvok attempted to soothe the young man, projecting a feeling of calmness and compassion to him through the newly formed link between them. Vir's awareness practically lunged at him, clinging to him like a drowning man to a lifeline.

Help me! Please, help me! It hurts too much! The terrible sadness of that silent mental plea nearly broke his heart – even for a Vulcan, such close contact with someone else’s strong emotions could be a heavy burden. But he was here to help. He was old, his mind was strong. He could deal with this.

You must allow me, Tuvok sent his thoughts along the link. I will not force you...

As he felt Vir relax a little, Tuvok moved forward, searching carefully. The most recent experiences were easily found. The echoes of searing pain and humiliation led him straight there. But there was more pain, older than that, more sadness. And Tuvok, while as stoic and restrained as any Vulcan could become after having lived a hundred years or more, did not entirely lack compassion. He was
capable of caring. The agony of the young Centaury touched him deeply; it awakened long-dormant protective instincts in him, instincts that had not resurfaced since his own children had grown out of his care.

Determined to help this troubled youth as far as he was capable of, he worded the silent question, asking permission to see all that was there. *Show me.*

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Night watch was a quiet affair at Command and Control of Babylon 5, and after the turbulences of the recent weeks, Lieutenant David Corwin welcomed the calmness whole-heartedly. He knew it would not last long – it never did on Babylon 5 – but at last for the moment everything seemed to be all right.

In space, there were no differences between day and night, of course, but human beings needed a certain rhythm in their lives, and so the station operated on the basis of a simulated twenty-four-hour-day, according to Earth standard. Corwin, who hailed from Earth, found that oddly comforting – even though other human crewmembers who came from the various colonies, sometimes grumbled about it.

Sometimes he wondered whether he would see Earth ever again. When Captain Sheridan had declared Babylon 5’s independence from the Earth Alliance, Corwin – unlike some other Dome personnel – had chosen to remain here. He had begun his career as a simple Dome technician, back in Commander Sinclair’s times and had worked his way up the ranks slowly, until his recent promotion to full lieutenant.

Babylon 5 had long become his home. But there were days when he still longed for Earth: for the sunrise over the hills on his grandparents’ farm, for the easy camaraderie working alongside other young men for his father’s construction company, for his mother’s cooking… even for the constant bickering of his two considerably younger sisters. He had gone to the military right after finishing school to ease the financial burdens of the family, but it did not mean that he wouldn’t love and miss them. He never regretted his decision – nor staying on Babylon 5 after they had broken away from Earth – but yeah, he missed them badly.

“Lieutenant,” Technician Robertson, another veteran from the earliest times, looked up to him from the Pit. “The Vorlon ambassador’s ship asks permission to depart.”

“Has it logged a destination?” Corwin asked with a frown. It was unusual from the Vorlon to leave at this time. As a rule, he preferred to have an audience.

“Yes,” Robertson named a jumpgate that led to the Coriana system.

Corwin nodded. “Very well. Permission granted.”

Robertson dispatched the message, and then they watched the Vorlon ship leave the station, floating in space like some large, exotic flower. It approached the jumpgate, and when the vortex opened, it accelerated and was swallowed by the maelstrom of energy.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Robertson asked. She was a gentle-faced blonde woman, some ten years older than Corwin himself, and in undying love with the beauty of space – and starship designs.

Corwin nodded thoughtfully. “Yes; beautiful and deadly. I think the Captain would like to know about this departure, though.”

“Shall I send a report to his terminal?” Robertson asked.
Corwin shook his head. “No; I’ll do it later. It’s not urgent, and he had dinner with the Voyager officers today.”

“He must be tired,” Robertson agreed; then she raised a hand to her headset in surprise. “My, but we’re having a lot of traffic tonight.”

“Another departure?” Corwin asked.

Robertson nodded. “It’s the Centauri shuttle Trethia,” she said, “with Lord Refa on board.”

“Destination?” Corwin asked. The Trethia was a small transport shuttle, used to carry people to the ships and back, not capable of hyperspace travel on its own.

“The Centauri personal liner Jaetari,” Robertson answered.

“That’s odd,” Corwin said. “It’s not the same ship with which he has come.”

“No, she agreed. “That one is still waiting for Minister Virini.”

“Hmmm,” Corwin pondered over that a little. “Has the Jaetari logged in a destination?”

“Checking,” she consulted her screen, and then looked up at him with a troubled expression. “They’re heading for Narn space.”

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Show me, Tuvok had said, but he was unprepared for the violence of Vir’s response, for the intensity of the resurfacing memories. Image after image was thrown up before his inner eye; he nearly became dizzy from the cavalcade.

Vir as a small child, arriving in the house of his rich, much-respected uncle, shortly after the death of his parents. His shock when tossed into the small, barren room in which he would spend the next ten years, while his cousins had their own apartments and servants. The terror of the lessons to which he had to attend, together with them, only to be told again and again what a dumb, slow and useless pupil he was.

Vir, having barely reached consenting age when he caught his uncle’s eye. The years of abuse and humiliation that had followed, until the secret came out and he was swept to Babylon 5 where no one would know him… and of his uncle’s transgressions. The fear that had not left him till the last moment before leaving his transport; the fear that his uncle would change his mind and have him killed, so that he could never reveal their shameful secret.

The years of anguish watching helplessly as Londo – the first person who was more or less decent to him – fell into darkness, inevitably. The frustration that he could never do anything to prevent that, despite the beatings he had suffered from various aliens in Londo’s defence.

The short period of peace when assigned to the embassy on Minbar. The excitement over the chance to finally make his own decision, to make something right. The nightmares that had plagued him since the bombarding of the Narn homeworld, the all-consuming guilt over the actions of his own people.

The first meeting with Lyndisty, his arranged wife. The hope to find someone who might like him, just for himself. The deep shock when his intended turned out to be a delightedly cruel young woman who positively enjoyed killing Narns. The shame that despite this knowledge, he was still longing for her.
And the latest blow – Londo’s nefarious plan to get the former Narn ambassador killed, just to strengthen his position in the Imperial Court. The self-loathing that he himself had helped luring G’Kar into the trap, out of fear for his own life and that of his family. The despair that he had not been able to keep that information from Lord Refa, and thus G’Kar would die for nothing. That Londo’s star was still sinking, no matter what.

It was a lot of burden for such a gentle soul to bear.

Tuvok would not take away the memories; that was neither his intention, nor his right. What he could do was help Vir to take control of them. He could show him how to distance himself from them; how to view them from the perspective of remoteness. How to relegate them to their proper place as past experience, rather than being overwhelmed by them and drowning in sorrow as a result.

His decision made, Tuvok opened his mind to the troubled young Centauri, projecting a sense of peace and safety, encouraging Vir to trust him. *I will show you how it is done.*

Watching them from the short distance of a mere two steps, Rastenn felt his *ren’helas*, the cerulean patches seaming his bonecrest, beginning to itch with nervousness. It was eerie watching them like that, he decided, frozen in the moment like statues, with their eyes closed, completely silent, save for the one or other intake of breath. He got the strong impression that somehow he was intruding on something very private, even intimate. Still, he was not about to leave. He had made a promise not to abandon his friend; and Rastenn of the Star Riders always kept his promises.

He stiffened to attention as he heard both men exhale slowly. Tuvok straightened, pulling his hands away from Vir’s face. Their eyes opened. For a moment, they simply stared at each other in deep understanding.

Then, to Rastenn’s great relief, a tentative smile appeared on Vir’s face. It was small and tremulous, but it was there.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“No,” Vir answered in a shaky voice. “But I will… I think.”

***************

Aboard *Voyager*, Harry Kim was getting more familiar with the history of Babylon 5 than he ever wanted to be – and seeing Seven’s determined face, he feared that this had just been the beginning.

“I don’t know what you hope to find,” he said morosely. “We’ve cross-checked Customs, docking logs and the indeticard records for the last four years, back to the constructing of the station, but neither the name Galen, nor a face like the one you’ve reconstructed with the help of the imagining program has shown up. Now what?”

“Now we will check the station logs and security records, back to the beginning,” Seven answered without as much as twitching.

“What for?” Harry asked in exasperation.

“That man, Galen, knew his way around the station all too well,” Seven explained. “He could move from one place to another without anyone spotting him. He *must* have been here before; presumably more than once. And if he has, there will be records.”

“Unless he has a clever little gizmo that can fool the internal sensors,” Harry pointed out. “Like some personal cloaking device. In which case we’ll never see him, even if he *lives* on the station.”
“Such a device would require a considerable amount of energy if activated continually,” Seven replied. “I don’t think he would activate it, unless absolutely necessary.”

“You think,” Harry said. “What if you’re wrong?”

That question earned him a coldly superior glance that clearly declared just how unlikely that would be, without the need for actual words. He threw his hands up in frustration.

“Fine!” he snapped. “Let’s keep searching, no matter how futile the whole thing is. But wouldn’t you at least provide some useful search parameters? Gamma Shift ends in about six hours, you know…”

Seven considered that request for a moment.

“Try to find cross-references for magic,” she then said.

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On the 8th of December 2660, as the Earth of this universe counted time, Chakotay woke up shortly before six o’clock as was his wont. He was an early riser by habit and did not need the wake-up call of the computer. As usual, he was fully awake in the moment he opened his eyes… yet this time he was a little disoriented.

Even though he was surrounded by complete darkness, he could feel that something was… odd. The bed in which he was lying felt… unfamiliar somehow, and so was the feeling of a warm body pressed against his back. He had been sleeping alone for a very long time. The scent of the room was different, too: a faint fragrance of jasmine instead of the sandalwood of his own quarters.

“Computer; lights at twenty-five per cent,” he ordered.

Nothing happened.

“Computer,” he began again, a little louder, but a sleepy female voice interrupted him.

“Your voice pattern isn’t registered, either as a permanent inhabitant or as a visitor,” she said. “The computer doesn’t recognize it and won’t accept instructions from you. Lights at twenty-five per cent,” she added, and the room became dimly illuminated.

Chakotay looked into her beautiful eyes and smiled. “I’ve forgotten that I wasn’t in my own quarters.”

She smiled back sleepily, clearly not a morning person but endearing even with bed hair. “Disappointed?”

Chakotay glanced around him, taking in the small but comfortable place that bore the indefinable feminine touch that would make a simple living space home — and shook his head.

“No. Actually, I like your quarters — even though they would probably fit in my bathroom,” he added with a grin.

“Living space is precious on Babylon 5,” Lillian said with a shrug; then she seemed to become very serious… almost anxious, in fact. “Any regrets?”

Chakotay shook his head again. “None. You were right. It was beautiful. “He hesitated for a moment before asking, surprised by his own shyness. “Can we… would you care to be with me again?”
She laughed gently about his sudden embarrassment. “That depends.”

“Depends on what?” he asked with a frown.

“Whether your bed is also so much bigger than mine,” she answered, still laughing.

Chakotay laughed, too. They had managed in her bed well enough in the previous night, true, but it was decidedly too narrow for people to sleep comfortably.

“Starfleet believes in king-sized beds,” he replied.

Lillian grinned. “Then I accept. Tonight?”

“Afraid not,” Chakotay said apologetically. “I’ve got night shift today, so that the captain can attend to the prayer service. But you could visit me aboard Voyager. There isn’t much happening at that time; I could give you the grand tour – there’s much to see on our ship aside from the holodecks.”

She thought about it for a moment. “You know what? I might just do that.”

“Great,” Chakotay couldn’t quite suppress the happy grin that practically split his face. “You have day shift?”

She nodded. “Starting at oh-eight-hundred, station time… which is, I think, the same as yours. I get off-duty at sixteen hundred… in theory. Usually, it’s an hour or two later. We’re hopelessly understaffed in the MedLabs.”

“We could have dinner at nineteen hundred, then,” Chakotay suggested. “That would give us an hour before I take over the bridge. You could come to Voyager with me, right after dinner.”

“That could work,” she agreed. “Will you fetch me from MedLab One?”

“You want to work through till then?” Chakotay asked.

“Not really,” she admitted, “But I’ll have to, I’m afraid. Where are we going?”

“Let me surprise you,” Chakotay smiled and kissed her. “Can I use your shower?”

“Sure, if you’re okay with the vibe showers,” she said, sliding from under the duet and into a dressing gown. “I have to clean up here first anyway.”

“Thanks,” Chakotay vanished in the tiny bathroom; then he put out his head for a moment. “I think there is another thing you’ll love in my quarters, aside from a really large bed: I have got a real shower.”

Lillian’s eyes widened in pleasant surprise. “A real shower? With water and all?”

Chakotay grinned. “Rank has its privileges. But I’m willing to share.”

***************

Aboard his huge battle cruiser, the Ingata, Alyt Neroon, clan leader of the Star Riders, was pondering over the mysterious message of his nephew. He had left Rastenn behind on Babylon 5 to learn more about the human Anla’shok, in whose eyes he had so shockingly recognized the light of a kindred soul. Rastenn, as expected, had made contact with the Anla’shok – but instead of gathering intel about the man, he had requested a digital copy of the Book of Valen… and that Neroon came to Babylon 5, as soon as possible.
That could not mean anything good. Despite his youth, Rastenn was an experienced spy, used to work independently till the last possible minute. That he had called for Neroon after such a short time could only mean that he had come across something truly important. Something that had gone beyond his extensive repertoire to deal with the unexpected.

He had also asked for information about the Sher’shok Dum, the Ancient Enemy, about whose return the Religious Caste had been warning the rest of the Minbari leaders for years. The Warrior Caste — most specifically their leader, Shai Alyt Shakiri — still refused to believe it, even after Delenn had broken the Grey Council and persuaded the worker and Religious members to give her their support. They were still keeping grudges for the victory that had been denied them at the end of the Earth-Minbari war. Like Sinoval, who had taken his own life rather than surrender, they still felt betrayed by the Religious Caste.

Neroon, who had been Satai, even though only for a short while, knew the reason for that unexpected surrender, of course. Or, to be more accurate, he had been told the reason — but never truly believed it. Not until that earth-shattering moment in which he saw the light of a Minbari soul shining in the eyes of the human Anla’shok.

It was a revelation that shook the very fundamentals of his existence. In the two weeks since the unfinished denn’shah, he had done more soul-searching than in all the years since the end of the war. He had meditated on this mystery that he was only beginning to understand — contrary to common belief, he had a strong inclination towards the Religious half of his inheritance, and that came in handy in such cases.

His mother was a member of the Religious Caste and the priestess of their family, and both Neroon and his late sister, who had perished with the Drala’fi, had been taught religious practices in more depth than Warrior Caste children usually would. But all his meditations led him to the same conclusion: if the Religious Caste had been right about the existence of the id’Minbari among humans, they most likely were right about the return of the Sher’shok Dum, too.

And if they were, the Warrior Caste had the sacred duty to enter this war against the Ancient Enemy, no matter on whose side they would have to fight. Honour would not allow them to let the Worker and the Religious fight instead of them, just because the thought to support Starkiller in battle was a repulsive one.

If there was a war, it was their duty — no, their calling! — to fight. To be shield between the enemy and the rest of Minbar, so that the Religious could pray and the Worker could build. Each Caste according to their calling. As it had been since the time when Valen had united Minbar and ended the Caste wars.

Still insight won through meditation was one thing; hard proof was another. And he needed proof, something he could present to the Warrior Council to counter Shakiri’s arguments. The Shai Alyt was so obsessed with the so-called conspiracy of the Religious Caste that he would not listen to reason.

Perhaps the human Anla’shok could help. The Rangers walked in dark places no-one else would enter; they had always been best at intel-gathering, and they knew how things on Minbar worked. If Marcus Cole did have the proof Neroon needed, he would provide it.

Somewhat comforted by that thought, Neroon pressed the button that would call his second-in-command into his office.

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Dropping Lillian off to MedLab One, Chakotay decided that he did not want to return to Voyager just yet. He had promised Captain Janeway to meet her after her duty shift ended — which meant they
would have lunch in the mess hall together, and probably a somewhat unpleasant discussion afterwards – but till then, he had roughly eight hours. Sure, he did have some paperwork to do (not that it would include any actual paper, but the expression had somehow survived the centuries) but that, too, could wait. He wanted to see a little more of Babylon 5 first. Besides, he had some table reservations to make, so he decided to walk across Blue Sector to Red.

His stroll took him by Captain Sheridan’s office, where the lights were down, but the door, surprisingly, was open. The Captain, wearing the same black uniform as on the previous evening, seemed to be still at work at a coffee table by the light of a small reading lamp, his eyes reddened by the lack of sleep.

For a moment, Chakotay was not sure he should interrupt the other man. But taking a second look at Sheridan’s weary face he decided that the captain sorely needed a little distraction and sauntered into the office jovially.

“Good morning, Captain. I hope I’m not interrupting anything important?”

Sheridan looked up in surprise. “No, no, it’s fine, Commander. Would you like some tea? I find it helps me sleep.”

“Just a little, thanks,” Chakotay crossed over to the coffee table and took a seat opposite Sheridan. “Forgive me the remark, Captain, but it doesn’t seem as if you’d had any sleep at all. Have you worked through the whole night?”

Sheridan nodded, waving a bunch of papers. “Daily reports, oxygen consumption logs, recycling figures. It never stops! Sometimes I think I stay in the War Room as much to avoid this stuff as I do to keep track of the war.”

Chakotay grinned. “I can relate. On Starfleet ships, such delightful paperwork is part of the First Officer’s duties. Of course, we don’t quite have this much – and we do it digitally. But it’s still a great responsibility, isn’t it?”

Sheridan’s only answer was a nod and a small laugh.

“Although I can call myself lucky, as the final responsibility for these things belongs to the captain,” Chakotay continued conversationally. “There are advantages in being only the second in command. Tell me, who do you share your responsibility with?”

Sheridan shrugged. “Well… there's, Ivanova, Garibaldi – Franklin's still on walkabout – others. The work gets spread around.”

“I didn't mean the work,” Chakotay interrupted. “I meant responsibility. I'm familiar with the burdens of command; everyone comes to you with questions, problems, concerns. It can be overwhelming at times. Who do you go to? Who do you talk to?”

“Well…” Sheridan shrugged again, with an embarrassed grin, “there isn’t anybody. It's my responsibility. I can't put it on anyone else.”

Chakotay nodded again. “That is certainly true. Still, you should talk to others, share the burden as much as you can…” He trailed off, becoming thoughtful. “That is what I’ve been trying to provide my captain with for years… if she’d only be willing to accept!”

“She isn’t?” Now Sheridan’s curiosity was piqued; for a moment he forgot about his own worries, just as Chakotay had intended.
“Unfortunately, she isn’t,” Chakotay replied. “She’s the kind of person who prefers to carry the burden of the whole ship on her shoulders, which is admirable, but in the end futile. She wants so badly to do right both by the crew and the regulations she’d got ingrained perhaps in the cradle already that it weighs her down till she can’t breathe anymore. She’s becoming more isolated, more lonely and… and rigid with every passing day.”

“You mean cranky?” Sheridan asked with a sudden grin, remembering his conversation with Delenn in the War Room, not long before that dinner in the previous evening.

Chakotay grinned back at him. “I wouldn’t use such a word to describe my commanding officer. It would be most disrespectful. But the fact is, she has reached the point where the crew is becoming hesitant to go to her with their worries. They don’t want to add to her burden… and that makes her even more isolated.”

Sheridan gave him a wary look. “Is that supposed to be a warning that I might be on my way to the same condition?”

“Aren’t you?” Chakotay asked quietly. “Be honest with yourself, Captain, and consider this: if you isolate yourself from the men and women under your command, after a while they will stop trusting you. And once they don’t trust you anymore, how can you expect them to die for you, no matter how noble your goals are?”

Sheridan didn’t answer, but Chakotay could see that he was getting through him, so he pushed on. “When I was talking with Mr. Garibaldi the other day, he said that the person you trust most would be Ambassador Delenn. Why don’t you talk to her about your concerns? She seems a good listener to me.”

Sheridan shook his head. “I can’t do that. Delenn's been through a lot lately! We all have! She's got enough problems on her hands without giving her mine as well.”

“Perhaps,” Chakotay allowed. “But perhaps she would prefer to share your burden; sometimes doing so can make one’s own burden easier to bear. In fact, I’m pretty sure she would like to do so. I saw how she looked at you last night, at that dinner table. There was a time my Captain looked at me that way… when we were alone, on an uninhabited planet for two months.”

“But she doesn’t do so anymore,” Sheridan observed. “What happened?”

Chakotay shrugged. “We were rescued… and she snapped back being the captain instantly. That was the moment when I gave up hope that she might ever come out of her protective shell of principles and regulations.” He rose. “I think you haven’t reached that point yet… but you will, if you clutch to your burden so jealously just a little longer. Well, I have to be on my way. Thanks for the tea, Captain.”

Sheridan sat motionlessly while Voyager’s executive officer left. He then put down the papers and turned off the reading lamp.

“Perhaps he is right,” he murmured, still a bit uncertain how to follow that well-meant piece of advice.

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Chakotay had managed to book a table in the Fresh Air restaurant and even found the time to take a walk through the Zocalo before returning to Voyager. He wanted flowers for the evening… and something special, to make his second official date with Lillian memorable. Nothing extravagant or terrible expensive – the credit chits granted them in exchange for information and some low-key
technical help that did not fall under the ban of the Prime Directive would not enable him to afford that – just a little something that would be, well, *special*.

He had already figured out from their conversations that Lillian was drawn to the cultural heritage of her Hindu grandmother, but that did not make things any easier. What he had seen in her quarters spoke of a woman with artistic tastes that tended towards clean, elegant designs, without too much adornment. That was a tough one, despite the near-overwhelming diversity of wares on the *Zocalo*.

He was so deep in thoughts that he nearly jumped when Garibaldi walked up to him (which he hadn’t noticed at all) and addressed him.

“Commander, you’re up early,” Babylon 5’s security chief said. “Are you looking for something in particular?”

“I am,” Chakotay replied. “I just don’t know what it is.”

“Tell me,” Garibaldi encouraged him. “Nobody knows the *Zocalo* better than me. Perhaps I can help.”

Chakotay explained his dilemma. Since everybody who counted already knew that Lillian and he were an item, there was no need for secrecy. Garibaldi nodded.

“I know just the right flowers for you,” he said and steered *Voyager*’s XO to a flower stand ran by a bald-headed, elderly woman wearing a dress out of some history novel: obviously a Centauri. “I saw Londo buy these for the lady he had a mad crush on, so they must be appropriate. One can say a lot of unflattering things about Londo, but when it comes to women, he sure as hell has style.”

“I can believe that,” Chakotay stared at the proposed flowers in awe. They had pale, star-shaped blossoms that seemed to glow from within. “What are they and where do they come from?”

“They are bio-luminescent star-laces,” the florist lady explained. “They only grow on Davo, one of our planets. Rest assured, sir, that your lady will appreciate them… and your generosity. Do you want to take them with you or delivered at an appointed hour?”

“Can you have them sent to the *Fresh Air* restaurant tonight?” Chakotay asked. “I have a reservation for nineteen hundred hours; the name is Chakotay.”

“Of course, sir,” the old woman said. “We deliver wherever and whenever our costumers want it. Can you spell your name? It’s an unusual one; we do not wish to make a mistake.”

Chakotay spelled his name, then handed over his credit chit to the florist lady, who inserted it into a reader to debit the price of the flowers from it.

“I hope you weren’t planning to buy anything else that’s expensive,” Garibaldi commented as they strolled away from the florist’s shop. “That bouquet of flowers probably wiped your credit chit clear for the next month or so.” Seeing the other man’s shocked face he laughed. “Oh, don’t worry! They aren’t cheap, but they are not *that* expensive. Now I believe there was a shop in the next range where you could find just the right thing for Doctor Hobbs.”

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Siarann, who had stepped into Neroon’s former place as the *shok’nali* the executive officer of the *Ingata* after the *Alyt* had taken over command of the ship, was a fierce-looking warrior, with an elaborate bonecrest, covered in spikes as only a pure-blood descendant of the Caste could have, despite being female. She was somewhat younger than her commanding officer, but well-proved, both in war and peacetime duty. She also happened to be quite a beauty.
“Alyt,” she said, pressing her fists to her chest and bowing from the waist in the usual stiff, Warrior Caste manner.

“How long till we reach Babylon 5?” Neroon asked.

“By current speed two more days,” she answered.

Neroon nodded. That would do. Fortunately, they had been patrolling a sector relatively close to Babylon 5 when Rastenn’s call came in. He could have ordered the chief engineer to give him more speed, but there was no need to hurry. Nothing in Rastenn’s message indicated immediate danger – just that he would be needed.

“Did you find the chance to speak to your family Elders?” he asked. Siarann was a cousin of Nidell, his young informant on Babylon 5, whom he wanted to offer Rastenn as a potential mate, and thus the best person for establishing contact with the family.

Neroon had already spoken to the young woman about arranging a courtship between her and his nephew, and Nidell had not been adverse. She’d just asked for a little time to think about the proposal. But they could not set anything in motion without the consent of Nidell’s family. It was a lucky coincidence that Siarann was so closely related to them.

“I have spoken to Aunt Dhaliri,” Shiarann replied. “Nidell’s father has fallen in the war, as you know, so my aunt has the deciding word all by herself. She is Religious, which is why she insisted that Nidell be trained in the Tha’Domo discipline as well, even though her heart called her to the Warrior Caste.”

“I know,” Neroon stomped on his impatience. This was a negotiation between the two families, not a report from the shok’nali to her Alyt; urging Siarann to come to the point would have been considered rude. “What else did she say?”

“That a bond with the Clan leader’s family would be both a great honour and very desirable,” Siarann answered, “but in the end, the choice must be theirs. Both Rastenn and Nidell must follow the call of their hearts.”

“The Star Riders have placed the calling of one’s heart above everything else from the very beginning of our Clan,” Neroon reminded her. “We were the first Clan that has accepted outsiders and allowed our own to bond with those of foreign Clans. I shall not be the first Clan leader to break that sacred tradition.”

“And yet you seem eager to set this courtship in motion,” Siarann commented. “May I respectfully ask why?”

Neroon sighed. “I left Rastenn behind on Babylon 5 because he is needed there. Yet my heart is concerned. He is young, passionate – and impressionable. Already he has shown unusual interest in an alien female. I want him safely bound, as soon as possible.”

Siarann inclined her head. “That is a valid concern,” she agreed. “Our young males are vulnerable without the safety of a bond. The female he is interested in, that alien… what is she like?”

“Impressive,” Neroon admitted. “A warrior born, with a strength and fire that could match our own female warriors. But that is not a way that could be taken. Even if there were not the issue of the Alien Prohibition – and let me tell you, that is an issue that I whole-heartedly support – she is a hybrid, and hybrids are, as a rule, infertile.”

Siarann nodded. “I see how that would be a problem, even if she were not an alien. Rastenn is your
heir and the future leader of our Clan. He cannot afford a childless bond, regardless of his feelings.”

“He is more than just my heir,” Neroon said tiredly. “With my own marriage dissolved and my ex-
wife having returned to the Temple of Valeria, Rastenn is the last one to give our bloodline an heir.
We owe it to the Clan not to render it leaderless.”

Siarann nodded in agreement. “Our duty to the Clan outweighs our personal interests. I hope they
will find each other acceptable. They would make a beautiful couple, and Aunt Dhaliri will not
interfere.”

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Lyta emerged from what must have been the most restful sleep for years on this morning. Whatever
Tuvok had done when he’d put him to sleep after coming out of the healing trance, it kept the
nightmares away. Which was to say a lot, since she had always had nightmares since her visit on the
Vorlon homeworld. It had been a great relief having slept through a night, unhindered by them.

She felt strong, healed and powerful; almost reborn. But she also knew that now that she was healed,
Ulkesh would demand her return. If she wanted to help Sheridan with those Night Watch people
kept in Voyager’s brig, they had to make their move, and soon.

She got up from the biobed without difficulties and looked around for someone who would be able
to help her. The holographic doctor was apparently deactivated; the only other person she could see
was the small elfin girl, studying something on the computer screen.

“Kes?” she asked quietly. She didn’t want to make mental contact just yet; wanted to give her brain
as much rest as possible before using her abilities for the interrogation.

The girl looked up and smiled that strangely mature smile of his. “Lyta! You’re up already! Are you
hungry? Would you like something for breakfast? I’m sure Neelix has…”

“Later perhaps,” Lyta interrupted her. “What I need right now is to have a word with Captain
Janeway. It is urgent, I’m afraid.”

Kes nodded. “Of course. I’ll tell her at once.

Ten minutes or so later Kathryn Janeway marched into Sickbay with her usual brisk, business-like
manner, and anybody but a telepath would have bought the show for face value. Lyta, however,
although she had only met Voyager’s captain once before, could sense a change in the other woman,
even without scanning her. Something in Janeway had been broken – not irreparably, hopefully, but
she would need a long time to heal in the inside. Of that Lyta was certain. It was to her credit as an
officer that on the outside she still looked basically the same.

“Ms Alexander,” she said. “I’m glad that you seem to be doing so much better. Kes said you wanted
to see me?”

Lyta nodded. “Yes, and thank you for coming to me, Captain. Even through Voyager’s comm
system, it would be… risky to discuss these things openly.”

“I see,” Janeway became alert like a hound at the sound of a hunting horn. “Has this something to do
with our… houseguests?”

“Yes,” Lyta said. “But more with my… employer, to be honest. Soon, he will sense that I’m fully
healed – I can’t conceal that fact from him for long – and then he’ll demand that I return to Babylon
5. If we want to interrogate those men in your brig, we must do it now. Before the ambassador
makes his move.”
She tried to suppress the cold shivers shaking her whole body – and failed. Janeway gave her a sharp look, protective instincts kicking into high gear at once.

“You don’t have to return to him if you don’t want to,” she said. “I can offer you asylum aboard Voyager; the regulations don’t forbid us to aid individuals in personal emergencies, as long as doing so won’t influence local politics.”

Lyta shook her head. “Thank you, Captain, but that would endanger your ship and your crew greatly. Vorlons do not take disobedience kindly; nor when others meddle with their business. The ambassador would tear Voyager apart and drag me back by force, should I refuse to return. Besides, I’m still employed by the Vorlons. I have no chance in this.”

She could feel the righteous anger building up in the captain rapidly and almost smiled. It was so typical for these foreign people to run to the aid of everyone in need, no matter the odds – or the possible consequences. It was a noble attitude… but also a deadly one, if it came to confronting the Vorlons.

“Are you his aide or his slave?” Janeway asked angrily.

“With this ambassador, it’s practically the same,” Lyta answered dryly. “It was not him who’s recruited me to work for the Vorlons, but since Kosh, the original one, is dead, I had to accept working for his successor. One does not quit service to the Vorlons. Once you get involved with them, it’s a lifelong assignment… and a very short one, should you try to resist them.”

Janeway snorted inelegantly. “God beware us from omnipotent superbeings and their meddling with our affairs,” she said, remembering humanity’s encounters with such beings in her own universe. “It never ends well.”

“It seems so,” Lyta agreed. “In any case, we should get on with the interrogation as long as we still can.”

“Very well,” Janeway said. “I’ll contact Captain Sheridan and Mr. Garibaldi on a hopefully secure channel, and we’ll see what we can organize at such a short notice.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Lyta said. “I’d like to have it done as soon as I’m here. Those men are dangerous!”

“I know,” Janeway sighed. “My people have dismantled a bomb that was stuck to Babylon 5’s fusion reactor, just yesterday. Who knows what other… surprises they might have up their sleeve.”

Lyta looked at her intently. “I thought you were against your people getting involved with the problems of this universe.”

“I am,” Janeway replied bluntly. “But it doesn’t mean that I’d condone terrorism… or sit around idly while a quarter million innocent bystanders are killed, so that one faction could make their point. I only wish my own people would trust me more; I thought after two and a half years together they’d know me a little better by now.”

Lyta did not scan her; that would be against the rules, and no matter what had happened to her since becoming a Vorlon agent, there were rules she still respected. Those rules were the only link that still connected her with her former life – with he Lyta she had once been and will never be again.

But even without an active scan, Janeway’s bitterness and disappointment came through to her clearly, and Lyta realized how very lonely she had been for quite some time. Sure, it was partly her fault, for retreating into the role of the captain so much that her crew could barely see the person...
anymore behind all those shields and defence mechanisms. But perhaps it was still not too late for her.

“I think you should talk to your people, Captain,” she said quietly. “They might surprise you.”
Part 7

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder: Technician Guerra, who only appeared in the pilot, was played by Ed Wasser – the same actor who later played Mr. Morden.

PART 07

Entering MedLab One, Lillian checked Marcus’ condition, which she found satisfying, all things considered, and then she sat down with Dr. Hernandez to get a picture about what had happened during the night. She was shocked to hear about what had been done to poor Vir… and about his step visit to Voyager.

“He is still here,” Maya Hernandez said. “We’re treating his bruises; and besides, he has a better chance to rest here than he would in the diplomatic section.”

“I’ll take a look at him,” Lillian promised. “Even though he had help from Voyager’s telepath, the long-time consequences of a forced deep scan must be taken seriously. Anything else?”

Maya Hernandez shook her head. “Nothing. It was an unusually quiet night. I wonder why I can’t get rid of the feeling that this is just the calm before the storm… and a big one at that.”

“Perhaps because you know this place all too well,” Lillian replied wryly. “All right, then. Go and rest. We all should make the best of what little time of repose we are given.”

The older doctor gave her a mischievous look. “If the sparkling of your eyes is any indication, you’ve done just that last night,” she teased.

Lillian smiled. “I would be a poor doctor if I didn’t listen to my own advice,” she said. “I’ll work through till sixteen hundred, or a little longer. Can you take over a little before nineteen hundred, just tonight? I’ll make up to you, honestly!”

Maya patted her on the shoulder fondly. “Muchacha, I’m an aging woman with no social life. I’ll be happy to save you from the same fate. What are your plans for tonight?”

“Dinner at seven, and then a tour on Voyager,” Lillian answered. “Chakotay has night shift, so this isn’t a real date, but,” she shrugged, “I’ll take what I get.”

“Dinner? Where?” Maya asked.

“I don’t know,” Lillian admitted. “He said he’d surprise me. It’s… quite romantic, actually.”

“It is,” Maya agreed, “and you are in love.”

“Perhaps,” Lillian said with a shrug and a secretive smile. “Well, I have to make my round now. Have a nice day.”

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Ivanova stormed into C&C with a facial expression that made all duty personnel duck immediately.
Apparently, this was going to be one of those days again, and all Dome technicians had learned the hard way that on those days one was better off becoming invisible. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. Like many commanding officers, Ivanova had the ability to notice just about everything – and a temper that enabled her to make her displeasure very audible.

Nobody envied poor Guerra, who had drawn the shortest straw this morning and so had to present the commander the reports from the previous night. Guerra was the ranking Dome tech here, had come aboard on the very day the station had become functional, and had a spotless duty record. For some reason, neither Captain Sheridan nor Ivanova seemed to tolerate the poor man, though - and no one knew why.

In one of his particularly suicidal moments Lieutenant Corwin had actually had the balls to ask about the reason, but Ivanova had just told him – in a less than friendly manner – that Guerra had a creepy likeness to someone both she and the captain had… problems with, and that Corwin should mind his own business. Which Corwin had done ever since then. He might be a little suicidal, but he was not completely mad.

After that incident Ivanova had tried to be nicer to Guerra, perhaps to show that they were determined to be fair to him, which freaked out the poor man even more. Fortunately, there was always so much work and stress that Ivanova soon forgot to pretend she didn’t hate him, and things returned to normal – or what counted as normal on Babylon 5 anyway.

She accepted the reports without as much as a glance at Guerra (who was all too happy to scurry back to his work unacknowledged) and checked last night’s events. Night shift was usually quiet, so she did not accept anything overly interesting. She furled her brow at once, however, seeing the two departures recorded. She knew that the new Kosh was still aboard – her latent telepathic abilities, weak as they were, seemed to home on to the Vorlon, so she always could tell whether he was on the station or not.

She also knew that Vorlon ships could travel on their own if necessary. The old Kosh had sent out his own ship on missions alone sometimes, so this was nothing unusual per se. The question was rather the goal of its mission. She cross-checked the ship’s official destination with the star map of the sector and the recorded Shadow activities, and her frown deepened.

Yes, her memory hadn’t betrayed her. The Corianna system was in Shadow territory. What the hell was a lonely Vorlon ship, and one without its master at that, doing there?

Unless it wasn’t lonely, after all. Nobody knew where the Vorlon fleet had gone after the battle in which they had beaten the Shadows a few weeks earlier.

Whatever the reason might be, Ivanova had the uncomfortable feeling that they would not like the outcome.

Setting the Vorlon problem aside for the time being, she checked last night’s other departure – and her expression turned very grim. Lord Refa, heading for Narn, mere hours after G’Kar’s secret departure? It was too much of a coincidence to believe it.

Which meant that G’Kar’s chances to survive the trip home had dropped dramatically; and that thought made Ivanova decidedly unhappy. Sure, the Narn could be – and often was – irritating as hell, but he was a reliable ally… and sometimes a surprisingly wise man. Should anything happen to him, Babylon 5 would feel his loss keenly.

She made a mental note to inform Delenn as soon as possible. Perhaps the Rangers could be warned. Perhaps they could do something to help G’Kar escape Centauri pursuit. But even if they could not,
Delenn needed to know about every event with possible political ramifications. The potential capturing and execution of the last free member of the _Ka’ri_ definitely counted as such an event.

“Commander,” the technician at the communications console looked up to her, “Captain Janeway from _Voyager_ is hailing us.”

“Put her through,” she said in surprise.

“I can’t,” the technician replied. “The call comes through a secured channel.”

“I’ll take it in the captain’s office, then.”

She hurried over to Sheridan’s now abandoned office and instructed the computer to establish the comm link, giving her authorization code for voice identification.

“Connection established,” the artificial voice told her a moment later, and the image of Captain Janeway appeared on the screen.

“Commander,” she said, nodding her greetings. “I hoped to speak with Captain Sheridan. Is he available?”

“He’s just turned in less than an hour ago, after working through the night,” Ivanova replied. “Can I help you? I’m authorized to handle things at my own discretion in his absence.”

“I’m not questioning your competence,” Janeway said. “I just thought he’d want to be present at the interrogation of our… _houseguests_. Ms Alexander says it must be done now, before her… _employer_ orders her back.”

Ivanova nodded in understanding. She had only met the new Kosh once, but that was enough to decide _not_ to cross him unless it could not be avoided. She could only imagine how much worse it was for Lyta, who had to _work_ with the Vorlon all the time.

“Understood,” she said. “I still wouldn’t like to wake the Captain, though. This is the first good sleep he’s gotten in two days… or longer.”

“Will you come over then?” Janeway asked.

Ivanova shook her head. “I’m afraid I can’t either. My aide has just gone off-duty, after a ten-hour-shift, and I’ve got nobody else whom I’d trust with the safety of C&C. But I can send you Garibaldi. He knows as much about the situation as we do – if not more.”

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Janeway left Lieutenant Rollins in charge of the bridge – not that there would be much to do while the ship was docked – and went down to the brig to witness the interrogation of the prisoners. Lieutenant Ayala was on duty, standing behind the console operating the holding cells: big, dark and unshakable like a solid rock in the breakers. Somehow the man managed to exclude the air of safety by his very presence.

Two other ex-Maquis, the Bajoran Trumari and Nozawa, a human of Japanese origins who knew fourteen ways to kill someone with his bare hands, or so it was rumoured, were standing in front of the holding cells, armed and ready. Security took this matter very seriously, and by dispatching ex-Maquis to watch the prisoners Tuvok had made sure that the guards would not hesitate to use force when necessary.

It was a relief to see that Chakotay had returned, too, in Garibaldi’s company. He was still wearing
his civilian clothes, his elegant grey jacket a strange contrast to Garibaldi’s black uniform, his face watchful and wary. He knew better than anyone else that dealing with terrorists, no matter in what manner, was a dangerous thing. He had been one himself – at least how Starfleet saw things.

A few minutes later Lyta Alexander came in, escorted by Tom Paris who was about to begin his usual duty shift in Sickbay. Despite Lyta’s protests, the Doctor had insisted on sending him with the recovering patient, just in case. Paris did not really mind. He was curious how Lyta would handle the situation. He was sure it would be very different from Tuvok’s methods.

Tuvok himself was demonstratively absent, but that did not surprise anyone who knew how Vulcans thought about forced mind-scans. Not that Lyta planned deep-scanning these guys; it usually wasn’t necessary. Members of organizations that demanded blind obedience could be manipulated to accept orders from anyone who seemed to have any authority, as a rule. Lyta counted on that.

Nonetheless, the Vulcan opposed any forced telepathic contact on principle and refused to be part of this particular interrogation… which was just fine with Chakotay, as long as they got the information they needed.

“Which one should we take first?” he asked Garibaldi, whose men the prisoners had originally been, after all. He ought to know them best.

“Let’s start with Pirello,” Babylon 5’s security chief suggested. “She’s only recently joined Night Watch, so she might be less fanatic than the rest and won’t give Lyta such a hard time.”

“If she was willing to stay behind and blow up the station, she must have embraced Night Watch ideology quite enthusiastically,” Chakotay commented; then he looked at Ayala. “Greg, go in with Ms Alexander, and don’t take your eyes off the prisoner. If she tries anything stupid, shoot her. We can’t take any risks here.”

Ayala nodded, setting his phaser at heavy stun. Janeway did not interfere. This special interrogation was better left in Maquis hands. They had more experience in the area.

Chakotay took over Ayala’s place behind the console and signalled Trumari and Nozawa to take up position in which they could give sufficient cover. Then he lowered the forcefield before Frances Pirello’s cell, so that Lyta and Ayala could enter.

The big, burly ex-Maquis went in first, taking up position behind the prisoner, phaser at the ready. His unmoving face left no doubts that he would shoot her on the spot if necessary. He had been a guerrilla fighter, used to react quickly and mercilessly if he had to.

Lyta followed Ayala in, facing the prisoner who glared at her with unveiled hatred. Frances Pirello was a stocky woman, at least a head shorter than the telepath, with a mulish expression on her round face, and Janeway wondered briefly if Garibaldi’s choice had been such a good one after all. The woman did not look like someone who would spill her secrets easily.

Yet Garibaldi seemed fairly unconcerned. Either he knew the prisoner very well – or Lyta’s abilities. Whatever the reason might be, he appeared quite sure about the outcome.

Unlike Tuvok in the extremely rare cases when he had to interrogate someone telepathically, Lyta apparently needed no time to focus. She captured and held the prisoner’s look easily, and told her in a cold voice that sounded barely human.

“Listen to me. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. You can give me what I want and you’ll be left alone in this cosy little cell again. Or you can try playing a hero and resist. In which
case I’ll take your mind apart, piece by piece, until I find what I need. You wouldn’t like that. I used to work for the Psi Cops once, and now I’m a rogue. I don’t care what will remain of your mind once I’m done with you. I need information, and I need it now; one way or another. Have I made myself clear?”

There was so much menace in her voice that Janeway felt cold shivers running down her spine. It did not surprise her at all to see the prisoner’s eyes widening and filling with sheer terror.

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From the small command deck of his cloaked ship, Galen was watching Seven of Nine’s progress – or rather the lack of it – with detached amusement. She was thorough, he had to give her that, but she had no hope to find the right answers. She simply did not have the clues to point her in the right direction.

Galen was now considering giving her those missing clues. She needed to find some information at least, to get used to the idea of him and his brethren. To realize that he had been serious. Otherwise, she would never cooperate.

Hacking into Voyager’s computer had taken him half the night, as Federation technology proved to be incompatible with his own, but he did not mind. It had been the first purely intellectual challenge for years, and he enjoyed every moment of it. Even now that he was in, he had to move around very carefully. The system was very sophisticated, and could even adapt to new problems to a certain extent, due to the bioneural circuitry. It did not make the ship exactly alive, or even self-aware as an artificial intelligence would be, but it made circumventing the system’s safeguards a true adventure.

Moving around those safeguards carefully, Galen used a BabCom unit to slip in a clue that would eventually direct Seven’s search to Captain Sheridan’s official log entry from January 31, 2259. From the day when Elric and his first followers had arrived to Babylon 5.

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After having checked on Vir in MedLab, Rastenn left a message for Lennier, who had been Vir’s friend a lot longer after all, hoping that Delenn’s aide might want to visit the Centauri and offer him some emotional support. Priests were better at that sort of things than Warriors; and besides, Rastenn had other things to do at the moment.

He took the core shuttle to Brown Sector to meet Nidell again. This was one of their less-frequented meeting places, one neither of them really liked, due to the questionable neighbourhood. There were several bars involved in various kinds of shady business, many of them ending up in fights, which could attract station security. But they had used the other drop points too often lately.

Nidell was already waiting for him, also disguised as a member of the Worker Caste. Considering the suspicions towards Minbari Warriors, this was the safest camouflage for them to wear. She seemed deeply concerned, and that worried Rastenn, as Nidell was not one who would be frightened easily.

“Alyt Neroon will be here in two days,” she said, handing Rastenn a data crystal. “A messenger has come from the homeworld and intercepted the Ingata. Since he was there already, the Alyt asked him to bring you this personal message. He has a fast courier flyer, so he could be here a lot earlier than the Ingata.”

“From the homeworld?” Rastenn repeated in surprise. “Has he told you anything about what is happening back home?”

“Not much, but it does not sound good,” Nidell answered. “Tensions between the Castes – especially the Warrior and the Religious Caste – seem to be growing. There are no open hostilities
yet, but it could happen any time. Since Delenn has broken the Grey Council, we do not have a ruling body that could unite our people. It is only a matter of time till Valen’s Peace will also be broken… unless something happens that can give those tensions a safer outlet.”

“Like the fight again a superior enemy that could unite our people again,” Rastenn said, thinking out loudly.

“Let us hope so,” Nidell replied, her dark eyes troubled. “According to the messenger, Shai Alyt Shakiri has ordered a great number of the Wind Swords’ warships back to Minbar, just days ago.”

“What for?” Rastenn did not want to give in to his suspicions, but it was hard not to do so.

Nidell shrugged. “To protect our world against an invasion, he says. But who knows what his true agenda is?”

“Impossible!” Rastenn protested. “The Shai Alyt would never turn against his own people. If he has called those warships back, he must know something we do not know yet.”

“I hope you are right,” Nidell said quietly, “for otherwise, we might be facing the first kinslaying in a thousand years... or longer.”

“Has my uncle been informed about this?” Rastenn asked.

Nidell nodded. “Of course. The messenger had originally been sent to him. I assume the Alyt’s message will contain detailed instructions for us, should he have to leave for home unexpectedly.”

She did not name the possible reason that would force Neroon to do that. She did not need to. They both knew… and both dreaded that possibility.

“Then I shall view it immediately,” Rastenn said. “Have you learned anything about the human called Morden?”

Nidell shook her head. “Nothing worth mentioning. He was here, talked to people, offering the services of his… his associates, as he called them – and then gave our spies the slip. I do not know how he does it, but he seems to be able to vanish whenever he wishes. He… he plays with us!” she added angrily.

“Let him play,” Rastenn said with a shrug. “Let him believe that he has fooled us. Make a list about the people he contacts and another one about those who keep up contact with him. We might need those names later.”

Nidell bowed in perfect Working Caste fashion, just in case they were being watched. “Consider it done. Anything else?”

“Not at the moment; I need to watch my uncle’s message first,” Rastenn looked down from the gallery where they were standing to the bar below. “We need a better drop point in this sector. Standing here is like target practice; only that here we are the targets,”

“I shall look into it,” Nidell promised, and then merged with the shadows. She was getting really good at the vanishing act.

Rastenn returned to his official quarters – as the heir of a Clan leader, he had been assigned small, yet comfortable ones in Green Sector, now that he was officially assigned to Babylon 5 – and put the data crystal into a reader.
“Coded message,” the computer told him. “Please provide voice print identification sample.”

Rastenn said his name and rattled down his identification code. The computer declared valid identification, and the stern, concerned face of his uncle appeared on the screen.

“Greetings, Rastenn,” Neroon said. “I assume you have been given the worrisome news about home already. We shall discuss those when I arrive. However, there is something I wish you to consider while I am still on my way: the matter of your unbound state. The Clan matriarch has voiced her concerns about that matter, and I happen to agree with her. It is time for you to do your duty towards your Clan and your family.”

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Sheridan had slept about four, probably four and a half hours only when his door buzzer woke him. Which was a good thing, actually, as this sleeping period had been too short for his body to shut down completely, and so he was reasonably awake by the time he opened the door for Garibaldi… a seriously worried Garibaldi.

“Michael, what is it?” he asked. Garibaldi being worried was not such a rare thing, on any average day, but this time, the security chief looked as if he’d been wrapped in a dark cloud of concern.

“We have a problem, Captain,” Garibaldi told him. “Lyta wanted to scan this Night Watch scum before the Vorlon would call her back; so we went to Voyager and did it.”

“And why was I not informed about this?” Sheridan asked, his brows knitting together in a displeased frown.

“You have just gotten the first snatch of sleep in two days,” Garibaldi replied. “Ivanova promised to break my arm, should I wake you; and she’s a woman who keeps her promises.”

“I see,” Sheridan suppressed a grin. He might be the military governor of Babylon 5, but the person everyone feared like the coming of Judgement Day was Ivanova. Rumour said it had already been true when Jeffrey Sinclair had been in command of the station. “So, what have you found?”

“Two more Night Watch bases,” Garibaldi told him sourly. “One in Brown Sector and one in Red. It seems some of the bastards have been hiding in plain sight.”

“Well,” Sheridan sighed, “it would have been too easy, were Grey 17 their only hideout, wouldn’t it? But at least it was their largest base… or was it not?”

“It seems so, yeah,” Garibaldi agreed. “The place where they were hiding their weapons and most of their technical gizmos, like the black light camouflage suits… although we’re still investigating how they were able to build a bomb there. Their rat hole in Brown Sector seems to be a similar place, just a lot smaller. We can take it out with minimal risk. The one in Red Sector, however…”

“That makes things complicated,” Sheridan agreed. “Taking them out in such a crowded section could lead to lots of collateral damage.”

“Yep,” Garibaldi nodded. “Especially considering the fact that they are operating from the middle of the business area. If they spot a security unit approaching them, there would be plenty of potential hostages to choose from. It could be ugly; and we need to take out both bases simultaneously, or they will slip through our fingers again.”

“Can we do that?” Sheridan asked in concern. “Do we have enough men we can trust? Do we have the time to have every single one of them scanned, to see whether they are trustworthy or not?”
“We don’t,” Garibaldi admitted. “But we must make our move, Captain, and we must make it now. They were able to build that bomb unnoticed; a bomb that could have killed us all. Who knows what else do they have up their sleeves?”

“Was Lyta unable to find out anything about their further plans?”

“The ones she scanned were small fish; cannon fodder that wasn’t told much. Well, with the exception of Jack, that is, but he’s so insane it’s hard to figure out what’s reality and what’s a figment of his mind.”

“Jack? That would be Officer Bruton, the guy who used to be your second in command, and who tried to kill you?” Sheridan clarified. “He didn’t make the impression of a crazy man to me.”

“Back then, he probably wasn’t,” Garibaldi agreed. “Lyta says someone has tampered with his mind since then, though. Put up an Asimov block – whatever that might be – around a big part of his memories, so he wouldn’t be able to tell us things, even if he wanted. She can’t remove it, she says. If she tried, it would probably kill him, and still do us no good.”

“Do you think she told the truth?”

“Yeah. Whatever I might think about telepaths, whatever the Vorlons might have done to her, Lyta is still a decent person.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Sheridan said, “but what are we gonna do now? We can’t let these people stay on the station and sabotage us left and right. We must smoke out their nests; and we must capture at least their leaders, Armstrong and that Malcolm Biggs character. Without them to coordinate the rest, they would be a lot less dangerous.”

“I know,” Garibaldi sighed. “And honestly, I can only see one way to deal with them: we need help from Voyager.”

Sheridan leaned back in his seat and shook his head slowly, regretfully.

“I don’t think that would be possible,” he said. “Captain Janeway’s made it adamantly clear that she will not get involved in the inner struggles between us and EarthGov; and I don’t think that Commander Chakotay would go against her orders in this particular matter. There’s only so far he can go without endangering his position, and he’s gone far enough already.”

“I know,” Garibaldi said. “I don’t want to go behind Captain Janeway’s back in this matter, though. I’m planning to ask her face to face.”

“And you expect a positive answer?” Sheridan asked doubtfully.

Garibaldi shrugged. “Well, we won’t know until we tried, would we?” he said. “Even if she says no, we won’t be any worse than we are now.”

“True enough,” Sheridan admitted. “But I want a backup plan, Michael. In the likely case that she does say no. This matter must be dealt with, one way or another, before we have to face the bigger evil: the Shadows.”

“I know,” Garibaldi rose. “Zack and Lou are working on it already. There still are a few people we can trust unconditionally: like Malcolm Cupertino, who resigned rather than join Night Watch. There are a few more of his sort, but not enough. With the rest, we just can’t be one hundred per cent sure… and that’s not enough. That’s why we need help.”
“Can’t you take the Narns?” Sheridan suggested.

“I could, but then the culprits would know at once that we’re after them,” Garibaldi pointed out.

Sheridan sighed. “Very well; let’s give it a try. I wouldn’t put up my hopes too high, though.”

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Gregor Ayala gave Kes, who entered the brig area with a medical scanner in hand, a fond smile. As a rule Ayala did not smile often, having a naturally grim disposition and still mourning the loss of his wife and his two sons somewhere in another reality, but few people could see Kes and not smile. There was something eminently likeable in this small-boned, big-hearted girl… even though he knew, rationally, that in the eyes of her own people Kes no longer counted as a child. But she did look like he Flower Fairy (sans the butterfly wings), and especially the human crewmembers tended to handle her as if she had escaped a children’s fairy tale.

Everybody loved Kes, and thus both Ayala and Trumari, who also stayed in the brig area after the prisoners had been interrogated, gave her identical friendly grins. She answered their greetings with that patient smile of hers that made her look so much older at once.

“The Doctor sent me to perform a quick scan on the prisoners,” she explained. “He wants to make sure they have not suffered any lasting damage from the telepathic interrogation.”

“And wouldn’t that be a crying shame,” Trumari commented cynically; he had not forgotten having found Lyta Alexander in a puddle of her own blood and Dalby with a PPG aimed at his head by that madman. “It couldn’t happen to any nicer guys…”

Kes gave the Bajoran a reproving look. “The Doctor sees it differently,” she said, “and so do I.”

“Yeah, because you don’t know what they’ve done; and what they’d be capable of if they weren’t locked up,” Trumari said.

“You think so?” Kes asked softly. “You think I do not know what they are thinking at this very moment? What they are feeling? Their hopes, their fears, their anger and hatred?”

She stepped closer to the cell holding Garibaldi’s ex-aide, a handsome, dark-haired young man with madly glittering black eyes. The man glared at her with unveiled hatred, his face twisted into an ugly scowl.

“This one,” she continued softly, “is not simply insane. I sense a darkness in him I have never sensed before. It is similar to the minds of those aliens from fluidic space, the ones Seven calls Species 8472… and yet different. Older, more powerful… a lot more malevolent.”

“You mean this guy isn’t even human or what?” Trumari asked, getting visibly nervous. No one aboard Voyager had pleasant memories about Species 8472.

Kes shook her head. “No,” she said, “he is human. The darkness that has touched him is not his own… but it has inhabited him for a while, and it will call out for others of the same mind. The sooner he leaves Voyager, the better for us.” She turned around abruptly. “I will perform the scans later. Tuvok must learn about this.”

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“Mr. Garibaldi, you must be kidding!” Captain Janeway stared at Babylon 5’s security chief in shock.

They were sitting in her ‘ready room’: a small room opening directly from Voyager’s bridge that was
part office, part coffee lounge. Also present were Chakotay, who had finally managed to change into his uniform and had come to have their usual working lunch with his captain, and Tuvok, called out from the middle of his daily meditation, if the black robe he was wearing could be any indication.

Garibaldi had expected Janeway’s knee-jerk rejection, based on recent experience. But he was not willing to give up just like that. Not without a fight anyway.

“On the contrary, Captain,” he said as calmly as he could manage under the given circumstances. “I’m trying to avoid major bloodshed in a frequented business area.”

“And for that, you need our security officers?” Janeway asked. “I thought you had trained men for that sort of job.”

“We do,” Garibaldi said. “Well, we did. But two third of them have left when we booted out Night Watch, and the sad truth is, we don’t know whom we could trust from the rest.”

“That’s certainly unfortunate,” Janeway replied, “but still doesn’t entitle us to get involved in your internal affairs.”

“Actually, Captain,” Tuvok intervened smoothly, “regulations allow to provide help for the local law enforcement, if there is an official request from the ruling body of the given colony.”

“Yes; if the request comes from a legally elected government, which isn’t exactly the case here, is it?” Janeway riposted. “And even in that case it’s left to the captain’s discretion. I don’t see any valid reason why we should interfere in this matter.”

Garibaldi took a deep breath before answering. Losing his temper wouldn’t help here, he knew that. What he needed were good, solid arguments.

“Look, Captain,” he said, as calmly as he could manage. “If I attacked the terrorist cell in Red Sector, they’d spot my men from a mile, and lots of innocent bystanders would be killed. I’d like to avoid that, if possible.”

“Why don’t you evacuate the area?” Janeway asked.

“Because they’d realize what was going on,” Garibaldi replied, exasperated, “and submerge in the crowd at once. Surprise is our only advantage here.”

“What makes you believe that our people would be better suited for the job?” Chakotay asked.

“They don’t know the area half as well as your men do.”

“Yeah, but they are new here,” Garibaldi said. “Armstrong and the others won’t recognize who they are, assuming they’d wear civilian clothes.”

“That wouldn’t save anyone once the shooting begins,” Chakotay pointed out, playing devil’s advocate.

“I know, I know,” Garibaldi rubbed his brow in frustration. “But you have those energy weapons that can be set to stun, right? You could knock out Armstrong’s men before they’d start shooting people randomly… if we managed to sneak up close enough to them.”

That argument finally made the Voyager officers think. After a moment, all eyes turned to Tuvok, hoping that his vast experience in security matters would help find the right answer to Garibaldi’s request.
“Mr. Garibaldi’s arguments do have their merit,” the Vulcan said after some consideration, “but so do Captain Janeway’s concerns. We know too little about the nature of this conflict to declare without doubt whether we are allowed to officially aid Babylon 5 security in this matter.”

Garibaldi’s face fell. He was hard-pressed to hold back a rather rude remark about Starfleet regulations.

“However,” Tuvok continued, as if he had not seen the anger and disappointment on the human’s face, “I believe there is a way to make a compromise. Clearly, we cannot intervene officially. This is an internal matter, and Starfleet Security has no jurisdiction here. But if a few people would volunteer, unofficially, to help prevent a bloodshed and save innocent lives, I believe regulations could be… bent a little to allow it. Especially if the persons in question have only temporary Starfleet status.”

“In other worlds: you’re willing to look the other way, as long as the ex-Maquis do the dirty work,” Chakotay commented dryly. “How very… Vulcan of you.”

He was rewarded with a supremely arched Vulcan eyebrow.

“Your people have a matching saying for this situation, Commander,” Tuvok said with equal dryness. “It takes a thief to know a thief, I think. Or, in this particular case, should we perhaps say terrorist?”

For a moment, it seemed as if Voyager’s executive officer would hit their chief of security. Seeing Chakotay’s expression, Garibaldi caught a glimpse of the ruthless freedom fighter lurking under that usually calm surface.

“If I remember correctly, you used to be part of those actions you seem to condemn now so summarily,” he said coldly. “Granted, it was part of your camouflage as a spy on my ship. But that doesn’t change the fact that you helped us blow up Cardassian ships and military depots, and destroy labour camps. So don’t think you were any better than us, just because you had been planted on my ship with the sole purpose to lure us into a trap.”

He shook himself like a dog after having fallen into a pit full of snow; then he turned to Garibaldi, now visibly calm again.

“I’ll see to it that you get all the volunteers you need,” he said. “And I promise you that they will do a good job taking out our ‘fellow terrorists’. We’re used to that sort of guerrilla attacks. Just tell me when and where.”

Garibaldi handed him an electronic notepad. “To be honest, I was counting on a positive answer from you,” he said. “Here are all the details you’ll need to know.”

“Fifteen hundred?” Chakotay checked out the data. “That will barely leave us an hour to get prepared.”

“It’s been my experience that this is the quietest hour in that particular section,” Garibaldi explained. “We’re trying to keep the numbers of potential victims as low as possible.”

“Understood,” Chakotay considered the possibilities for a moment. “It would be more practical if you gave this Ayala, though. He knows best who’d likely volunteer and where they would be the most useful. Tell him to assign me to any team he finds most suitable.”

“Commander, there is no need for you to participate in this action,” Tuvok said, disapproval clear in his even voice.
“Yes, there is,” Chakotay retorted. “I won’t send my men anywhere I wouldn’t be willing to go myself.”

Less than an hour after having investigated the Night Watch people, Lyta Alexander checked herself out of Sickbay… much to the chagrin of the Holodoc, who wanted to keep her another day, at the very least. But she knew she had tested the patience of the Vorlon to its limits already and did not want to test it any more; not for a while, at least. With Kosh, she had never had to ask herself whether her actions would be approved or condemned; with Ulkesh, she never knew what to expect.

Just before her getting injured, the new ambassador had ordered her to remove ‘all distractions from the way of her work’, as he had put it. Those ‘distractions contained all her personal belongings, save a few changes of clothes, and every piece of furniture that had been in her quarters. She had only been allowed to keep a mattress, as lenience towards the human body’s need to sleep. She could not even imagine what further sacrifices would be demanded from her… but she had the feeling that giving away everything she had ever possessed had not been the last of it.

She had been very close to Kosh; closer than to anyone else in her life. She had hoped that the new Vorlon ambassador would be similar in nature, but during their very first encounter she had realized that it was not so. During her time on the Vorlon homeworld, she had been indoctrinated to obey any Vorlon unquestioningly, and despite the dark secrets that she had been shown, as long as Kosh was alive, she had done so willingly.

Kosh, in his ancient wisdom, had been a great inspiration for her, and carrying him inside her an intimacy beyond human imagination. Carrying Ulkesh, on the other hand, had been a very unpleasant experience. This new Vorlon did not treat her like a person; she was merely a tool for him, and – as he had made her feel on more than one occasion – a rather unsuitable one.

Her current situation was not what she had expected when agreed to work for the Vorlons. Kosh, at least, had genuinely cared for the younger races… for humans… for Sheridan in particular. Working for Kosh had meant helping her own people, even though she often did not understand the ways that would lead to that goal. She could not feel any of that interest for mankind’s welfare from Ulkesh… or from any other Vorlon, for that matter.

She wondered whether there would be a way for her out of this trap; in the heart of her hearts she knew that there would most likely be none. The new shielding technique Tuvok had taught her worked well against any other telepath, but an enraged Vorlon could shatter her shields to pieces in a second. As long as there was one Vorlon around, she would always be vulnerable.

Oh, Kosh, she thought desperately, what have you done to me? How am I supposed to go on without you, if your own people have grown deaf towards our pleas?

She allowed herself to wallow in self-pity for a few precious moments. Then she took a deep breath and pulled herself together again. Feeling sorry for herself led to nothing. She needed help if she wanted this new Vorlon to be dealt with; help that went well beyond the powers of everyone on the station.

Beyond the powers of everyone limited by mere flesh and blood.

She thanked the Doctor and Lieutenant Paris for their care and left Voyager, aiming straight for the garden, before Ulkesh could have caught any stray thought from her and moved in to intercept. She rode the core shuttle to the Zen garden, as this was the place with the least possible distractions. She sat down on the bench, focused all her Vorlon-enhanced mental powers, and sent out a desperate call for help to the only person she could hope to be able to aid them… assuming he was still within
reach.

She kept sending as long as her strength lasted before collapsing on the bench, empty like a burned-out oil lamp.

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The part of the entity that still identified himself as Kosh, weakened and greatly limited in his strength though he might be, was awakened in his hiding place by that powerful mental distress call. It had not been addressed to him, but it shook him up from his slumber nonetheless.

Regaining semi-consciousness, while nested in a vessel that could not respond, could not even recognize his presence, was a long and arduous process. He understood that the greatest part of what had once made him to the person he had been – that had made him Kosh – was irrevocably gone, had fallen victim to the Shadow attack. His ship, another part of him, was also gone… and the thoughts of his brethren, as little as he could perceive from them, seemed to have taken a dark turn.

At the moment of his ‘death’ he had hidden part of himself in the only somewhat compatible vessel within reach. It had been a good hiding place, as the vessel had not even been aware of his presence and thus hidden him well; but now he needed to move on, should he still want to make a difference.

He could not use his previous vessel, the one he had grown so familiar with in such a short time, any longer. She was now being used – abused would have been the more proper term – by his dark brother. He needed someone else.

Stretching his consciousness all over the station – and carefully avoiding any contact with the Dark Ones still present – he searched for the right choice. It did not take him long to find some interesting possibilities. They were not from his own reality, true. But they had potential; and it would be only a temporary merging anyway. There was not enough left of him to remain longer than absolutely necessary.

For now, he was content to hide in his oblivious vessel; until he could make contact with those strangers. He would not switch for a while yet. Staying where he was, he could get the most complete picture about how the war was going, study his possible chances, and watch the moves of his brethren. For a while, he would remain with the one named Sheridan. It was a good choice, as long as he still had to hide; and the human would need his presence, soon.

But once that part of his mission was done, he would move on, to a more powerful and receptive vessel, through whom he would be able to make his move. To make things right – hopefully. All he had to do till then was to wait and to watch; both things he had millennia-long experience with.
Part 8

Chapter Notes

Armstrong is the nameless Night Watch leader who had several appearances in Season 3. Since he was played by Vaughn Armstrong, I simply bestowed the actor’s name upon him.

PART 08

Lennier found Rastenn’s message when he returned from his regular meeting with the visiting Rangers; Marcus still being restricted to MedLab, he had taken over that particular task for the time being.

At first he found it strange that Neroon’s nephew would send him a message to begin with; due to their different allegiances, they were anything but friends. That was a fact that not even their current, surprisingly insightful conversation had changed… and would not change, not for a while. Not as long as Delenn and Neroon remained adversaries.

Besides, he had already told Rastenn what he was allowed to tell – what Rastenn needed to know. What else could have remained unsaid between the two of them?

Deciding that guesswork would not take him anywhere, Lennier shrugged and ordered the computer to play the message. It did not surprise him that it turned out to be a coded one – Rastenn was his uncle’s spy, after all, and spies tended to be a little paranoid. Thankfully, he only needed voice identification to read it.

The Rastenn on the vid was a very concerned one; in fact, this was the first time Lennier had seen him display anything but calm arrogance – the typical Warrior Caste attitude.

“I do not have time for details,” he said without preamble, “but since you are a friend of Vir’s, I think you ought to know about this. He is in MedLab One, in a… delicate condition and could use the support of a friend. And perhaps Ambassador Delenn would need to know what has happened tonight as well. I have to go now and meet my uncle’s messenger, but… it would be better for Vir not to be alone; for several reasons.”

With that, the message ended, leaving Lennier in a seriously worried state of mind. He could not even guess what might have happened to Vir, but he supposed it had something to do with the visit of Minister Virini and Lord Refa as well as the sudden departure of the latter for Narn space during the previous night. Add G’Kar’s own hurried departure only a short time before that, and the implications did not look good at all.

Contrary to common belief, Lennier was not as meek – or as naïve, for that matter – as appearances might lead one to think. He had been trained in the unarmed defence arts of Tha’Dom in the temple from his early childhood on; those arts included tactical thinking as well as actual physical combat. Plus, as Delenn’s aide for two and a half years, he was privy to plans and information very few other people would know of. He could imagine why Lord Refa had felt the need to visit Narn in such a great hurry, right after G’Kar’s departure. He just could not imagine what Vir’s role might have been in all this.
He wished he could speak with Rastenn personally. But if Neroon’s nephew would be meeting his uncle’s spies, not even another Minbari – or even a Ranger, for that matter – would be able to find him. Warrior Caste spies were highly capable and, despite his youth, Rastenn was one of the best.

That left one person Lennier could ask: Vir himself. And since – according to Rastenn’s message – Vir was in need of a friend, Lennier decided to pay MedLab One a visit.

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Wearing his old leather garb – the one he had worn in all his years as a Maquis – brought back a strange feeling of *déjà vu*, Chakotay found, strolling with the similarly-clad Ayala along the Zocalo. The shop that served as one of the Night Watch operations bases was near the end of Babylon 5’s ‘shopping mile’, but still in a frequented area. They had to be very careful.

He glanced around, checking for his people unobtrusively. He saw Trumari and Tabor, both wearing the oversized, asymmetrically-cut tunics and ceremonial earrings of their native Bajor, approaching slowly from the opposite direction. Chell, wrapped into a cloak so brightly coloured that it positively hurt the eye – not to mentioned it contrasted with his blue skin almost painfully – was talking to a Centauri a mile a minute, holding the elbow of the man (who had a decidedly trapped look) in a vice-like grip, but kept an eye on his commanding officer all the time.

Further away, Ken Dalby and Mariah Henley strolled along the booths, arms linked in the manner of an old, married couple... which they were in all but the letter of the law. Mariah even had the cheek to put his small, old-fashioned phaser on her girdle and wear it as if it were a strange-looking ornament.

“Everyone is in position, Cap,” Ayala said in a low voice, as if they were discussing the knick-knacks displayed on a Brakiri gift shop’s counter. “Hogan and Gerry are waiting at the core shuttle stop. Nozawa and T’Ral are watching the turbolift… er, transport tube. Yosha and Jarvis have just taken up position at the other end of this section and can be here in no time, using the maintenance tunnels Mr. Garibaldi’s shown us.”

“Very well,” Chakotay said. “Let’s do this.”

Ayala tapped his comm badge twice, signalling the others – and Garibaldi’s troops that were approaching the other base in Brown Sector at the same time – that they were going in. There was no verbal answer, of course, but he could see the two Bajorans closing up from one side and Dalby and Henley from the other one; even Chell let go of the Centauri, who could not get away from him quickly enough, and moved up towards them.

“Our surprise is already within,” Ayala informed his commanding officer.

Chakotay nodded. “Good. Let’s move on.”

They entered the clothes’ shop. It was lucky for them that the Night Watch people had not chosen a more specific establishment as camouflage… exotic alien instruments, for example. Faking interest for *those* would have been a lot more complicated.

The shop owner turned towards the opening door with convincing interest; he must have been well-trained for the job… unless he was the genuine item, of course, used as a pawn by the others. He was a heavy-set, middle-aged man with a face one could have seen a hundred times and yet not remember afterwards, which could be useful in this kind of work.

“Gentlemen,” he said jovially, “what can I do for you?”
“We can wait,” Chakotay said, gesturing towards the only other customer, a slender, dark-haired young man with pointy ears, who had obviously been there for quite some time already.

The shop owner waved off his concern, though.

“Oh, that gentleman is still looking for the right jacket for his betrothal ceremony,” he explained. “He said it would take some time, so I can help you in the meantime. What would be your pleasure?”

While Chakotay involved the shop owner into a discussion about the best possible gift for a woman he had just begun to date, Ayala’s experienced eyes checked the shop for hidden doors, weapons and surveillance devices. He found quite a few of the latter ones, but none of the rest, which meant that there either were none, or they were very well hidden. Finally, having seen all he could without the help of openly use scanners, he slapped Chakotay on the back.

“You’re overcomplicating things again,” he said. “I told you: if you wanna impress her, you ought to buy her a silk shawl – that one, in yellow, would match her colouring nicely. Don’t you think it’s pretty?” he turned to the alien customer who had come closer to watch them choosing.

“Indeed,” the young man said, reaching out for the shawl in question over the shoulder of the shop owner. “If I may be so bold.”

“Sure,” the shop owner moved to the side to make room for him – and then dropped heavily over the counter, crushing his delicate wares, seemingly without reason.

“Oh, my!” the young alien exclaimed, trying to soften his fall. “He fainted! Surely, there must be a shop assistant somewhere who can help him!”

He laid the shop owner onto the counter, hurried to the back door and began hammering on it with his fists. “Hello? Somebody? Help us, please?”

Chakotay had a hard time to suppress his grin. The famous Vulcan neck pinch was a handy thing, especially among people who had never heard about it, but who would have thought that young Vorik was such an excellent actor? First the tale about the betrothal suit, and now this spectacle… It had surprised everyone that he would volunteer for an almost purely Maquis mission, but that he would be so good at it…

“Hey, kid,” he said to the Vulcan, “don’t hammer a dent into that door, would you? If there’s anyone at all, they don’t hear you. We must go in and see if we can find them.”

He could see through the semi-transparent front door the two Bajorans blocking the entrance and nodded to Ayala, who had memorized the layout of the shop from the blueprints shown to him by Garibaldi. Ayala stepped to the back door and – shielding his own actions from the surveillance devices with his broad back – inserted a key card (also courtesy of Garibaldi) into the security slit, overriding the lock. The door opened.

“Go,” Chakotay said. “I’ll cover you. Vorik, let in the others and stay here to secure the shop.”

“Aye, sir,” the Vulcan replied crisply. He produced a phaser from under his tunic, called in the two other teams plus Chell, then he took up position behind a row of long cloaks hanging near the front door – and waited.

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Seven of Nine stared at the computer screen in slight confusion. She was currently watching Captain Sheridan’s log entry from February 6 of the previous year; an official entry recording the visit of the so-called ‘techno-mages’ on Babylon 5, and also his personal entry, which was supposed to be
confidential… but such minor hindrances never bothered Seven when on her quest for knowledge.

In January 2259, over one-hundred techno-mages were gathering on our station, Sheridan’s personal log entry said. Their reason: a great storm was coming and they were leaving to preserve their knowledge and to keep it from being used to ill purpose. They said they do not know where they are going and with luck, should not return within a human lifetime. One of them – the one named Elric – told me they had nothing to say to anyone on this side of the Rim; perhaps they expect to find someone or something on the other side.

She had cross-referenced the term but all she got was a short entry in the station’s database; an entry that was apparently based on some arcane Centauri legends.

Long ago, techno-mages used to be quite common on Centauri Prime, the entry, apparently authored by Ambassador Londo Mollari himself, said. They are long gone from the homeworld, but they have been seen on other planets and even in the depth of space from time to time. They are a secretive order that uses science to achieve the effect of magic; their organization predates the Republic. While we cannot say with certainty that they originated from our world, it is known that membership is not restricted to one race or one world. There have been known human, Vree, or, as some say, even Pak’ma’ra techno-mages, although the latter is hard to imagine.

Techno-mages use technology in new and different ways. They combine ingenuity with the technological knowledge of the various races and the result is startling. Little is known about what technologies are used and how they are controlled. Not all of their powers require technological aid, though. Knowledge and intelligence give them a great edge. They study the mysteries of laser and circuit, crystal and scanner, holographic demons and invocations of equations. These are the tools they employ. And they know many things. Secrets that they share with nobody else.

It is said that they almost never travel. They do not like to leave their places of power. To see even one of them is a rare thing. To see more than one at a time is considered a very bad omen. Before our first Emperor took the throne of the Centauri Republic, he consulted three techno-mages, who gave him their blessing. That is an image that is very powerful for those of us who still believe in the old ways. They can be a source of great trouble, unless one knows how to deal with them.

And that was all. A handful of commonplaces and superstitious rumours. That was not something Seven of Nine would find satisfying.

Obviously, those people did exist, and – based on visual records – the enigmatic Galen person she had met on Babylon 5 was one of them. They seemed to have unusual skills (or technology) to create illusions and, considering what their leader had apparently done to the Centauri ambassador (Seven had actually found that entry first), also a twisted sense of humour.

This still did not explain, however, what this Galen character could possibly want from her. It was unlikely that he would have mistaken her for one of his own kind; they most likely knew each other well, and besides, she was nothing like them, nothing at all.

And yet this Galen had spoken to her as if he could offer her an alternative; something that would give her existence true meaning, a real purpose. That was an option she intended to learn more about. Yet before she would confront Galen – assuming she could track him down in the first place – she needed to learn more about techno-mages in general. Those short entries she had found revealed almost nothing… at least nothing of true significance.

She checked the records again to see who had had the most extensive contact with them. The answer was Captain Sheridan, of course, but she rejected that possibility at once. She could not corner the station commander and demand information about something she wasn’t even supposed to know of.
She rejected the Centauri ambassador for the same reason. But there was another possibility. It seemed that the ambassador’s aide had been the first to make contact with these techno-mages. And he seemed a friendly and talkative fellow, who had already befriended several Voyager crewmembers. That sounded promising.

Seven started a search for Vir Cotto’s possible location – breaking into Babylon 5’s security system had not been a true challenge for someone who could communicate with computers directly – and was surprised to find that the young Centauri had visited Voyager last night. She also found indication that the man was currently treated in MedLab One.

That was convenient. She would have needed a very good reason to enter Babylon 5’s diplomatic section. For visiting the MedLabs she only needed a simple excuse… again, not a true challenge.

Deciding to find out the reason for Vir Cotto’s nocturnal visit in Sickbay later (she generally preferred to know everything that happened aboard Voyager), Seven of Nine terminated her search in favour of paying MedLab One a visit.

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Zack Allan had not been so anxious since the big showdown with the Night Watch people several weeks earlier. He would have preferred to be with the teams attacking the remaining two Night Watch bases, but Garibaldi had forbidden him to do so. He had been a Night Watch member himself – out of naïveté, not because he had bought the propaganda, though – so he’d have been the first to be recognized… and that would not be a very friendly reunion.

Sometimes he wondered what would have become of him, had he chosen Armstrong’s side instead of Garibaldi’s. Would he be hiding somewhere in Brown Sector with the others right now? Or would have his help made enough difference for Armstrong and his cronies to emerge from the conflict victorious, arresting – probably even spacing – the captain, Ivanova, the chief and who knows whom else? Would Babylon 5 now being run by Night Watch?

He did not regret his choice. He never really understood the intricacies of politics, the power plays going on under the seemingly hale surface; but he trusted Garibaldi. He trusted that the chief would know what was the right thing to do; that following his commanding officer, he would do the right thing, too. He had to trust that… or there was no point to anything he was doing here.

Parting ways with the rest of his team (who had been assigned to attack the Night Watch base in Brown Sector) Zack rode the core shuttle to the Garden. In order to make everything look normal, he needed to show increased Security presence in all the places where nothing of importance was going on. Smoke and mirrors and all that stuff, as Garibaldi called it.

Leaving the shuttle, he took the elevator to the ground level of the Garden. He looked around, taking in the illusion of peace the Garden always created. It seemed so calm, so serene, so very beautiful. So very out of place here, on the last frontier against a malicious enemy… and yet so comforting.

Until he discovered the black-clad figure of Lyta in the Zen garden, lying in front of the bench like a broken doll, that is.

Of course he recognized her immediately. How could he not? He liked her… liked her a lot. He had liked her ever since she had got back to Babylon 5 again. He had felt for her… for all the things she had gone through, ever since severing ties with the Psi Corps. And lately he had even begun to think that probably, just probably, he could do right by her.

Granted, there was a big gap between him, a simple security officer, and the kind of life Lyta was leading. A life he might never understand; although he hoped he could, one day. In any case, he
wanted to at least try. Lyta was the kind of person who made a guy want to try. There was something about her that made him nuts.

He had thought about asking her out once or twice, but never got the courage to actually do so. She was so different… and she had been through a lot, what with the Psi Corps and the Vorlons and all. Maybe she didn’t even want that kind of connection; not now, not here, and likely not with someone as unimportant as he was.

And yet, seeing her collapsed on the sand like a wounded bird only made him feel all the stronger for her. Perhaps he ought to say something, after all – before he would lose the chance to do so entirely. But first he needed to see that she got help… whatever might be ailing her. If there was anything he could do, that is.

He was almost afraid to check her pulse. To his great relief, it was there… weak, but relatively steady. Well, that was good, for starters. He activated his comm link.

“Zack to MedLab,” he said. “I need a medic in the Zen garden, as soon as possible.”

But before the person on the other end of the connection could answer, Lyta began to regain consciousness. She caught the end of his sentence, and grabbed his hand… either for support or to stop him, he was not sure.

“That’s… unnecessary,” she protested. “I’m… I’m better now… just very tired. Could you… could you help me get back to… to my quarters? All I need… is rest.”

Zack did not really buy it. “Are you sure about that?”

She nodded. “Please… no medics.”

“All right, all right,” Zack sighed in exasperation. “MedLab, cancel that. We seem to have the situation under control. Thanks.”

But when they reached Lyta’s quarters, he stared at the barren room with only a naked mattress on the floor with trepidation.

“Lyta! This is no way for a human being to live!”

“There is no other way… not for the moment,” Lyta replied, her strength slowly returning. “I can’t fight a Vorlon; not over something as trivial as furniture.”

“Does the captain know about this?” Zack asked.

Lyta shook her head. “No; and I don’t wish him to learn about it, either. He has far more important concerns at the moment. Please, Zack; if you’re truly my friend, don’t tell anyone. Especially not the captain. This is not the right time for personal grievances.”

Zack mulled over that bit for a while.

“All right,” he finally said. “I’ll keep it for myself… For now. But after this mess is cleaned up one way or another…”

“… nothing of this will matter anymore,” Lyta interrupted. “Thank you, Zack – for everything.”

And then she promptly lost consciousness again.

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Chakotay and his men found the back room of the clothes shop empty. Well, empty of any people, that is; with suits and dresses and coats hanging everywhere, it seemed the ideal rat trap.

“Nobody home here,” Trumari stated the obvious. “What now?”

Ayala consulted his tricorder. “There are two maintenance tunnels leading out from this room, here and here,” he showed the others the hidden entrances. “Unfortunately, they lead to vastly different directions. We’ll have to split up and follow the two routes as Ms. Alexander had taken them from the prisoners’ minds.”

“What about side branches and such?” Chakotay asked.

“There are few of those, and Garibaldi has placed Narns at the exit points,” Ayala explained. “They’ve got pictures of the suspects and will – hopefully – be able to pick them out of the crowd, should they try to escape through the side exits.”

“Hopefully,” Chakotay replied with emphasis. “This must happen very fast, or things will escalate into something really ugly. “All right; Greg, I’ll go with you, Dalby and Henley. Trumari has the most experience with this kind of thing; he’ll take Tabor and Nozawa and check out the other way. Keep radio silence, and remember our hit code: two touches at every new stretch you’ve found clear; three if you’ve made contact.”

“And don’t forget to mute your tricorders,” Ayala added, “or else they’ll shoot you before you can realize they’re there. I’ve seen them in action; they won’t hesitate to kill.”

“Neither will we,” Trumari replied darkly.

“But only if there is no other way,” Ayala reminded him. “The actual goal is to get them alive, so that their brains could be picked for more information. Are you all ready?”

“Sure,” the others chorused as one man.

Ayala nodded. “Well what are you waiting for? Let’s get it done!”

The ex-Maquis team split up and vanished in their respective maintenance tunnels. Chakotay took head in his own group, as he’d always done while still a freedom fighter. The tunnel led them straight to Brown Sector, where it forked.

“Where now?” Dalby whispered.

Ayala checked the layout of the section on his PADD.

“The one on the left,” he decided. “Thirty metres further down must be one of those temporary lodgings that usually are rented by visitors passing through the station, who only spend here a night or two.”

“They have their base in a hotel room?” Henley asked in surprise. “How would that work? How can they stay there without being found out?”

“Perhaps they rotate as hotel guests,” Chakotay shrugged. “That way, they won’t draw any unwanted attention; especially if they do it under false names. They have good enough contacts to get fake ID-chips, I guess. Let’s go!”

It took them at least twenty minutes to reach the end of the side tunnel. Only in situations like this did one realize how huge Babylon 5 actually was. Before opening the hatch, Chakotay pressed an ear
against it.

“I can’t hear a thing,” he whispered, “but that doesn’t mean they aren’t there. We’re going in – set phasers at heavy stun. Attack pattern Gamma-Six. At three…”

The others nodded in understanding. Chakotay counted back from three on his fingers; then he tossed the hatch open, and they all jumped into the room behind it, scattering in all directions and rolling into a ball, to offer as small a target as possible. With the same roll, they fired widely-fanned, heavy-stun beams into the room in a random pattern.

One had to give their adversaries one thing: they were well-trained. Simultaneously while being his by the stun beam, one of them managed to fire his PPG at the intruders. Fortunately, he was unable to take proper aim, so only Henley’s hair got singed a little. Which caused her to grumble for a week afterwards, but that was another matter.

But that was the only attempt of resistance. Only seconds later, everyone in the room was heavily stunned and lay on the floor. Chakotay counted them.

“Five down, six more to go,” he commented in satisfaction. “Whom do we have here, Greg?”

Ayala, the man with the vital information, checked his PADD again.

“Four of them are small fish,” he replied. “But this one,” he nodded at a grey-haired, middle-aged man with sharp features, “is one of the chief honchos. This is that Armstrong character Garibaldi’s told us about. The one who tried to take over the station a couple of months ago with the other Night Watch types.”

“But neither of them is Malcolm Biggs?” Chakotay asked. Ayala shook his head. “Well, then we need to be very careful, people. He is the puppeteer… these are just the puppets. Let’s call in station security; then we can move on to help the others.”

Henley called Garibaldi on the pre-appointed channel and asked for ‘clean-up service’ to be sent both to the clothes shop and the hotel room. They handcuffed the unconscious terrorists, just in case, and searched them for any possible hidden weapons – they didn’t find much. Apparently, the guys trusted their PPGs to be enough in any conflict.

_Well, they were apparently wrong_, Ayala thought.

Dalby and Henley were left behind to keep an eye on the captives until Security arrived. Chakotay and Ayala hurried back to the fork in the maintenance tunnels, and chose the other way to give Trumari’s group reinforcements.

They had barely brought half the way behind them when Chakotay’s comm badge vibrated. Once. That meant, the other group had run into unexpected trouble and needed help. Since there was no longer any danger for the business area, Chakotay activated the communicator.

“Angry Warrior to the tribe,” he said. “Move in onto our tertiary target, from both sides. Elf boy, keep the beachhead. All others – move it!”

The ex-Maquis jumped into action from all the different positions they had taken in. Only Vorik and the ones guarding the transporter tubes and the core shuttle station of Red Sector kept their posts, in order to cut off the way of potentially fleeing terrorists.

“Hurry up, Greg,” Chakotay said through gritted teeth. “I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.”
“You and me, Cap, you and me,” the big, burly ex-Maquis replied, moving through the low and narrow tunnel with surprising speed and agility.

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Lennier found MedLab one in a bit of disarray when he arrived. It seemed that once again, Ms Alexander had been brought in, after her most recent release from Voyager’s Sickbay, although nobody appeared to know what could be wrong with her. Mr. Allan, Mr. Garibaldi’s aide, stood at her bed, while Dr. Hobbs was taking readings, her face grey with concern.

After a few moments of watching the highly professional blur of activity around Ms Alexander’s bed, Lennier finally spotted a med tech he knew.

“Mr. Kiriyama,” he said politely, “I’ve come to visit Vir Cotto. Can you tell me where I can find him?”

“Observation Room Two,” the Asian med tech nodded in the direction of said room. “But he needs to rest. Has gone through severe trauma and must not have any more stress.”

“I do not intend to be stressful,” Lennier replied seriously. “I just want to sit with him for a while. He is my friend.”

“Well, go on in, then,” the med tech said. “If there's anything the poor guy can use right now, it’s a friend.”

Lennier readily did as he was told, and he found a somewhat bruised but otherwise unhurt Vir sleeping quietly in the observation room. Well… physically unhurt, in any case. As for his mental condition… the deep, dark rings under his eyes and the new, previously unseen bitter lines in the corners of his mouth spoke another language.

The med tech had spoken of severe trauma, and whatever it might have been, it had left traces. Traces that wouldn’t be easily erased – in the worst case, they wouldn’t be erased at all. Still, Lennier tried to remain optimistic. Vir was resilient; more resilient than most people would give him credit for. He was one of those people who bent easily but didn’t break easily.

Vir must have felt his presence, because he opened his eyes and gave Lennier a weak smile. His eyes were weary and full of pain, but – to Lennier’s relief – he didn’t seem completely shattered. Just deeply hurt; which was bad enough, but still not beyond healing.

“Lennier,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

He spoke clearly, in a calm, even tone, even though his voice was as weary as his eyes were. Lennier guessed that whatever had happened to him, it had already been dealt with, and Vir was getting through the aftershocks at the moment.

“I cannot leave you out of my eyes for a minute,” the Minbari chastised his friend gently. “I turn my back for a moment, and you get in trouble as soon as I am not looking.”

Vir actually laughed at that, which did a great deal of good to ease Lennier’s heart.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ll try to take better care of myself – for your sake.”

“What happened to you?” Lennier asked.

Vir made a small, dismissive gesture with a chubby hand – a gesture Lennier had seen too often, whenever the young Centauri was speaking about himself. Vir didn’t have a great deal of self-
confidence, which was a shame indeed.

“Oh, nothing unusual,” he said. “Caught up in Centauri politics; got used as an unwilling and useless tool by both sides… that sort of thing.”

There was so much sadness in his voice it almost broke Lennier’s heart. He knew that Vir considered Ambassador Mollari as some kind of mentor, and while he wasn’t blind towards Londo’s faults, he’d do literally everything to help him.

“What did he make you do?” he asked quietly.

“He forced me to lure G’Kar into a deadly trap,” Vir answered in defeat. “And then Lord Refa’s men caught me, and his telepath tore my mind to pieces. And now G’Kar will be arrested, tortured and publicly executed, and Lord Refa will be triumphant, and all that because I was too weak.”

“A forced scan?” Lennier hissed, leaving Vir’s self-recriminations unaddressed for the time being. He’d work on those later. “How deep?”

“All the way,” Vir replied tiredly. “They know everything about me; including how I helped Narns to escape labour camp while I served on Minbar as temporary ambassador. I’m a dead man, Lennier – unless your government grants me asylum.”

“And they let you go after this?” Lennier was truly bewildered. That wasn’t the usual Centauri way to deal with political adversaries… or their co-workers.

“Oh, I’m sure they were going to execute me; after they’d squeezed every bit of potentially useful information out of my brain,” Vir said bitterly. “It seems that befriending a Minbari spy does have its advantages, though.”

Lennier nodded in understanding. “Rastenn. He truly must like you very much – the Warrior Caste does not get involved with the affairs of other species, as a rule.”

“Rastenn,” Vir admitted. “He broke me out of the room where they kept me, got me to Voyager – with the help of Mr. Cole, I assume, as I doubt he’d have contacts of his own already. Mr. Tuvok, that Vulcan security chief of theirs, performed something they call a mind-meld then, putting back the pieces where they belonged, somehow… I have no idea how. He isn’t even a doctor, I understand. But he’s a hundred years old, they say, and trained for this sort of thing. However he did it, I am grateful. I still might be executed in the near future, but at least I won’t be an insane, slobbering wreck in the meantime, and that means a great deal to me.”

“Why are you still here, then?” Lennier asked.

“He put my mind back together, but a forced deep scan also causes a nasty physical shock… or so the doctors say,” Vir replied with a shrug. “I’m still weak like a baby. Doctor Hernandez says it will take days until my body has finished dealing with the trauma, so they want to observe my condition for at least another day. I don’t mind, actually – they have less chance to get to me while I’m here. And the nurses are very kind.”

He didn’t say pretty or friendly as Londo would have done, and Lennier understood that kindness was not something his friend had often experienced in his long life. He tried to say something… comforting but didn’t seem to find the right words, and that seemed him deeply. What kind of friend was he if he couldn’t even give a little comfort?

While he was still struggling with himself, the doors of the observation room slid open again, and in walked a tall, blonde vision of a human woman in a form-fitting silver-grey jumpsuit, on such high
heels that the mere sight of it made him struggle for balance. How human females were capable of walking on such dangerous footwear – and why they felt the urge to do so in the first place – remained a mystery for him.

The woman walked closer to Vir’s bed and looked down at him with large, doll-like blue eyes. Over one of her eyes there was some kind of cybernetic implant. That and the exoskeleton covering her right hand revealed her as the cyborg lady from Voyager, of whom Lennier had already heard. Well, perhaps she wasn’t a cyborg – not entirely – but definitely the closest thing.

“Well, perhaps she wasn’t a cyborg – not entirely – but definitely the closest thing.

Vir Cotto?” she inquired, raising her unimplanted eyebrow. “I require your assistance.”

When Chakotay and Ayala reached the last known base of the Night Watch terrorists, they found it suspiciously empty… well, empty save for Trumari’s group, every single member of which was lying unconscious on the floor.

“Anaesthetic gas!” Ayala hissed, throwing one of the transparent breathing masks to Chakotay and pressing the other one onto his own face. The adhesive seaming of the mask adapted immediately, so that he was now safe from any possible gaseous substances or pathogens that might have been in the air.

Chakotay followed his example in a great hurry, hiding a smile. Nobody but Greg would have thought to keep those masks on him all the time – but again, as Greg liked to say, he was born ready. Ready for anything life might throw in his face. This continued alertness had saved Chakotay’s life more often than he would care to count. He considered himself a level-headed and careful leader – well, most of the time anyway – but Gregor Ayala kept surprising him with things that sounded very logical in hindsight yet would never have occurred to him in advance.

Which was the reason why Ayala had always been his second-in-command. Not because of their decades-long friendship, although it was good to have someone watching his back whom he could trust unconditionally. Not for reasons of technical savviness – Ayala was good, but Torres was better, and so were Hogan, Tabor and even Dalby. What made Ayala unique and supremely important was his thoroughness. If there was any chance of something going wrong, Ayala had already taken it into consideration and was prepared to deal with it. Like now.

“Be careful, Cap,” he warned, scanning the room both with the tricorder and with the experienced eyes of a guerrilla fighter. “They can be hiding somewhere in the room still.”

“That’s unlikely,” Chakotay replied. “The room is practically empty, save these boxes; and they have been pushed tightly to the walls. There isn’t enough room for anybody to hide behind them.”

“We can’t be sure about that,” Ayala said soberly. “Our local knowledge is very limited; and there can be hiding places the cannon fodder we’ve questioned wouldn’t even know of. I suggest doing a heavy-stun beam sweep here, too.”

“I’m all for thoroughness,” Chakotay shrugged. “Just be careful whom you aim that phaser at.”

This was an old joke between them, originating from their youth, at which time Greg had once accidentally hit Chakotay with an old-fashioned phaser pistol they’d found while exploring a former battle site. Fortunately for Chakotay, the weapon had been set at light stun, so that he recovered after an hour or so, but poor Greg never lived it down.

They both grinned and began with the stun sweep, slowly, methodically, careful to cover every inch in either direction. They were almost done when – from the corner of his eye – Ayala spotted a
movement among the shadows. In the next moment, a man wearing one of those damned black light camouflage suits stepped forward, becoming visible due to having moved, and aimed his PPG directly at Chakotay.

“Chak, no!” Ayala screamed when the PPG shot hit his friend’s broad chest, but he was too far to protect Chakotay with his own body. His training, however, kicked in. He stunned the assassin and forced himself to finish the stun sweep they’d begun, in order to avoid any other unpleasant surprises.

Four more camouflaged terrorists fell to the floor with loud thuds. Only when he was sure there could be not more of them hiding anywhere did he hit his comm badge.

“Ayala to Voyager. Chakotay has been shot. I need an emergency beam-out, directly to Sickbay.”

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant,” the concerned voice of the duty transporter technician replied. “I don’t know where you are and what’s interfering with the transporter beam, but I can’t get a lock on either of you.”

Ayala said something in Cardassian that would have earned him a prompt execution from the spoonheads – he only used expletitives in the language of the enemy in times of extreme stress – then he took a deep breath to calm down.

“All right,” he said. “Beam Paris over with an emergency kit to MedLab One, and inform Doctor Hobbs that I’m taking Chakotay there. We’ll see when and how we can get him back to the holodoc. Ayala out.”

He changed the frequency and called all the ex-Maquis who took part in the action.

“Ayala to all teams. Mission accomplished. Clean-up teams needed. Chakotay’s down, though; I’m taking him to MedLab One. You know what you have to do, so do it. I’ll stay with the Cap. Ayala out.”

Now that the necessary calls had been made, he could finally look after Chakotay – and the sight was not encouraging. Chakotay had a nasty-looking burn in the middle of his chest, his hand was clammy and his breathing shallow.

Ayala swore under his breath and felt around himself for the ever-present hypospray without which he’d never start any mission. He found it in his pocket and shot Chakotay with everything it contained: something to prevent infection, something to prevent inflammation and something to support his heart till the medics arrived. It was the standard Maquis cocktail they always used – one he hadn’t needed for a long time. He knew he had to stabilize Chakotay before they could move him – he was just not sure he could do it. The emergency shot was not nearly effective enough for such severe injuries.

Laconic creature as he was, he still almost burst out in tears when Paris came in running, with a med team of Babylon 5’s MedLabs pushing a gurney in tow.

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When Lyta came by, she had a splitting headache and felt ridiculously weak. She was vaguely surprised to find herself in MedLab One – and Zack Allan sitting at her bedside, perched on a very uncomfortable-looking stool.

“What… what happened?” she asked.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Zack answered gently. “I found you in the Zen garden…”
unconscious. I called medical assistance, but you insisted on going back to your quarters instead – where you promptly passed out again, so I thought it would be more prudent to bring you here, after all.”

“Oh… Lyta found it hard to think. “I… perhaps I’ve a bit… a bit overstrained myself.”

“Doing what?” Zack was still light years from understanding things.

“I… called for help,” Lyta whispered.

“Er… what?” Zack was starting to feel as if he’d suddenly entered some sort of weird alternate reality.

But Lyta had already fallen asleep again.

Zack sighed and rubbed his burning eyes. Looking up again, his glance fell upon Captain Sheridan, who was standing in the door of the observation room.

“What did she mean with calling for help?” Zack asked him in honest bewilderment.

Sheridan shook his head. He looked a little better, now that he’d slept a few hours, but still every bit as tired as Zack felt. They must have gotten him out of his bed, which could only mean that the action against the Night Watch people had been finished.

“I have no idea,” he replied. “And quite frankly, that scares the shit out of me.”

The confession surprised Zack greatly – even shocked him a little. He’d always thought that nothing could shake Sheridan’s self-confidence. Was even annoyed about that fact sometimes.

“What exactly does scare you about it, Captain?” he asked.

“Several things,” Sheridan answered slowly. “Firstly the very fact that she apparently sees our situation serious enough to call for help. Secondly, that she might see the new Vorlon ambassador as a threat, against which we’d need help. And thirdly that she actually might know someone who’d be able to deal with an out-of-control Vorlon.”

Zack thought about those aspects for a while, then he nodded. “I see your point, Captain,” he said in complete agreement.

A moment later, a med-team rushed by the observation room with a gurney, Voyager’s pilot following them with a concerned face. On the gurney Commander Chakotay lay, with a nasty-looking PPG-burn in his chest. Now concerned himself, Sheridan got hold of Ayala who was hurrying after them with an exception as near to panic as he was capable of on his usually stony face.

“What happened, Lieutenant?”

“We ran into a bit of trouble in one of the Night Watch hideouts,” Ayala summarized. “Chakotay was shot. They need to stabilize him before he’d slip away into a coma… or we won’t be able to beam him over to our Sickbay.”

“Did you get all the targets, at least?” Sheridan asked.

Ayala nodded. “Stunned, captured, delivered to the holding cells, identified… all but one.”

“You mean one of them is still on the run?” Sheridan asked with a frown.
Ayala shrugged. “No plan is absolutely waterproof. Perhaps he’s been elsewhere on the station, minding his business, while we got out their rat holes.”

“I see. Who’s the one missing?” Sheridan asked.

“You won’t like it,” Ayala replied grimly. “It’s that Malcolm Biggs.”

Sheridan and Zack looked at each other, realizing where the missing terrorist could have been. After a moment, Sheridan shook off the shock and activated his link, calling Garibaldi.

“Michael, find Ivanova and put her under guard. She’s in extreme danger.”

“She won’t like it,” Garibaldi commented.

“And I don’t care,” Sheridan replied. “I want her safe. Biggs might be after her. All the others are counted for.”


Sheridan deactivated his link and looked at Zack in anguish. “I just hope we’re not too late already,” he said.
Chapter Notes

The Reg Gel is book canon, mentioned in the original series novel “The First Adventure”.
I’ve taken some liberties regarding Londo’s ex-wives. The Minbari imprinting on one person is BanAduial's idea, which I adopted for my personal headcanon.

PART 09

Vir looked up into the icy blue eyes of the blonde vision of exaggerated human femininity in honest shock, and Lennier couldn’t blame him. Even though he wasn’t similarly affected himself. Minbari imprinted on one person and were never interested in anybody else through their entire life.

He’d heard of the cyborg lady of Voyager, of course – everyone with even the smallest contact to C&C had – but this was the first time he saw her face to face. He found the experience… unsettling, although for different reasons than Vir might have.

Centauri, even though they were genetically incompatible with humans, found them sexually attractive. Minbari, not being slaves to their hormones – or rather, their hormones being naturally channelled towards a single person – were able to look deeper. Most of them being spiritually sensitive, they could feel another person’s soul, even that of humans.

Humans were easier than other aliens anyway, as they practically wore their souls on their sleeves.

From the cyborg lady of Voyager, however, Lennier could feel nothing. And that, frankly, terrified him.

Being mildly empathic, like most members of the Third Fane of Chu’domo, he could usually read the general disposition as well as the momentary emotional state of most people he met. From this semi-robotic woman, however, he felt nothing.

He’d heard complaints about her treating C&C personnel with impatience and arrogance, but those must have been temporary emotional patterns. Because right now, as she was staring down at Vir with those unblinking, porcelain blue eyes, gleaming in her steel-grey, almost metallic jumpsuit like a silver statue, she felt… well, unreal would have been the best word for it.

As a rule, Lennier perceived the souls of others as music: a wordless melody, the chiming of temple bells, the singing of the wind across the crystal spires of large Minbari cities. Simpler souls, like Vir’s, had a simple melody. Delenn’s was like a symphony played by a grand orchestra: violent themes forged into a complex pattern of rising and ebbing, and with every change, Lennier’s own soul was being sucked deeper into that powerful tide.

But from the cyborg lady of Voyager he got no music at all. Oh, there were faint echoes that revealed that there had once been a great deal of… well, noise could probably be the best description. But it was all gone now, save for those lingering echoes, and she felt as empty to him as a discarded piece of Warrior Caste body armour.
Lennier wondered if she’d implode in the not so distant future. People who were hollow in the inside usually did, and then innocents got hurt. Already, Vir seemed horrified enough – although by her cold professionalism rather than by the danger he wasn’t even aware of.

“M-my assistance?” he stammered. “W-with what?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lennier interrupted before the cyborg lady could have answered. “You are in no shape to assist her with anything,” he turned to the woman who was more than a head taller than him, due to the high heels supporting her already impressive natural height. “Please, leave. My friend is not well, and you are upsetting him.”

“Irrelevant,” she replied coldly. “I require information. This individual might be able to provide it.”

“This individual is my patient,” Dr. Hernandez, smaller even than Lennier in size but fierce enough to put a Warrior Caste matron to shame, stepped between them and glared up into the cyborg lady’s face with a scowl. “He’s been through a lot and he needs to rest.”

“Rest is irrelevant,” the cyborg lady replied. “Information is of paramount importance.”

“Not in my MedLabs, unless it’s necessary for treatment,” Dr. Hernandez put her foot down. “Now, you can leave voluntarily, or I’ll have you removed by security.”

“They would be no match for me,” the cyborg lady said.

There was no arrogance in that statement, only the cold fact. And, seeing the exoskeleton on her hand, somehow Lennier didn’t doubt the truth of it.

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Before the verbal confrontation could have escalated, though, the low-key hum of Voyager’s miraculous particle transporter could be heard, and the golden column of energy swirled into existence in the middle of MedLab. A moment later Tom Paris stepped out of it, with an anxious face, carrying the 24th century equivalent of a medkit.

“Oh, Lieutenant Paris, good that you’re here,” Lennier jumped at the chance… figuratively speaking. “Would you tell your colleague that she should not bother Vir while he’s still not recovering?”

“As if she’d listen to me; or to anyone else, for that matter.” Paris grinned cynically, but he gave it a try nonetheless. “Seven, you should return to Voyager; I’ve been called over because Chakotay is apparently injured – the captain might need you.”

Seven of Nine considered that argument for a moment – then she nodded.

“Very well. I’ll go – for now. But I’ll return to continue my research.”

With that, she left indeed, stalking on her high heels like a hereon.

The relief following her departure was short-living, though. Almost at the same time Mr. Leong, the paramedic on duty, came in with his team, running with the gurney with Chakotay on.

The executive officer of Voyager was in a horrible shape, with a hole of the size of a fist burned through his midsection, as if it had been punched through flesh and bone with white-hot iron. He was unconscious, his skin clammy and of a pale, muddy colour from the shock and the blood loss.

“Shock room, now!” Dr. Hernandez yelled, yanking on a pair of antiseptic gloves. “Send me a trauma team!”
“Wait!” Tom Paris tried to sop her. “We’re supposed to stabilize him and then beam him over to Voyager…”

She gave him a measuring look.

“Lieutenant, I was a battlefield trauma surgeon in both major interplanetary wars of our century; and then served with the troops of General Franklin, before coming to Babylon 5. Your technology may be more advanced, but I know everything about PPG shot wounds, and I’m telling you, if I don’t treat him now, there’ll be nothing left to take back to your ship. Now, either assist me or get out of my way, because we don’t have a moment to waste.”

Her tone was so authoritative that Paris simply nodded and followed her to the shock room.

Barely were they gone, Lieutenant Ayala arrived, his face full of concern for his friend and commanding officer.

“Chakotay and I have the same blood group, should he need a transfusion,” he told Lillian, who was just coming from examining Lyta Alexander.

The doctor, though, shook her head.

“You couldn’t donate the amount of blood he’d need,” she replied, apparently having been updated about Chakotay’s condition. “It was a high-powered shot; the kind that would burn straight through an organic body, causing massive internal burns and trauma to the internal organs – even melting clothing into the skin.”

“The dermal regenerators can deal with that,” Ayala said. “The damaged organs, though, will have to be replaced with cloned ones.”

“We don’t have the technology for that,” Lillian began, but Ayala interrupted her.

“Fortunately, we do. In fact, Sickbay has cloned organs of every crewmember in cryogenic storage, as per Starfleet regulations,” he pulled a face. “I never thought I’d be grateful for the damn regs one day, but now… I just hope we get him over to Voyager as soon as possible.”

“Doctor Hernandez will do her best,” Lillian replied, although she was deathly pale with worry, “She has great experience with PPG shot wounds.”

Ayala raised an eyebrow. “You’re not going in with them?”

Lillian shook her head. “No; Maya Hernandez has more experience with this kind of injury, and besides, it’s better for the patient if his doctor is not… emotionally compromised. I’ve got a lot of work to do anyway. Ms Alexander has been brought in, and her condition is… worrisome.”

“In what way?” Ayala asked.

Lillian shrugged. “That’s the problem: we don’t know. She’s unconscious, but I can’t find any physical reason for it. She seems exhausted, and I don’t know why. It’s less than a day ago that she checked herself out of your Sickbay, and I haven’t got any documents from your doctor yet.”

“You should ask Tuvok,” Ayala suggested. “He’ll be coming over to check on the chubby little guy with the funny hair anyway; perhaps he can do his Vulcan mojo to wake the lady up again,”

“It might be worth the try,” Lillian agreed; then she sighed, as the paramedics came running again, bringing in the less seriously injured participants of the fight with the Nightwatch people. “Well, it
seems duty calls. Are you staying, Lieutenant?"

Ayala nodded. “I won’t go anywhere as long as Chakotay is in there.”

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Walking back to the docking bays to return to Voyager, Seven of Nine felt a profound sense of dissatisfaction. Her project of learning more about techno-mages – a contradiction in itself, if there had ever been one – had been unnecessarily delayed. She was certain that answering a few factual questions wouldn’t have harmed the pathetic creature in any way. But doctors – especially human doctors – were unreasonably protective of their patients.

Certainly, she could have removed the obstacles from her way and force the information out of the Centauri. He was such a weak creature, he wouldn’t be able to withhold anything from her. But Captain Janeway wanted her to follow the rules – human rules, Starfleet rules – and without the Collective she needed a place to belong.

It was better to comply – for now. Until a better opportunity came up.

Janeway and the others might believe that they had tamed her. That she had adopted their opinion that becoming human was possible – and desirable – for her. She would leave them their illusion… for the time being.

Reaching the bay where Voyager was docked, her long, purposeful strides slowed down considerably. She had that odd feeling of being watched again. But as she slowly turned around and scanned the room with her enhanced Borg senses, she couldn’t spot the source of the sensation. Still, she was certain that something – or someone – was spying on her. There had to be some very advanced technology at work… even by Borg measures.

She shook her head. Guesswork was counterproductive, as she couldn’t gather any empiric data at the moment. The best thing to do was to regenerate – she’d skipped one rotation in favour of deepening her research, and it showed. She needed to replenish her strength for the clearly inevitable encounter with this Galen person.

She entered Voyager through the door on the underside of the hull and headed directly to the cargo bay, where her regeneration chamber was waiting. She was looking forward what she’d once described to her curious crewmates as “contemplating her existence”. At that time, they had found it a charming concept.

They had no idea what it truly meant.

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Ayala used the time of waiting to engage Vir and Lennier in conversation. He wasn’t a political animal by his nature, but the various intertwining conflicts of this universe fascinated him. Especially the conflict between Narn und Centauri: the changing roles of aggressors and victims and the consequences of this power struggle for the rest of the galactic balance of powers.

Besides, it was always tactically wise to know as much about the power structure of a given situation as possible. He’d learned that from Chakotay, who hadn’t led advanced tactical training at Starfleet Academy for nothing.

He understood that the current conflict had started when the Narn attacked a defenceless Centauri agricultural colony – established on a planet formerly belonging to the Narn – some three years ago. Only the intervention of Commander Sinclair, then commanding officer of Babylon 5, now Earth’s ambassador on Minbar, which probably explained his success, had persuaded the Narn to withdraw.
But the humiliation of the Centauri in general and Ambassador Mollari’s in particular had been complete.

And now the Centauri, having arranged themselves with this reawakened ancient power, the Shadows, were paying back for that, in grand style. By having bombed the Narn homeworld back to the Stone Age; and by hunting down and publicly executing every Narn that would dare to raise their voice – or their weapon – against them.

“The attack on Ragesh 3 was particularly bitter for Londo,” Vir explained. “He’d used his influence to get his nephew, a talented young scientist, a safe position as head researcher and project director at the research station there… or what he thought was a safe position. And then the Narns attacked, captured his nephew, forced Carn to make a false statement about civilian unrest within the colony and that they had asked the Narns to move in and help keeping up order – and that publicly, on all channels… That was a black day for House Mollari.”

“And once Mr. Morden showed up here, with his enigmatic question of ‘What do you want?’, Ambassador Mollari walked straight into the Shadow trap,” Lennier concluded.

Vir nodded unhappily. “Yes, he did. I’m sure he hadn’t realized at first what he was doing. He was hurt and angered… and rightly so! What the Narns did to our colony, to his nephew, was vile! Five thousand people lived on Ragesh 3; unarmed civilians, all of them. And Carn Mollari was marked as a traitor for that forced statement. He didn’t deserve that! He was a good, decent young man – quite surprising of someone coming from one of the Old Houses, in fact.”

“Where is he now?” Lennier asked.

“I don’t know; and I seriously doubt that Londo would,” Vir sighed. “He escaped being arrested and executed for treason – barely – but where he has gone is everybody’s guess. Londo was devastated, of course. With his brother dead, Carn was his only relative he truly cared for; and his heir… was like a son to him.”

“That certainly explains a lot,” Lennier commented slowly. “But it still doesn’t excuse what he did.”

“Do you think I don’t know that?” Vir snapped. “Do you think I enjoy watching him falling into darkness a little more with every passing day? But I cannot do anything to stop him. He doesn’t listen to anyone.”

“He might listen to Timov, though,” Dr. Hernandez said, entering the room. She was no longer wearing her surgeon’s scrub and looked relieved. “Commander Chakotay has been stabilized and beamed directly to your Sickbay,” she added for Ayala. “Lieutenant Paris said something about reconstructive neurosurgery and Reg Gel – whatever that is.”

“A disgusting but highly efficient method of regeneration, both for broken bones and injured organs,” Ayala explained. “Essentially, you’re put into a tank with what looks like green jelly and you have to sit there until it does its thing. The more serious the injury, the longer you have to sit there.”

“Interesting,” the doctor commented. “I’ve never heard of such a method.”

“It’s been out of use since the late 23rd century, having been replaced with faster methods,” Ayala said. “The Holodoc reconstructed it, though, since we no longer had access to specialized Federation hospitals, lost in the Delta Quadrant as we were. Chakotay will hate it; but, assuming the surgery goes well, it will help him. Who is Timov, though?”
“Ambassador Mollari’s wife,” Lennier replied. “The one of the three he chose to keep when
Emperor Turhan granted him a divorce from two wives out of three in 2259, Earth reckoning, as a
gift for the thirtieth anniversary of his Ascencion.”

“His what?”

“The ceremony marking the time from which a young Centauri noble is considered a full adult and
allowed to take part in politics,” Lennier explained. “They celebrate this anniversary with a huge
party, at which all invited guests have to appear barefooted – as a sign of respect. They also have to
bring a gift.”

“That Londo chose to keep Lady Timov as his nominal wife doesn’t mean he’d be willing to listen to
her,” Vir pointed out reasonably. “Or that Lady Timov would bother to talk to him in the first place.
She always made her low opinion of Londo adamantly clear.”

“That may be so,” Dr. Hernandez allowed. “But she’s also very dutiful. She did save Londo’s life,
after all, when his youngest wife’s Day of Ascension gift oh so accidentally poisoned him,”

“She did?” this piece of news was obviously new for Vir. “How would she do that? And, before
anything else, why?”

Dr. Hernandez shrugged. “Apparently, they have the same blood type; and Ambassador Mollari
needed a transfusion. As for the why, she announced, and I quote: ‘I still have some principles that
even twenty years with Londo can’t erase’. A remarkable woman… and one tough cookie, if I ever
saw one.”

“But why did she never tell anyone?” Vir was completely flabbergasted.

“She told Doctor Franklin that neither of them would be ready for the awkwardness of any fake
gratitude from the ambassador’s side,” Dr. Hernandez grinned. “As I said: a remarkable woman.”

“With the less than endearing habit to bite when under duress,” Vir muttered sourly.

“Well, if you are small and unarmed, you need to find alternate ways to defend yourself,” Dr.
Hernandez, rather on the petite side herself, commented. Then she suppressed a yawn. “Well, I’m
beat. Fortunately, Doctor Harrison is due to take over for me, so I can go to my bed with a clean
conscience Good day, gentlemen. This old lady sorely needs her beauty sleep.”

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“She, too, is remarkable woman,” Lennier said when the doctor was safely out of earshot. “What are
you going to do now, Vir? Are you contacting the ambassador’s wife?”

“I’m not sure,” Vir admitted glumly. “Perhaps I should. But the mere thought of it sends cold shivers
down my spine. She is small, but she has a fearsome temper.”

“Does she really bite people?” Lennier still had a hard time to believe that; but again, Minbari
weren’t that big on physical contact, unless among bondmates – and even then strictly in private.

Vir blinked a few times, thinking.

“Well, I never actually saw it myself,” he finally said. “But I’ve been assured by Londo in
confidence that it happened at least twice.”

Now it was Lennier’s turn to blink in confusion.
“And the ambassador still choose to keep her when he had to choose?”

Vir shrugged, which looked a bit strange, lying on his back as he was.

“He said, with her he at least always knew where he stood – which is certainly true. Lady Timov is not one to mince her words when she has something to say.”

“What were the other two like?” Lennier knew it was nowhere near his business, but curiosity took the better of him.

Vir frowned for a moment; then his face cleared in realisation.

“Oh, right; you were rather occupied with Ambassador Delenn’s personal matters at the time. Well, all three marriages were arranged ones, as it is custom among our Great Houses. Londo married Lady Timov in 2239, according to Earth reckoning; she was his first wife and came from a lesser but very wealthy family. Lady Daggair, the second wife, was the oldest of the three and the daughter of a politically very active nobleman. She, too, had a devout interest in ‘the vagaries of politics and social climbing’, as Lady Timov would put it, as well as in spending great amounts of Londo’s money. When Londo was poisoned, Lady Daggair actually hoped he would pass away, as he hadn’t made his divorce decision public yet.”

“Charming,” Lennier commented dryly. Vir shrugged.

“She liked to say that she was what she’d been made: by her father, by Londo and by our society. I’m afraid there’s a great deal of truth in that statement.”

“I will take your word for it,” Lennier said. “What about the third wife, though?”

“Oh, the Lady Mariel!” Vir’s eyes became just a little wishful with the memory of her. “She was the youngest of Londo's three wives by many years. Soft spoken and beautiful, yet utterly ruthless – the iron claw in the velvet glove, as Lady Timov called her. Her father married her off to Londo because her… err… special interest in rich and powerful men was becoming an embarrassment for the whole family.”

“She was the one who made attempts to poison Ambassador Mollari?” Lennier tried to clarify. Londo Mollari’s family life was nothing if not complicated.

“She’d purchased the ancient statuette that fired a poison arrow at Londo,” Vir clarified. “She might or might not have known that it was booby-trapped; we never really found out. Personally, I’m sure she knew. Had Londo died before making his divorce decision public, all three of his wives would have become rich and prestigious widows, able to live the privileged lives of noble women they were accustomed to.”

“And yet Lady Timov chose to save her unloved husband,” Lennier said slowly. “That speaks of a noble character.”

“She’s brutally honest, I’ll give her that,” Vir allowed. “Perhaps Doctor Hernandez was right. Dutiful is the correct word to describe her.”

“What’s become of the other two?”

“Londo gave each of them a modest alimony as a settlement upon the divorce; but, of course, they were forced to adopt a more… modest lifestyle – something they weren’t happy with. Lady Daggair couldn’t bear the disgrace and fled to her family’s country estate, where she’s been living ever since. Lady Mariel, I heard, found herself something of a pariah in our social circles as a discard, and did
her best to sleep her way up the ranks again. She’s currently said to be one of Emperor Cartagia’s playthings… which means a fairly short life expectance as a rule. But she’s like those Earth animals… you know, the ones that resemble your goks…”

“Cats?” Lennier offered a little uncertainly, and Vir nodded.

“Yes. They say, those… cats always land on their feet, no matter how high they fall from; and so does Lady Mariel, regardless what might happen to her.”

“She was certainly fortunate that Ambassador Mollari simply let her go, after the poisoning attempt,” Lennier said dryly. “I’m told that people have been executed for much lesser offences on Centauri Prime.”

“Londo had no proof that it was pre-meditated; and a scandal would have harmed House Mollari more than the attempt to kill him,” Vir replied with a shrug.

Lennier shook his head. “I will never understand your people.”

“It’s not easy,” Vir allowed. “Sometimes I wonder if I do.”

And yet Lady Morella had foretold that he’d become Emperor one day. Truly, it was hard to imagine, even for him. Had he not known that she was one of the most powerful seers of her era, he wouldn’t believe it for a moment.

He still hoped it was a mistake. Even prophetesses could make mistakes, couldn’t they? He hadn’t told about the prophecy anyone; not even Lennier, whose discretion was absolute. If he behaved as if the prophecy had never been spoken, perhaps it wouldn’t come true, either.

He hoped it wouldn’t. He prayed for that to all fifty-two gods of the Centauri pantheon. Because should it come true, it wouldn’t bode well – neither for him, nor for the Centauri Republic. Vir Cotto knew his own limitation and was man enough to admit them.

Seeing that his friend was lost in thought, Lennier excused himself to return to Delenn’s quarters. There was still much work to do, and even he felt a little overwhelmed at times. Visiting Vir had been a welcome distraction, but now he had to pick up his duties again.

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Wrapped in his cloak of invisibility – actually a clever piece of technology, based on the bending of light – Galen left the docking bay, heading for a certain, abandoned part of the MedLabs. It was an interesting challenge to wave his way across this crowded and busy sector of the station without bumping into anyone and being discovered by touch, but he had great practice in such things.

Still, he wouldn’t have taken the risk in the first place, hadn’t he felt the urge to check on his, let’s say, special wards.

He knew that as long as Ulkesh remained on Babylon 5, the telepaths in their cryogenic chambers were in mortal danger. Vorlons could instinctively feel the presence of Shadow technology, even in its dormant state, and only Merlin could tell what an ill-tempered Vorlon would do if he decided to eliminate a perceived threat. And Ulkesh was constantly ill-tempered in these days.

Galen knew, of course, the reason for the Vorlon’s permanently sour mood. He had watched the oddly powerful little creature travelling on Voyager hurl the bulky Vorlon against the wall in an act of instinctive self-defence. He had to admit that is surprised him. The girl was so small, so fragile, so child-like with her blonde pixie cut and those pointed ears; she could go as the Flower Fairy, but for the lack of butterfly wings.
And yet she’d been able to overpower a Vorlon! An ancient and ruthless one, even as Vorlons go. That had been… unexpected. Not to mention impressive.

 Granted, she’d caught Ulkesh unaware. Next time she’d have a real fight at her hands and might not get away so easily. Nonetheless, it had been amazing; and one could not yet foretell, how much her powers would grow.

Still, the innocent little girl with the enormous mental powers was of no use for Galen’s plans. Her path led to a different destination; to a kind of existence that was several levels higher than his own. That much he could already see and knew it would be unwise to meddle with such powers.

No, his secret weapon was Seven of Nine, the ex-Borg still mourning her Collective… and those unfortunates violated by the Shadow servants to become the living weapon of the Enemy.

*Living* being relative, of course.

He reached the hidden compartment of the MedLabs where they were kept until somebody might be able to figure out how to reverse the handiwork of the Shadow Servant biotechnicians… which was a futile hope, of course. Once merged with the implants, they were no longer removable – not without killing the host first, that is. *He* knew that. *His* implants were of similar nature. The only difference being that he’d achieved them willingly. He’d volunteered to become what he was now.

These poor souls had not volunteered; but they’d remain what they had become nonetheless: part human, part machine. The only question was now: how to use their powers for the greater good. Because there was no way to lose them again.

The door to the cryogenic storage room was sealed, of course, but that could never stop him. He neutralized the seal with the tiniest flicker from his staff and entered the large hall, originally meant as storage space for medical equipment, medicine reserves and the likes. Now it was a tomb of some sort.

It looked like a hallway of the Stoa in Ancient Greece, the cryo-tubes seaming both lengthy walls like cylindrical steel pillars. One hundred cryo-tubes. One hundred human beings, full of implants that served only one purpose: to fly a Shadow ship.

*One hundred* Shadow ships, to be more accurate. Flown by the most powerful telepaths Earth had ever bred. Capable of withstanding the telepathic interference coming from their adversaries. Enough to destroy everything Sheridan and his unsteady allies might come up with… unless the Vorlons interfered again.

Galen shook his head in sorrow. No, the Vorlons would *not* interfere. They never really did, save for the one instant when Sheridan had practically blackmailed Kosh into helping them. For one thousand years, they held back, watching the younger races, inspiring them, manipulating them, nudging them in the right direction.

Or rather what they *believed* was the right direction. The Vorlons always believed they knew everything. And they never hesitated to sacrifice the younger races, just to prove their point.

That was something the Minbari – especially the Religious Caste – had yet to understand; and Galen feared that with Ulkesh in position, they would learn it the hard way, very soon.

But even if his own brethren chose *not* to interfere, Galen himself wasn’t willing to let those two ancient giants play with all the younger races as if those were merely chess pieces. Granted, what he *could* do was but a drop in the ocean on the grand scale of things. But he was determined to do that
Much, at the very least.

Ironically enough, the Shadows themselves had provided him with the means to hit them; and to hit them hard. And Voyager had brought over from an alternate reality the only missing piece: the very person that could – and would, though she didn’t know yet – serve as the Nexus.

All he needed yet was a suitable ship; but he was confident that that, too, would come his way at the right moment. Until then, he’d have to do what techno-mages did best: he would watch.

He slowly walked down between the long rows of cryogenic chambers, each housing a violated, dissected and rebuilt human being; their faces, frozen in a mute scream of utter horror spoke clearly of what they had gone through. He touched every single chamber briefly, in greeting as much as in compassion; but he knew that not even the knowledge of his brethren would be enough to safely remove the cyberweb implants from those poor creatures. The Shadow Servants might be able to do so, but the person they had once been would still be changed, forever.

“It will be over, soon,” he promised them in a low murmur. “You cannot be helped; not anymore. You won’t be able to return to your former lives. But you will be given a new purpose; and perhaps, if we’re very lucky, the chance for a new existence. Be patient, my children. It won’t take long now.”

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Blessedly unknowing of the plans of such enormous consequences taking shape behind his back, Babylon 5’s chief of security had finished his detailed report about the hit on the Nightwatch base in Red Sector, sent it to Sheridan’s computer and prepared to go off-duty. Officially. His shift had ended several hours ago – officially – but crises rarely took the official duty roster under consideration; and on Babylon 5 a day without at least a medium-sized crisis was a very rare day indeed.

Becoming independent from Earth hadn’t changed that fact one bit. It only shifted the nature of the regular crises to a different angle.

Garibaldi waited for Zack Allan to relieve him – officially - and paid MedLab a quick visit to see how his people were doing. The injured Nightwatch members had already been treated and sent to the holding cells; this time Sheridan hadn’t wanted to ask for Voyager’s help, as Captain Janeway had been decidedly unhappy with her people’s involvement in station business.

Well, at least she hadn’t forbidden any volunteers to help; and Chakotay’s people had proved eminently helpful. Garibaldi only hoped that the medicine of a parallel Earth – of a federation of hundreds of planets in the 24th century – was advanced enough, so that Chakotay wouldn’t pay with his life for his willingness to help out his fellow humans.

Which reminded him of Chakotay’s original plans for tonight. Plans that somebody ought to do something about. With purposeful strides, he left MedLab and headed back to Red Sector. He had a Centauri flower vendor to speak and a table reservation to cancel. After all, circumstances changed and plans changed with them. Why should Chakotay spend his credits on a reservation he wouldn’t be able to put to good use?

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In the cryogenic facility of the MedLabs Galen had come to a decision. He didn’t know if his protective spells would work against a Vorlon – never had techno-mage technology been tested against one of them – but he had to try. This new Vorlon was a bigot, with an unusual hang to cruelty, even for one of his old and merciless race. He would try to eliminate the frozen telepaths who, in his eyes, had been tainted by the Shadows.
That they hadn’t asked for it meant to the Vorlons nothing.

Perhaps with Kosh – the original Kosh – it would have been different. Perhaps with him one could have reasoned. Not with Ulkesh, though. This Vorlon was fanatical in his pursuit of cleansing the universe from the Shadows and their taint.

Actually, his attitude was morbidly similar to that of certain pro-Earth groups. “Let’s purify the universe,” had been the Homeguard slogan. The Vorlons just did it in a grand scale and didn’t care about collateral damage.

Gathering his strength, Galen closed his eyes and concentrated.
Some of the Sickbay dialogue is borrowed from the 1st Season *Voyager* episode “The Phage”. The Reg Gel treatment is book canon, mentioned in the Classic'Trek novel “The First Adventure”.

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**PART 10**

Sickbay was a blur of activity when Tom Paris arrived with Chakotay’s haphazardly cobbled-together body, straight into the operation room; and yet everything highly economical and under control. After the chaos of Babylon 5’s MedLabs, it was a relief.

Fortunately, they didn’t have to bodily haul the severely injured executive officer onto the table. The transporter was adjusted finely enough to deliver him on the spot. Tom was secretly grateful for small mercies; he knew from first-hand experience how heavy the commander was. All muscle, not an ounce of excess fat, but heavy nonetheless.

“Get the blood gas infuser!” the EMH snapped, taking in the readings of the diagnostic computer magnitudes faster than any flesh and blood person could have.

Tom shot him a confused look. He never assisted the Doctor by an operation before and had no idea where to look for the more specialized surgical equipment.

“Equipment storage unit two, second shelf on the left,” Kes supplied quietly.

Tom nodded his thanks and hurried to fetch it.

“We must implant the cloned lungs before he goes into a coma,” the EMS muttered. ”The infuser will only keep his oxygen levels stable for the next hour or so, so we’ll have to hurry. It is a good thing the shot missed his heart, but this won’t be pretty.”

“What about the other damaged organs?” Janeway asked from the Doctor’s office, where she was watching the procedure through the large plexiglass window. “I’m told his liver and spleen have been damaged, too. And one of his kidneys.”

“And a generous portion of his intestines, yes, but those can wait,” the EMH replied. “First we replace the destroyed lungs; then we go over to the other organs, one after another. We’ll be here for a while; no need for you to stay, Captain. I’ll inform you when we’re done.”

Which meant in translation: *I’ve got a patient in a critical condition, on whom I must concentrate now. Please go away and let me do my job.* After a moment Janeway accepted the not-so-subtle message and left, followed by the apologetic glance of Tom Paris.

“Good,” the EMH said. “Now we can remove his lungs and attach the cloned replacements. Mr. Paris, did they teach you how to run a respiratory series in your bio-chemistry class at the Academy?”
Tom shook his head ruefully. “No, I’m afraid they didn’t.

The EMH rolled his eyes in very convincing irritation... considering that he was a hologram, that is.

“Fine, I’ll do it myself. Get me a pulmonary scanner!”

Kes hurried to deliver the required instrument. The EMH run a hurried but thorough scan, and then nodded.

“All right; we can begin. Mr. Paris, I want you to keep an eye on his toxicity levels and warn me the moment they start rising. Kes, you’ll assist me.”

For the next hour and a half, the Doctor was working with a singular concentration only artificial life forms – those not hampered by the natural limitations of an organic body – are capable of. To her credit, Kes showed no sign of tiring, either. In fact, she seemed almost relieved to be able to burn off some of the excess energy her exponentially growing powers were releasing into her body. Tom’s eyes glazed over by merely watching them.

Admittedly watching the readouts on the diagnostic computer screen wasn’t a particularly inspiring task, either.

Until the alarm sign popped up on the screen, that is.

“Doc, I think his cellular toxicity level is rising,” he warned.

The EMH glanced at the screen over Chakotay’s still open chest cavity.

“It’s up to thirty-two per cent,” he said with a frown. “Let's see if we can stabilize those levels. Get me a cytoplasmic stimulator.”

Tom checked the equipment unit and frowned. “Er... we don’t seem to have one.”

“Then replicate one. The design schematics are in the ship’s medical database,” the EMH returned to the complicated task of attaching the individual blood vessels to the cloned lungs, muttering angrily under his nonexistent breath. “The man drives a seven hundred ton starship, so somebody thinks he’d make a good medic. Hurry up with that cytoplasmic stimulator, Mr. Paris! We need to oxygenate the commander’s blood supply – what’s left of it – and relay the neuro-electrical impulses.”

“Will he need further blood transfusions?” Kes asked, while Tom replicated the requested tool and handed it to the EMH.

The hologram nodded. “I’ve already started the production of synthetic blood for him; that and the Reg Gel will eat up all his replicator rations, I’m afraid, as we don’t have unlimited capacity in Sickbay. But it still beats being dead. I just hope our combined sources will be enough. Producing Reg Gel is not an easy process, and it costs lots of energy.”

“We can use my replicator rations as well, Doctor,” Kes offered. “I don’t really need them. And I’m sure the ex-Maquis will lay together whatever they can spare.”

“You can use mine, too,” Tom added. “What is a replicated pizza compared with the chance to keep our fearless executive officer with us? Besides, we can have real food on the station to escape Neelix’s cooking. All sorts of it. Who needs the replicated stuff?”

“How selfless of you, Mr. Paris,” the EMH commented dryly. “I’m sure the commander will be
touched. Well, that was Problem Number One dealt with; the new lungs are firmly attached in all the required places. Let’s take a look at his liver now; and at his digestive tract. Plenty of work to do here still.”

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Commander Susan Ivanova, fearless – and much feared – second-in-command of Babylon 5, was positively fuming. Garibaldi had actually had the cheek of assigning two bodyguards to her. To her! As if she were some delicate flower, or a damsel in distress, that would need the protection of big, strong men! Pah!

All right, one of the security guards was actually a woman – a deceivingly petite Asian woman at that, whom she happened to like well enough – but that wasn’t the point.

The point was that Garibaldi apparently thought that she needed protection. Just because that slime Malcolm was still at large!

Granted, Malcolm was slime. One had to be slime – and worse – to become such a high-ranking Homeguard member as he had been. Coming to Babylon 5, with the sole agenda of organizing random violence against aliens, ultimately planning to assassinate the ambassadors of the four major alien powers, while his comrades on Earth would struck at the respective embassies.

He’d almost succeeded with Londo; and whatever she might think about Londo personally, she didn’t want him dead. Neither did she want to face the reaction of the Centauri government. Whatever they might think of Londo, they wouldn’t have taken kindly if their ambassador had been assassinated – and that on the thirtieth anniversary of his Day of Ascencion, of all times!

How delusional with hatred towards aliens had one to be to believe that she – and Commander Sinclair, of all people! – would become part of such a conspiracy? Yet Malcolm had believed it… revealing therefore not only his co-conspirators and the new stealth suits but also the entire plan. He’d been arrested and deported back to Earth two years ago, but it apparently had been too optimistic to hope she’d never see him again.

Actually, they should have counted on him resurfacing after Clark had risen to power. Homeguard might have been absorbed by Nightwatch last year, but that didn’t mean their ultimate end – on the contrary. All they had lost was their unflattering public image; the dirt itself they produced was still living on – had even become the strong right arm of Mini-Pax.

What did that say about Earth in general and about the new government in particular?

“Strong right arm indeed,” she muttered under her breath angrily as she turned into the section of Blue Sector where the quarters of the command staff were situated, her faithful shadows hot on her heels. “Ministry of Peace, my ass! Fucking hypocritical warmongers, the lot of them!”

“Commander?” Officer Shinisho, the petite Asian security guard, asked in confusion, making Ivanova realize that she’d been swearing in Russian.

Which was perhaps the best for them all.

“Never mind,” she said. “Just blowing off steam.”

Fumi Shimisho nodded in understanding. She knew – they all knew - of the stress the command staff had to deal with on the daily basis and, like the others, she was glad not having the same responsibility.

“We’ll remain in front of the door, just in case,” she said, taking up positions with her colleague.
“Unnecessary, but thanks anyway,” Ivanova keyed in her code – the two security guards discretely stared in the opposite direction – and entered her quarters.

It was dark inside, which she welcomed. After a long duty shift she was always a little headach-y from the exposure to the harsh lights of C&C. For that reason she always kept her private quarters dimly lit. It was relaxing. And it fit her mood after work.

That, and the first glass of vodka.

“Computer, lights, at twenty-five per cent,” she said, taking off her uniform jacked and hanging it on the outside of the wardrobe.

That was one of the advantages of the military. One did not have to ponder what one should wear on the next day. Dress regulations took care of the problem nicely; and she was hardly ever off-duty in these days.

Right now she was off-duty, though, and that left her with exactly two choices how to relax. She could have a long-overdue shower, then a glass of vodka and crawl into the bed with a book she wouldn’t actually read because she’d fall asleep after the first couple of paragraphs.

Or she could get stoned right away and spend the night alone, in drunken stupor; it wasn’t as if Garibaldi’s minions would let her even close to the Zocalo tonight.

She opted for the first solution (she was really looking forward to that shower all afternoon, and besides, duty shift was hell after a night of lonely drinking) and was heading to the bathroom when something stirred in the farthest corner of the room and a familiar voice said softly,

“Hello Susan! Missed me?”

*Lillian Hobbs was dead on her feet when she finally decided to return to her quarters. After having treated the wounded from the fight in Red Sector – from both sides – she did what she could for Lyta Alexander, until she got at last relieve by Dr. Groyokin and could hurry over to Voyager to see how Chakotay was doing.*

*Of course, watching the odd holographic doctor operate on her lover with the help of that small-boned, sprite-like little alien girl and some highly sophisticated equipment they simply called the Arch hadn’t served to ease her frustration.*

She knew it would have been unprofessional to allow her to assist – more so as she had no idea what Voyager’s medical equipment could do and how to use it. Still, she wished she could have actually done something, instead of just watching helplessly a surgical process so far beyond her own experience she sometimes didn’t even understand what the Doctor was doing.

After three endless, agonizing hours, the process was finally finished. The Doctor declared himself satisfied with the preliminary results, stating that the Reg Gel would do the rest. Apparently, they had the regeneration tank already prepared, and now they lowered Chakotay into it, up to his chin, and the semi-translucent green… stuff ensconced him immediately.

It wasn’t a pretty sight. In fact, it seemed every bit as if the rigor mortis had already set on.

“Don’t be concerned, Doc,” said Voyager’s blond pilot, who also dubbed as their field medic (since the Holodoc, as they had nicknamed him… it… couldn’t leave Sickbay – unless transported to the holodeck, but how that was possible really escaped Lillian’s understanding).
“How could I not?” she replied anxiously. “He looks… well, he looks dead, honestly.”

“He isn’t dead, though,” the pilot, what was his name again, something with Paris, promised.
“That’s just the regeneration stiffness. The gel immobilizes him, so that his wounds can heal and his bones can knit without being unintentionally jostled.”

“But he still hasn’t regained consciousness!”

“No; and he won’t, either, not for several days to come. The Doc keeps him in an artificial coma. The accelerated healing process puts a great deal of stress on his system; plus, if he were awake, the boredom would drive him mad. Trust me; this is the best, for all parties involved. Especially for him.”

“I know,” Lillian said glumly. “It’s just… I just wish I could do something. Aside from just standing here and staring at him through the glass.”

“You can talk to him,” Paris suggested. “He might not understand you, but it’s a known fact that patients react to the voices of their loved ones – at least mentally – during regeneration. It helps them to find their way back when it’s time to awake.”

Lillian nodded in relief. “All right, I can do that.”

“But not today,” the Holodoc popped up from somewhere to check on Chakotay’s vitals. “You’re exhausted, both physically and emotionally, your blood sugar levels are dangerously low,” he briefly waved that little hand-held instrument they called a tricorder in her direction. “You need to rest. Go home, eat something and sleep. Commander Chakotay will still be here, lying in the Reg-Gel, tomorrow. And for days afterwards.”

“No need to talk down to me as if I were a child,” Lillian snapped, her tempers flaring. “I’m a doctor myself, I know the drill.”

“And we both know that doctors are the worst patients,” the hologram replied. “Stop arguing, I’ll see that you receive permission to visit the commander regularly, but I want you out of my Sickbay for now. Go!”

“Don’t take it personally, Doc,” Tom Paris said, when the irritated – and irritating – chief medical officer of Voyager stormed off to look after his other patients. “He’s got the knowledge of the two hundred best physicians of the Federation programmed into his matrix, but his bedside manner is still shit.”

“I wish we could borrow him for a while; that would take care of all the self-important dignitaries invading the MedLabs in no time,” Lillian looked down at Chakotay; then back at Paris. “Watch over him for me while I’m not here, will you?”

The pilot shrugged. “Sure. There’s not a lot of flying I can do while Voyager is stranded here, so at least I can do something useful in the meantime.”

Lillian thanked him, and then she returned home indeed. It was a good thing that all station personnel lived in Blue Sector; that way she didn’t have to go far. She wasn’t sure she could have managed to get, say, to Red Sector on her own.

Crossing the MedLabs on her way home, she exchanged a few words with Dr. Harrison, who was relatively young, gifted and highly dedicated to her work. Reassured that things were running smoothly, she allowed herself to relax – for the first time since Chakotay had been shot.
A shower and then bed, she decided, keying in her code; she didn’t feel like eating, even though she knew she ought to. Starting an early shift, as she would do in the morning, wasn’t a good thing to do on an empty stomach. But with Chakotay’s dissected body before her mind’s eye she seriously doubted she’d be able to eat.

She wondered when did she become so fond of him that she could no longer keep the professional distance; not even when it was needed. She’d had lovers before. Some of them she’d actually liked very much. And it wasn’t so that they’d have a real chance; sooner or later he’d find a way to return to his own universe, and that would be the end of – of whatever this thing was between them. And yet she couldn’t deny that he meant more to her than all the others before.

She shook her head. It was time to rest. With Dr. Franklin still on his quest to find himself, they were seriously understaffed at the MedLabs. She would need her full strength tomorrow.

The first thing she noticed upon entering her darkened quarters was the scent: fragrant, sweet and spicy at the same time, something she’d never encountered before. Then there was sound: like crystal chimes, heard from a great distance.

“Computer,” she said, almost afraid to break the magic. “Lights at fifty per cent.”

Her living area became half-illuminated and, searching for the source of scent and sound, her glance fell upon half a dozen flowers placed in a vase in the middle of the coffee table.

They were long-stemmed and fragile, as if made of spun glass, yet very much alive. As she went closer, spellbound by their otherworldly beauty, they reacted to the moving of the air with soft chiming, and their scent grew stronger. They were the most perfectly beautiful things she’d seen in her entire life.

Leaned against the vase was a hand-written card. She picked it up, her eyes widening a she read.

*Hey Doc,*

*Chakotay ordered these Centauri star-laces for your dinner date. As they’re rare and short-living, I thought it would be a waste to be sent to the restaurant, so I’ve redirected the delivery to your quarters. I hope you don’t mind.*

*Garibaldi*

Lillian had heard of Centauri star-laces before, of course – who hadn’t? – but she’d never actually *seen* one… until now. She also knew that they were extravagantly pricey, not just rare. No-one ordered them simply to adorn a dinner table – unless the dinner (or the dinner partner) was of great importance.

And yet Chakotay had ordered them for their planned dinner. The meaning of *that* almost frightened her. But she decided to ignore that aspect for now. This was her chance to experience a rare moment of perfect beauty, and she was not about to waste it. She would take a shower, put on her sleeping suit and dressing gown and sleep on the couch of the living area, bathing in the scent an the music of the star-laces.

And tomorrow she’d seek out Garibaldi to thank him.

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Ivanova turned around just in time to see Malcom Biggs step out of the shadows. She pulled a face.

“I should have known you’d find a way in, sooner or later,” she said scathingly. “You’ve always
been a sneaky bastard with more money at your disposal than it would be healthy. So, what was it this time? A changeling net? One of those black light camouflage suits again? Or have you simply bribed the guards?"

“You don’t seem to set much faith in the loyalty of your people,” Biggs replied mockingly. “I thought now that you’ve got rid of Nightwatch, the rest of them would be seen as trustworthy.”

Ivanova shrugged. “Trust is good; control is better. I trust everyone exactly as far as I can control them. Which is why I don’t trust you at all.”

“I’m hurt!” Biggs declared, with a parodical exaggeration of supposedly hurt feelings. “The thought that we loved each other once…”

“We didn’t,” Ivanova interrupted. “We had sex – damn good sex, admittedly, but just sex. You were never half as important to me as my career, which is why I left you,” she noticed with dark satisfaction the twitching muscle in his face. “Even though I had no idea that you’d turn into such a murderous, xenophobic bigot.”

“Times change and we change with them,” Biggs answered sweetly. “I hadn’t expected you to go for girls, either. Tell me,” he added with a lecherous grin, “was your little blonde Teep good in bed? Could she make you moan and scream as I could? Oh, wait! How could she? She didn’t have the right equipment for that. Or did the two of you use toys, for the lack of the true item?”

He must have done a lot of combat training in recent years because he almost managed to move out of Ivanova’s reach in time. Almost. The difference was clearly demonstrated by his broken nose… and some bruised knuckles on Ivanova’s side. For a slender woman, she had a mean left hook, as many of her Earth Force comrades had learned the hard way. Just as Biggs got the chance to learn now.

“That,” he hissed, trying to stop the bleeding of his nose with the help of a handkerchief,” was a mistake. I was willing to put things right with you. To let you realize what you’ve missed all those years; what’s turned you into such a cold bitch. I’d have taken you back.”

Ivanova shook her head in disbelief. The nerve of the guy was simply unbelievable!

“You’re delusional, do you know that?” she said. “I’m done with you; I’ve been done with you for ten years by now. And after the stunt you pulled last time with your Homeguard buddies, I wouldn’t even waste a PPG shot on you.”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m a lot less choosy,” holding the handkerchief to his still bleeding nose with one hand, Biggs pulled a PPG out of his belt with the other one. It was a different model than the one used by station personnel on duty, with considerably more firepower.

Ivanova shot him a perplexed look. “What is this, Victorian melodrama? ‘Return to me or I’ll burn a hole of the size of a football through your chest?’ You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I’ve never been more serious in my life,” Biggs hissed from behind his blood-soaked handkerchief. “It’s you who doesn’t seem to recognize the gravity of your situation.”

“What gravity?” Ivanova actually laughed in his face. “Malcolm, you don’t really believe that I’m afraid of you, do you?”

“You should.” Biggs replied darkly. “I’m done playing, Susan. You will return to Earth with me; on your own or in a coffin. It’s your choice.”
“Oh, for God’s sake!” Ivanova exploded.

She’d told him the truth; she wasn’t afraid of him. She didn’t like the impractical way he was holding that PPG, through. He hated non-professionals waving a deadly weapon around, period. That could lead to some nasty surprises – for all parties involved.

“Listen, Malcolm,” she began, trying to sound reasonable, which wasn’t an easy feat, considering how furious she was. “Put that gun away before somebody gets hurt… unless you really want to kill me. Because I’m sure as hell not going back to Earth with you… or anywhere else, for that matter. The sooner you accept that inevitable fact, the better for both of us.”

But Biggs wasn’t about to listen to reason. He was clearly too far gone for that,

“Wrong!” he hissed. “You’re under arrest upon the charge of treason against EarthGov generally and President Clark personally. You will come back with me, and you will face your court-martial; and then we will discuss our future.”

“You seem to forget that I’m no longer an Earth citizen,” Ivanova replied calmly. “Babylon 5 is an independent state now. EarthGov has no jurisdiction here, and the only one I answer to is Captain Sheridan. Not to Mini-Pax, not to Nightwatch, and most definitely not to you. My place is here, and nothing short of God appearing in a burning rosebush would make me leave Babylon 5.”

“Then I will have to kill you,” Biggs said with the terrible inner logic of insanity. “You’ve been tainted by all these filthy aliens. By the tentacled decandents who try to mimic us, by the genocidal boneheads who nearly extinguished us, by the spotted reptiles whining for our help, now that they’ve been beaten…”

“You forgot the Vorlons,” Ivanova commented, unimpressed. “Of course, it’s hard to say anything dehonestating about a species you know nothing about. And, just for your information, I’ve even become Drazi leader for a while.”

Biggs’s face distorted with hatred.

“You!” he spat in utter disgust. “You’ve whored yourself to those… those monstrous creatures!”

“Actually… no, I haven’t. Humans aren’t even biologically compatible with most of them, and Minbari aren’t into casual sex. But one can learn a great deal from them… especially from the Minbari.”

Using Biggs’s momentary distraction to her advantage, she leapt forward without warning, and performed the classical attack manoeuvre of the Tha’domo discipline, the Minbari martial art of unarmed combat, that she’d learned from Lennier, of all people. Ramming her knee into Biggs’s groin, she slapped the PPG out of his hand and well outside his reach, while she head-butted him brutally at the same time.

Lennier would have been scandalized, seeing Tha’domo used in such undisciplined manner, of course. Minbari stood on ceremony to an unhealthy extent. EarthForce officers, however – even ex-EarthForce officers – didn’t. Above all else, they stood on efficiency, and Ivanova was showing an impressive display of that.

Within seconds, she had Biggs disarmed and at her (currently rather questionable) mercy, and continued beating him up, giving in to her pent-up frustration all too willingly, until the security detail in front of her quarters used the emergency override to open the door and came in running, thinking that she was being murdered.
“Commander, are you all right?” Officer Shinisho asked worriedly.

“Oh, yes,” Ivanov held her bloody, bruised hand under the tap and let the cold water flow over it. “Haven’t been better since this whole mess with Earth started. Now, take this sorry excuse for a human being to the brig. Perhaps he’s understood now that if a woman says no it means no,” she looked down at the broken and bleeding figure at her feet with utter contempt. “You see, Malcolm, the move that helped me to kick your sorry ass to the next sector? I’ve learned that from a bonehead. From one of their priests, for that matter. Think about it.”

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The man known on Babylon 5 merely as Mr. Morden was preparing himself to leave the station. His work here was done – for the time being – and he was needed back on Z’Ha’Dum. The game was just about to be upped several levels.

Oh, he did have a given name, of course. Just as he’d once had a wife and a daughter, killed mindlessly just because some idiot terrorist group had found it a good idea to bomb the Io jumpgate. And without them to speak it with love, what need would he have for another name? Just Morden was enough.

He briefly touched the Afran love stone worn around his neck, with the symbol of the star god turned inwards s it was proper. Not for religious reasons; he no longer believed in any gods, least in one of an extinct people. But the idea of it sending the good wishes of Alicja and little Sarah into his heart appealed to him.

It was all that he had left of his family.

Anna always understood that, She’d been the one to have the stone mounted on a necklace, giving it to him as a gift, as a symbol of friendship, during the Icarus expedition. Shortly before they would reach Z’Ha’Dum.

Shortly before their lives would change forever.

For his part, he’d welcomed the change. It gave him purpose again: something to do. Something else than the organized grave robbery IPX was doing all over the known galaxy, salvaging alien technology for Earth.

The only thing he still regretted was what had happened to Anna. He’d have prevented it, if he could; whatever else she might have been, she was a friend. But his... associates hadn’t trusted him quite as much as they did now – insofar they were capable of trust at all, that is – and in his efforts to save her, he’d forgotten about the most crucial argument: Anna’s husband.

He’d never quite forgiven himself for that oversight.

But it was a moot point now. What was done was done, and he couldn’t change it. Not anymore. He needed to focus on the task still before him. The game – the biggest game of the current millennium – had already started.

He left his temporary quarters in Brown Sector with mixed feelings... but mostly in satisfaction. There have been several minor setbacks during the last couple of days – the failed assassination attempts on both Delenn and Rastenn, his failure to get inside the strange human ship the likes of which he’d never seen before, the unexpectedly successful action against the Nightwatch leftovers... the list went on.

In any other case, he’d be worried by now. His associates didn’t take failure kindly. But all this was
virtually insignificant compared with the news of Voyager’s secret weapon: that the fragile little pixie working in their version of the MedLabs had managed to hurl the new Vorlon ambassador against the bulkhead by the sheer power of her mind, without breaking a sweat.

That piece of information saved him from the prospective consequences of his minor failures. Somebody strong enough to defeat a Vorlon without actually trying was of utmost value. He’d been told that the little creature would be his next agenda. His associates couldn’t get close to her; she was so sensitive she’d feel them from two decks away.

But she seemed to be open to human charm; and charm Mr. Morden had in spades. It was his weapon of choice.

First, however, he had to work on the Sheridan project. The break-away from Earth had been an unexpected move, but one they might use to their advantage yet. Clark might grow over-confident and forget who was truly pulling the strings here, so creating a strong opponent within the same camp could be useful. Therefore Morden needed to get Sheridan away from his Minbari allies – revealing Delenn’s deception would take care of that – so that he’d need a new alliance against EarthGov.

And the very person with the best chance to persuade him was already on her way to Babylon 5.

For that plan to work, Mr. Morden needed to return to Z’Ha’Dum. The failed attempt by Nightwatch to seize control of Babylon 5 had to be abandoned. Besides, once they had Sheridan in their camp, there would be no need or such unsubtle methods to secure control. His associates had their metaphorical fingers in many pies; and as their public face, Mr. Morden got to play in the upper league now.

With a satisfied little smile, he approached Customs. He had about twenty minutes to board a Centauri shuttle that would bring him to the regular starliner – which, in turn, would drop him off on a waystation where a Drakh ship would be waiting for him. It was a bit of a circumspect route, but he had to be careful. There was no need to alert Sheridan and his allies to the existence of the Drakh – the strongest, most efficient servants of Z’ha’dum.

He was almost at Customs when he got the feeling that he was being watched. That was nothing new; he was always being watched, even in the most private moments of personal grooming. He’d grown used to it during the last five years. But the intense attention focused on his person felt different than the slick omnipresence of his associates. This was something else; something no less powerful and dangerous, though.

Slowly, avoiding to draw attention, he turned around. At first he saw no-one in the empty, almost dark corridor. Then something stirred, and as his eyes adapted to the poor visual conditions, he saw a tall, bald-headed, broad-shouldered man in a long black coat.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

The man came forward, but only a couple of steps. His face became visible now, and he appeared vaguely familiar, but where from, Morden couldn’t quite put his finger on it at the moment.

“Isn’t this what you always ask: what do you want?” The man asked in a clear, sharply accentuated tenor voice.”Such a seemingly innocent question, and yet if one answers it honestly, they become trapped forever. So, if you don’t mind, I’ll keep my secret wishes to myself. They’ve all turned to ashes a long time ago anyway, and your masters cannot change that. Nobody can. Just as no-one can bring you back your wife and daughter.”
“Who are you?” Morden asked in a dangerously low voice.

This man clearly knew who his was and whom he associated himself with. Such knowledge was dangerous at the current state of things and had to be erased.

Preferably together with the person possessing it.

“Have you forgotten me so soon?” the man asked back in a mocking tone. “That’s sad – but it’s the way the world is, I suppose.”

He came another step closer, and now Morden spotted his staff and recognized it – and its bearer – for what they were.

“You’re a technomage,” he said.

It was stating the obvious, but the man nodded nonetheless.

“Indeed, I am. I was there when you visited my mentor, two years ago. Elric recognized you for what you are: a Shadow servant. We’ve been keeping an eye on you ever since.”

The thought sent a cold shiver down Morden’s spine. Technomages, for all the ridiculous little games they so loved to play, were a force to be reckoned with. The technology they used for their quaint little illusions had once come from the Shadows, too, and their extensive knowledge made them even more dangerous.

“You still couldn’t stop me doing anything I want,” he sneered.

The man shrugged his broad shoulders. “We never actually tried. The others chose to hide, and I... I had more important things to do.”

“What are the right questions then?” Morden began to enjoy himself.

He rarely had the chance to verbally spar with someone of such high intelligence. The other Shadow servants were usually dull; the Shadows liked them that way. Too much independent thinking always rang the alarm bells with them. Which was why he, too, was still being watched closely, wherever he went, even after five years of useful and highly efficient service.

“One of them is: Where are you going?” The mage replied. “The other one is: Who do you serve and who do you trust? The answer to those questions – even if it is a lie – tells you everything you need to know about another person.”

“So, have you come to ask me those questions then?”

“Oh, no. I already know the answers where you are concerned,” the mage smiled darkly. “I’ve come to warn you. This station is not big enough for the two of us, and I don’t intend to leave. So you’ll have to go.”

“Or what? Do you think you can threaten me?” Morden concentrated hard to call his associates – but nothing happened.

“I’ve taken the liberty to put your keepers to sleep,” the mage said nonchalantly. ”And yes, I can
threaten you. You can’t imagine the things I can do... not even in your worst nightmares. So I strongly suggest that you leave Babylon 5 and don’t return; because next time there will be no warning.”

Only now did Morden realize that he hadn’t heard the soft chittering of his associates since he’d entered the corridor, and that made him nervous. As intrusive as their constant presence was, he’d grown so used to it that without them he felt exposed. Vulnerable.

He hated being vulnerable. The very reason why he’d accepted their offer was to be in the position of strength. The knowledge that his fragile human existence would be protected.

“How... how did you do that?” he asked; and regretted it immediately.

Showing weakness was always a mistake.

The mage shrugged. “When they created our first brethren, and those weren’t even humans but a race called the Taratimude, who eventually became extinct - but not before rebelling against the Shadows and spreading the techno-mage order to other races - they revealed more of themselves than they’d probably intended. We know of their weaknesses like no-one else; not even their servants. That knowledge had been handed down from generation to generation ever since Wieden had created our order, so that we’d be able to protect ourselves.”

“So why didn’t you tell the Vorlons?” Morden asked, because that would have been the logical thing to do.

The mage gave him a baleful look.

“We don’t have a death wish. What, do you think, the Vorlons would have done to us when they discovered that our powers are based on Shadow technology? We are but a few; we couldn’t withstand a concentrated Vorlon attack. So the elders decided that the needs of the others didn’t concern us and we went into hiding. We don’t take sides in this conflict, you see.”

“Except you,” Morden said, and the mage nodded.

“Except me, yes. So if I were you, I’d avoid this place in the future. Because I’ll be watching you. Constantly. Good day, Mr. Morden, and have a pleasant journey.”

And with that, the mage was gone. Just like that. Vanished into thin air. Morden shook his head in displeasure before heading for Customs again. His associates would want to learn about this.
Part 11.1

Chapter Notes

Some of the Sickbay dialogue is borrowed from the 1st Season *Voyager* episode “The Phage”. The Reg Gel treatment is book canon, mentioned in the Classic 'Trek novel “The First Adventure”.

The dialogue at the tactical meeting is based on the one in the actual episode. I took some liberties with the War Room, though, as I couldn’t find any accurate descriptions. So I used the taped episode and my imagination.

Part 11 has grown so extremely long that I decided to post it in two more easily digestible halves.

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PART 11.1

Vir had mixed feelings when in the next morning Dr. Hobbs declared him ready to leave MedLab and return to his quarters. On the one hand, he was glad to have recovered enough – at least physically – to have some much-needed privacy. Having first Lord Refa’s telepath tear his mind apart and then *Voyager*’s Mr. Tuvok survey the damage in order to repair what could be repaired had laid him bare in a manner he couldn’t have imagined before. He needed time to come to terms with that… if he could.

On the other and, he knew he would have to confront Londo about the whole issue eventually, and he definitely wasn’t looking forward to *that*.

“Mr. Tuvok says he’s done everything he could to heal your mind,” Dr. Hobbs explained, clearly concerned. “But you’ll still have to deal with the psychological side of the events. You have been violated; you’ll need counselling. We can help with that, though. Dr. Harrison has a degree in psychology, so if you want to…”

“No,” Vir interrupted. “Thank you, Doctor, but it’s not our way.” The mere thought of telling the attractive, efficient Dr. Harrison about his humiliating weakness, his utter failure, made him almost physically sick. “Besides, what I’d have to say would only unnecessarily endanger Dr. Harrison. I can’t do that. Enough innocents have been hurt already; I won’t have more to burden my conscience.”

“But you’ll have to talk about it to somebody!” Dr. Hobbs protested.

“He can always talk to me,” a third voice said and Rastenn entered MedLab, accompanied by Lennier, of all people. “I’m a trained Warrior; I can take care of myself.”

Then he pressed both fists to his chest in greeting in Warrior Caste fashion. “Greetings, Vir Cotto… *Hela’mer*,” he added, with a prefuctionally bow in Dr. Hobbs’s direction.

“We thought we’d escort you to your quarters,” Lennier supplied. “Just in case. Lord Refa has left the station yesterday and took the majority of his retainers with him, but better safe than worry.”
“Sorry,” Dr. Hobbs corrected, smiling.

Lennier looked at her in confusion. “What can you possibly be sorry for, Doctor?”

“The correct expression is: better safe than sorry,” Dr. Hobbs explained. “It’s a common mistake; many people make it, even humans who’re not native English speakers.”

“Ah, I see,” Lennier showed no sign of embarrassment. As somebody who dedicated his life to learning, he was used to make mistakes. One learned through making mistakes, after all. “Thank you, Doctor. Please, share with me your honest opinion: is Vir in the right state to visit the prayer service with us tonight?”

“There will be a service tonight?” Dr. Hobbs asked in surprise.

Lennier nodded. “Reverend Dexter who, I understand, is the head of a congregation called the True Gospel Mission Baptist Church, is holding an open church meeting in the chapel tonight, and Rastenn and I are thinking of participating.”

“You do?” Vir was a little baffled. Lennier nodded again.

“Yes. We’re interested in human philosophy and religion, and since we’ve already watched the service of the Catholic monks who live on the station, we thought we’d give a different Earth religion a try to see what the differences are,” he shook his head in bewilderment. “All those different belief systems! I’m surprised humans can keep them apart.”

“We can’t,” Dr. Hobbs said, a little cynically. “Which is why we usually stick to the one we grew up with. Firmly believing that we have it right and all the others are wrong helps with the confusion.”

The two Minbari and one Centauri seemed at loss how to reply to that. Then Lennier cleared his throat diplomatically. He was a priest, after all, and an ambassador’s aide. Diplomatic behaviour came to him naturally.

“You should come, too, Doctor,” he suggested. “Reverend Dexter said that he people on Babylon 5 needed all the joy they can get, and he’d give it to them; it ought to be interesting.”

“I’m sure it would be,” Dr. Hobbs allowed. “And I’d perhaps give it a try, too, under different circumstances. But I’m hoping to be allowed to visit Commander Chakotay tonight.”

Lennier nodded in understanding. Dr. Hobbs seemed to have found the other half of her soul in the human warrior from the other universe, but no-one could tell how much time fate would allow them to have. It was more than understandable that she’d want to spend as much of it as possible with him; even if he was still unconscious.

“What about you, Vir?” he then asked. “Are you coming to the service with us?”

“He should,” Dr. Hobbs said before Vir could come up with a convincing answer. “If anyone needs a little joy in their life he certainly does. I highly recommend it as part of the healing process.”

Vir only hesitated for a moment. Going to a joyful human service was certainly better than sulking in his quarters alone, waiting for the inevitable confrontation with Londo to happen. Because this time he would confront his mentor. Some things needed to be said openly, no matter how unpleasant that promised to be.

Besides, Lennier had been his friend since they both came to Babylon 5, and Rastenn had saved his life. What better company could he wish for?
“All right,” he said. “I’ll go with you.”

Captain Janeway was also looking forward to the prayer service. She wasn’t particularly religious – albeit nominally a member of the Presbyterian Church – but a prayer service, especially a Baptist service with gospel music, had something about *home* in it. Something she’d sorely needed ever since they’d been stranded in the Delta Quadrant.

Ever since she’d stranded them in the Delta Quadrant when she’d ordered the destruction of the Caretaker’s Array. An order she’d given in a moment of righteousness, in the spirit of doing the right thing – and that she’d second-guessed in the solitude of her quarters countless times.

Especially since they’d ended up in this foreign universe.

She’d felt strangely out of her depth ever since. Staying true to the Prime Directive required a hard struggle here, and most of her senior officers weren’t helping. Chakotay – or B’Elanna Torres – she wasn’t surprised by. They were Maquis, after all. But she’d never have thought that Tom Paris, or even young, naïve Harry Kim would turn their backs on the regulations so quickly, just because they’d befriended some of the locals.

The only one she could still fully count on was Tuvok – and even Tuvok had violated the non-interference rules repeatedly, in the name of humanitarian aid. Things were getting out of hand – out of *her* hand in any case – and she didn’t like it. She didn’t like it at all.

The door buzz of her ready room sounded and in came Tuvok, as if summoned.

“Captain, we’ve got an invitation, you and I,” he said without preamble. Vulcans weren’t big on small talk.

“What kind of invitation?” she asked suspiciously.

“Captain Sheridan has summoned a tactical meeting to their War Room,” the Vulcan explained. “He wants us to take a look at their collected data, possibly run an analysis of our own, in the hope that a fresh we can detect a pattern they’ve failed to see so far.”

She frowned unhappily. “I can’t see how that would concern us. The Prime Directive…”

“… has only limited validity in a reality not our own,” Tuvok interrupted her.

She was shocked. That had never happened before. If she lost the Vulcan’s support, too, whom could she count on?

“Are you siding with Chakotay and the Maquis now?” she asked accusingly.

“Ex-Maquis,” Tuvok corrected. “They’re your crew now, Captain, even if they have the impudence to disagree with you. And no, I am not taking their side. I do not think there are sides here; at least there should not be any. But their argument does have its merit. To a certain extent, we are protected by Babylon 5. With the dilithium crystals damaged by our crossing the threshold between our respective universes we cannot go home – not without outside help. We are not even capable of interstellar travel on our own… and that is assuming we can use the jumpgates safely. We are basically stranded here for the time being, and that makes us a target, too… a very convenient one. I believe you humans call it a sitting duck.”

“I still don’t like the idea of getting actively involved in an armed conflict of a parallel universe,” Janeway said stubbornly. “We could change the future…”
Tuvok gave her his best Vulcan eyebrow.

“It’s their future, not ours; if they are willing to take that risk, it is not our responsibility. Besides, we may not have any other choice. Captain, logic suggests that these Shadow aliens would hardly make any distinction between us and the humans of this universe – and then what? Are we supposed to sit idly and let them massacre us?”

“No, of course not!” Janeway snapped; the mere idea that she’d allow her crew to be killed without resistance angered her. “But self-defence is one thing. Entering a war actively is a different one.”

“I do not believe that this is a conflict where we can have the luxury of remaining neutral,” Tuvok said grimly. “I had time to analyse the data given us about the Shadows by Ambassador Delenn from a tactical point of view. I have come to the conclusion that one can either be with them or against them; and all who are not with them are considered to be against them. They accept no middle road. Entire planets trying to hold onto their neutrality have already been wiped out; and Voyager is too much of an oddity to be overlooked.”

“So, are you saying that we will have to enter this war, whether we want or not?” Janeway demanded.

After a moment of consideration Tuvok nodded calmly.

“That is exactly what I am saying, Captain,” he replied and placed a PADD on Janeway’s desk. “Captain Sheridan sent us the latest data report. He expects us in forty minutes in their War Room; I was told it is located adjacent to his office. That would give Seven of Nine time enough to run a thorough analysis.”

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The War Room of Babylon 5 was an amazing place, Neroon found as he was escorted there by Delenn’s aide. Finished but a short time ago, it was a large, circular room, vaguely similar to the command centre of a human starship; but it clearly served the purpose of intelligence gathering and communications.

The middle of the room, situated on a somewhat lower level than the rest, served as a conference room and was dominated by a metallic blue round table that could also be used as a display surface. It was surrounded by comfortable, rotating armchairs padded with black leather; from these chairs, one had a direct view at the huge, three-dimensional galactic map that covered an entire wall.

The other walls held computer and communications panels and monitor banks of various sorts, some of them based on human, some on Minbari technology. A number of technicians – mostly humans, but Neroon spotted the occasional Minbari among them, clad in Worker Caste fashion, which made sense – were standing on the walkway that surrounded the conference area, working on said panels. A sturdy metallic railing protected them from falling down – clearly, an allowance for human clumsiness. Minbari had a better sense of balance than that.

When he entered the room, nearly all places around the conference table were already taken. He recognized Delenn, of course, and Starkiller – Sheridan, he corrected himself mentally, you need to learn calling him by his name, he has invited you to this meeting as an ally, after all – the human Anla’shok he’d fought in Denn’sha, and the security chief of the station. But the former Narn ambassador – now a wanted man by the Centauri invaders, with a price on his head – was suspiciously absent. So was Londo Mollari, though that wasn’t really surprising. With the Centauri having allied themselves with the Sher’Shok’Dum their representative would hardly be welcome here.
There were no representatives of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, either, which suggested a tactical meeting, without the usual squabble. Neroon welcomed the decision. As needed as the forces of the League might be, their ambassadors could drive one to distraction. And distraction was something they couldn’t afford right now.

He was surprised to see that Sheridan had invited his fellow humans of the alternate universe. *Humans* being relative, of course. Captain Janeway was certainly one – and one so much out of her comfort zone that it was almost painful to watch – but the other female, the one Rastenn had described as *the cyborg lady*, clearly no longer was; if she’d ever been. And the other officer, the tall, elegant male with the dark skin and the leaf-shaped ears, was from a different species entirely.

A species that didn’t even exist in their universe.

Rastenn had sent detailed reports about Vulcans, as humans called them. Apparently, they were touch-telepaths, but reluctant to use their talent, as they found any contact with the undisciplined minds of other people bothersome. They were also devoted to logic and pacifistic, as a rule; yet they could be as quick as lightning and twice as deadly if they had to. And they were long-living, with an eidetic memory, which made them extremely useful when no computers were available.

Spotting him, Sheridan rose from his seat and inclined his head in an almost Minbari manner; Delenn must have instructed him how to show proper respect.

“Alyt Neroon,” he said in that rough voice of his that was such a contradiction to his smooth, youthful face. “Thanks for coming. Allow me to introduce Captain Kathryn Janeway, in command of the Federation starship *Voyager*; her tactical officer, Lieutenant Commander Tuvok, from the planet Vulcan, and Seven of Nine, their… well…” he looked at the other human officer a bit helplessly, clearly uncertain *what* exactly the female cyborg’s position was aboard *Voyager*.

“Our data analyst,” the Vulcan said smoothly; then he turned to Neroon, raised his hand in a peculiar gesture of greeting and announced very formally. “Live long and prosper, Alyt Neroon.”

Neroon knew from Rastenn’s reports that this went for “Good day” for Vulcans, so he simply repeated the greeting, without bothering with the gesture. *That* would have required some time to perfect, and he wasn’t going to make a fool of himself.

Instead, he bowed formally to Captain Janeway, as commanding officer to commanding officer – they both had their own ship, after all – and then took the proffered seat t the conference table… almost directly opposite the human *Anla’shok*.

This was the first time they saw each other since their fateful encounter. The man looked much better than any human ought to, after the beating he’d suffered from Neroon’s hand. Neroon assumed that 24th century medical achievement – provided by *Voyager*’s healers – had something to do with *that*.

“Thank you all for coming,” Sheridan said when everyone was seated again. “I’ve asked you to join us here because as much as I try, I could find no recognizable pattern in the Shadow attacks. I asked Captain Janeway’s help with the analysis; we’re now about to see the results.”

Janeway nodded to Seven of Nine, and the cyborg stalked up the short fling of stairs leading to the upper level on her high heels, with a suggestive sway of slim hips. Neroon could see the human males present staring after her, slack-jawed and glassy-eyed, and suppressed a grin. Humans were such slaves of their hormones!

And not the humans only. According to Rastenn, the cyborg had the same effect on Centauri, even though their species weren’t even biologically compatible. But then Centauri were a decadent
species, too…

Reaching the panel of her choice, Seven of Nine simply extended her hand – the one with the exoskeleton – towards it. Two long, slim, slightly curved metallic probes (looking uncomfortably like claws) emerged from the exoskeleton and embedded themselves in the panel’s surface, presumably downloading data.

In the next moment, the previously stagnant galactic map came alive on the big screen.

“These tactical graphics are displaying Shadow attack data,” the cyborg explained in her cold, unemotional voice. “The red dots are being placed at the locations of the attacks in chronological order.”

Captain Janeway shook her head. “I’ve watched his analysis four times already, but to no avail. There is simply no pattern to the Shadow attacks. No pattern at all! I'm sorry. I wish I could see it.”

“So do I,” Delenn commented grimly.

Sheridan sighed. “Aaaah, it’s okay. At least I know it’s not just me. It’s very frustrating, though, not be able to get a step ahead of them.”

“I’m not sure we cannot,” Neroon said, a vague idea beginning to take form in his head.

He got up and walked to a bank of monitors on another wall.

“Put the three-dimensional grid back up again,” he ordered the Minbari technician, who hurriedly obeyed, conditioned to listen to a Warrior in tactical matters. “Display the attacks in sequence, chronological order!”

A moment later, the three-dimensional effect was achieved by drawing a wire-frame box around the attack region and setting the display into slow rotation. The red dots popped into the display again.

“Wait!” the rotation stopped, and Neroon looked at Voyager’s tactical officer. “Did you see what I just saw?”

“I believe so. They started here,” the Vulcan indicated the lower right corner of the box; and then the one in the exact opposite, “Then jumped across to this area. Seven, display full attack data.”

The cyborg nodded, and the huge star map launched into motion again.

“Move the tactical display inward, peeling off the attacks on the outer areas and show me the middle of this sector,” Neroon instructed the Minbari technician.

The red dots blinked out until only a handful remained.

“Stop!” Sheridan said, his eyes widening in recognition. “Nothing! There have been no attacks in the centre of this area! Why, they’ve actually gone around this part to attack on the other side!”

He shook his head, and the others shared his bewilderment.

“Why?” Captain Janeway asked. “Why would they leave this particular area alone? This makes no sense! No sense at all!”

“Actually, it makes a great deal of sense,” the human Anla’shok said grimly. “The Rangers say that many refugee ships fleeing the war have been heading toward this area of space because so far, it hasn’t been attacked.”
“That's interesting,” Sheridan commented thoughtfully. “What if they wanted to drive the refugees into one area, corral them?”

“Make it easier to hit them all at once,” Neroon added. “It’s all an elaborate trap.”

“Could be,” Delenn allowed. “The effect would be devastating, demoralizing!”

“And that, exactly, could be their intent,” Tuvok said, “assuming that this is as much about terror as it is about territory. Breaking the enemy morally before breaking them physically. Mr. Cole is right. This does make terrible sense.”

Sheridan nodded. “When we've had wars back home, sometimes one side would leave a, a few areas of enemy territory undamaged. That way you'd get maximum results when you finally hit them with something big. Think of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden, San Diego!”

“I rather wouldn't, if you don’t mind,” Captain Janeway replied dryly. “None of those was a glorious moment of human history.”

“And yet you must learn from that experience,” Neroon pointed out. “Or all those people would have died for nothing.”

“The Shadows could be doing the same thing here,” Tuvok supplied. “Drawing in thousands of ships, escorts, and refugees from a dozen worlds in preparation for a major offensive.”

Sheridan nodded, “It makes sense! It – it's what I'd do!”

“What?” Delenn stared at him, deeply shocked, and Neroon rolled his eyes mentally. Really, she was overdoing this moral high ground spiel. Especially since hers had been the deciding voice that had started the Earth/Minbari war, out of retaliation for the death of her mentor. Which had been a tragic misunderstanding to begin with... a fact that hadn’t stopped her calling for the death of every human being in the galaxy.

Neroon had only learned about this when elected into the Grey Council in Delenn’s place. He wondered if Sheridan knew. Probably not; or else he wouldn’t look at her as if she were Valen’s Second Coming. The Religious Caste had always been very good at hiding the uncomfortable truth – even from their own people.

Sometimes Neroon wondered when that narrow-minded policy would blow into their faces.

Sheridan, in the meantime, was back-pedalling in a great hurry.

“Well... you know, if I were the bad guys!” he explained. “If I were them!”

“Captain Sheridan is correct,” Seven of Nine announced, looking down from her place next to the star map dispassionately. “The only way to beat a much stronger, ruthless enemy is to learn from them. To learn to think like them!”

“To think like them?” Delenn repeated, clearly appalled, and Neroon mentally thanked the universe that Minbari didn’t have a gag reflex. He might have thrown up otherwise in the face of so much hypocrisy.

But that was Religious Caste for you.

“That’s quite enough, John,” Delenn declared, grabbing Sheridan by the wrist and pulling him to his
feet. “We’re finished here.”

“Hey, no, no, no, wait, we just figured this out!” Sheridan protested.

Delenn, however, didn’t even listen to him. Instead, she kept pulling him towards the elevator.

“Reverend Dexter says you need some time away from this!” she said. “Right now, I agree!”

“Delenn, the battle, the – the war, they need me here!” Sheridan spluttered indignantly. “I mean, today the Shadows, tomorrow the galaxy!”

Delenn paid no mind to him at all. She dragged him into the transport tube.

“Yes, John, of course, John, whatever you say, John!” she said sarcastically.

“Delenn, listen...” Sheridan’s words were cut off as the car door closed.

The human Anla’shok tried to hide his manic grin by stroking his beard, but of course he couldn’t fool anyone. Security Chief Garibaldi, who had been listening to the entire meeting without a comment, rolled his eyes.

“It makes you wonder which one of them really wears the pants here,” he said wryly. Then he rose with a soft groan. “Well, I’ve got a station to keep safe. I assume I’ll see you at the service tonight?”

“No me,” Neroon replied. “But my nephew chose to participate.”

“We’ll come,” Captain Janeway promised. “Save the ones on duty, that is. But we’ve organized a live transmission for those; many requested it as it’s like a piece of home for us. For the humans among us, that is,”

“You aren’t coming then?” Garibaldi asked the Vulcan, mildly disappointed.

“As the only non-human of the command staff, I volunteered to take the bridge,” Tuvok explained. “I might watch the live feed, though... with the volume turned down to a much lower level.”

The others laughed, and the meeting was adjourned without much ceremony.

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The Centauri shuttle Leaute, carrying – among forty-some other passengers – the enigmatic human entrepreneur known as Mr. Morden, departed from Babylon 5 according to schedule, heading for the personal transport ship Colossus. Which, on its turn was waiting for Minister Virini to finish his business on the station and grace the ship with his august presence – meaning that it wouldn’t start before that happened, schedule or no schedule.

Being a Centauri aristocrat and a minister of the Imperial Court did have its perks.

Mr. Morden wasn’t happy about the delay. His plans had been set up with some rather strict deadlines in mind, and his associates were already fidgety enough, without their timetable in danger of collapsing.

The fact that some junior technomage had managed to put them to sleep made them even more twirly than they usually were, restlessly poking around in Morden’s head to find more details about his encounter with the mage; some minor detail he might have forgotten to report.

Morden gritted his teeth and endured. Telling them to leave him alone before his brain gave out wouldn’t be of any use; he knew that from previous experience. When they were nervous – or the
Shadow equivalent of such mundane things – they went into research mode. The almost paranoid need to know everything was part of their nature, and as ancient as they were, one could hardly expect the to break the habit. Millennia-old creatures weren’t prone to abrupt changes.

Perhaps this had been the intention of the mage all along: to make them nervous, to launch them into research mode, so that they’d be busy picking Morden’s mind apart, looking for more information. Making sure that neither of them would be of much use, until they’d calmed down a bit. In the meantime the mage – or whomever he was covering for – could do whatever they wanted, largely undisturbed.

One had to admit: it had been a clever move. Worked like a charm, too.

Trying to resist two inquisitive Shadows would have been hopeless – not to mention suicidal. His masters reacted badly to resistance. Therefore Morden did what he always did during such investigations: he tried to relax, opened his mind as wide as he could and let them do their thing. The sooner they went through every insignificant little shard of memory, the sooner would they leave him alone.

Watching the scene in his magic bauble, Galen smiled to himself darkly. His device enabled him to see the Shadows, too, and it appeared indeed as if they were slicing their human servant’s head to pieces with their claws. The whole scene had an odd similarity with cheap 20th-century horror movies, where vampire bats attacked people for no apparent reason. Disgusting, yes, but somehow ridiculous at the same time.

It also must have been painful, or at least fairly unpleasant, if the tense expression on Mr. Morden’s face was any indication. The man tried to relax and simply let it happen, but his gritted teeth gave him away. Galen didn’t blame him. His training as a technomage had required that he shared his mind with others on occasion, and that had been bad enough. But at least he’d done so willingly. Having the Shadows search his mind… he shivered involuntarily.

Still, he felt no pity for the Shadow servant. Mr. Morden, too, had made his choice freely. Now he had to deal with what that choice entailed.

Galen engulfed the bauble in both hands and willed it to rest. Then he decided to have some rest, too. His cloaked little ship was in position above the Colossus, invisible for the larger vessel’s instruments. It would alert him if the Centauri ship moved.

For now, there was nothing else for him to do.
Chapter Notes

Some of the Sickbay dialogue is borrowed from the 1st Season Voyager episode “The Phage”. The Reg Gel treatment is book canon, mentioned in the Classic!Trek novel “The First Adventure”.

Apologies to my fellow Christians for some things that are said in this part; but without the respective cultural background, aliens would have problems with understanding certain aspects of our faith.

Part 11 has grown so extremely long that I decided to post it in two more easily digestible halves.

PART 11.2

Vir met Rastenn and Lennier outside the chapel; he still felt more than a little shaken and intimidated and found it better to have some friends with him when facing a room full of strangers. He wasn’t sure he would be truly welcome, either. Due to the politics of his homeworld, Centauri generally were a lot less liked than before – not that they’d have been all that popular before, either.

He could hardly overhear the comments made about his kind, and the hatred of the Narns towards Centauri in general and himself in particular hadn’t lessened much after the failed assassination attempt towards him. It wasn’t so that he could make public what he’d done for them while assigned to the Centauri embassy on Minbar, after all.

Therefore he was relieved when he saw his Minbari friends show up in the corridor. To his surprise, neither of them came alone.

That Lennier would be accompanied by the human Ranger, Marcus Cole, was understandable, considering that Delenn owed her life to the young man. Rastenn, however, came in the company of a lovely, deceivingly petite Minbari woman who wore very feminine clothes in jewelled colours, made of heavy, brocaded silk. Much like Delenn, actually, although her bonecrest was carved in decidedly Warrior Caste fashion.

“My bride, Nidell,” Rastenn introduced her.

Unlike every other time Vir had seen him in the past, he had opted against Warrior Caste black and body armour and was clad similarly to Lennier, although in darker, more sombre hues. He cut a very striking figure in civilian clothes, Vir found without envy.

The announcement, however, seemed to surprise even Lennier.

“I didn’t know you were engaged,” the young priest said.

“This is a recent development, arranged by our families,” Rastenn explained.

“The Warrior Caste still arranges marriages between their youth?” Lennier asked with a frown. “I thought such practices have been outlawed a long time ago.”
Nidell smiled. “Oh, this is not what you obviously think it is. But yes, if an old and respected Clan is in danger to become leaderless for the want of a rightful heir, they do… encourage their children to seek a life-mate and make suggestions. Rastenn is Satai Neroon’s heir; he will be Clan leader eventually, and should he remain childless, the bloodline would die out.”

“And you weren’t even asked?” Vir had thought such customs only ruled Centauri lives; his failed marriage still hurt, so he usually chose not to think about it. All this talk about arranged marriages brought back painful memories.

Nidell laughed; it was a surprisingly delightful sound.

“Of course I was; we both were. And we both agreed to give it a try. We’ve known each other for years, worked together. Should we realize during courtship that we won’t fit as husband and wife, after all, we would be allowed to part ways and seek out more fitting partners. That’s why Minbari courtship is so long, you see. A life-bond, once forged, cannot be unmade; we have to be certain.”

“When have you started courting?” Marcus asked with interest, curious if the Warrior Caste has different traditions in this, too.

“We haven’t yet; not officially,” Rastenn answered. “There is an agreement, yes, but we didn’t want to enter a bond before this war is over. Should one of us die, that would make it easier for the other one to find a new life-mate. As Nidell suggested, Minbari don’t remarry after the loss of their mate, and even an official courtship would force the surviving one to a long period of grieving. It would be cruel and unnecessary.”

While Vir was still digesting this piece of new information about Minbari customs, the chapel door opened and out looked a black man with a ready smile, a friendly manner, a large voice, and under his arm a thick tome that Vir recognized as the holy book of several human religions.

“What are you waiting for, friends?” he asked, smiling at them broadly. “Come in, come in, we’re just about to start. Come and learn how to be joyful in the presence of the Lord!”

The four young people – representing three different races – exchanged amused looks and followed the Reverend into the chapel. This promised to be a unique experience.

Lillian Hobbs had received permission to visit Chakotay in the regeneration department – of course she had. Even though Captain Janeway had thrown a temper tantrum at first (according to Lieutenant Paris), harping about the Prime Directive (whatever that was; Lillian still didn’t fully understand and frankly, she didn’t care), about contaminating the timeline and other such nonsense, should she be able to learn any of their 24th century healing methods.

As if that would be a bad thing, with people dying all around them, from battle wounds, from plagues emerging on post-war worlds – or simply from the lack of proper nutrition in DownBelow.

The Holodoc, however, overrode the captain’s decision as was his – its? – right in all medical issues, allowing Lillian to see Chakotay day or night, whenever she could get away from the MedLabs. Her respect for her artificial colleague went up several notches.

Not that seeing Chakotay like this – motionless, lifeless, submerged in the semi-translucent green jelly up to both ears – would have been particularly comforting. Granted, the Holodoc ensured her that Chakotay was making excellent progress; but when she looked at his emaciated body, she got the eerie impression that he gel was sucking the remaining life out of him. How else would he have lost so much weight in a mere two days?
She sat down next to the tank and began to talk to him, in the hope that on some level he might hear her. She thanked for the flowers, expressed her regret that their dinner date had to be cancelled, told him every little thing that had happened in the MedLabs, the people she’d met today – everything she could think of, until she grew tired and hoarse and nearly fell asleep in the uncomfortable chair.

“It looks good,” Lieutenant Paris said encouragingly, as he stepped up next to her to study the graphics and readouts displayed on the diagnostic computer’s screen. “The neuron bundles in his spinal cord are stable and structured once again. The vertebrae have re-grown and his body has integrated the cloned organs completely. It’s a good thing he’s got the heart of an eighteen-year-old…”

“… kept in a jar on his bedside table,” Lillian finished the somewhat morbid medical joke that, oddly enough, existed in both universes. “I can see that, Lieutenant. I’m a doctor, too, remember? But what my head knows and what my eyes can see are two different things.”

“I know,” the blond-pilot-turned-medic said gently. “My father spent three months in a Reg-tank once. I was ten; and they could not make me believe that he’d wake up and heal ever again. But he did… and so will Chakotay, I promise. This is a well-proved method, trust me. Even if it had gone out of use in the recent decades in favour of new technologies.”

Lillian nodded absently; she’d already been reassured about that. Repeatedly.

“Is there any prognosis when he’ll wake up?” she asked.

The thought that he might spend weeks, even months in there mortified her. Voyager might even leave before he woke up – and what was she supposed to do then?

Lieutenant Paris shrugged. "Well, his injuries were serious, but he only had to re-grow a few vertebrae, thanks the cloned organs we had in storage for him, so the Doc thinks in a few days... a week, tops."

“Oh, thank God!” Lillian practically deflated in relief.

Lieutenant Paris grinned. “You thought it would take much longer, didn’t you? Don’t worry, you’ll have him back in no time!” He became serious again. “You should rest a bit, too. I heard the MedLabs are overflowing with patients; you’ll be of no use for them if you collapse in the middle of an operation.”

“I know,” Lillian sighed. “I’ll go in a moment. I just want to watch him a little longer.”

“Ten minutes!” Lieutenant Paris said sternly. "If you aren’t gone by the time I make my next round, I’ll activate the Doc, and he might sedate you.”

“That would take care of the rest,” Lillian laughed tiredly. "Ten minutes. I promise.”

“Very well,” the medic said and left her alone with the man she loved.

Because she did. She’d tried to deny for a while, but in the end she had to be honest with herself. She was in love like she’d never been before, and the thought that two whole universes stood between them broke her heart.

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The prayer service was the strongest ceremony he’d ever seen, Vir decided. For starters, everybody was in civilian clothes, even the priest – was the Reverend called a priest at all? Well, the title probably didn’t matter.
Secondly, everyone seemed so cheerful. There was none of the pomp so characteristic for Centauri rituals when wassailing the household gods. There was none of the quiet serenity of Minbari ceremonies... or the contemplative silence Brother Theo and his brethren displayed during service.

Oh, they sang, too, and it was beautiful and otherworldly and above the hurts and desires of daily life. This, however – this was simply cheerful.

Thirdly, the members of this congregation clearly gathered for the main purpose to hear their priest... pastor... whatever... speak. And speak he did, in a loud and intense voice, as if he wanted to brand the message into the very hearts of his audience.

“Every day, here and at home, we are warned about the enemy,” he began. “But who is the enemy? Is it the alien? Well, we are all alien to one another!”

Rastenn glanced around him and spotted Starkiller and Delenn among the others in the congregation, listening intently. And indeed, if there had ever been two people one would consider enemies, these two certainly were. Or, at least, they had been.

Satai Delenn, youngest member of the Grey Council, who had once called for the eradication of the entire human race, out of pain and vengeance. And Sheridan Starkiller, destroyer of the Drala’fi, murderer of Rastenn’s own mother. And yet here they were, side by side, united against the Ancient Enemy, for the good of their respective peoples.

“Is it the one who believes differently than we do?” the human priest continued, and Rastenn had to think of the conflict between Religious and Warrior Caste, based on different insights simmering under the surface of Valen’s Peace.

“No. Oh, no, my friends!” the priest raised his voice; he also raised his forefinger, as if to catch their attention. “The enemy is fear! The enemy is ignorance! The enemy is the one who tells you that you must hate that which is different! Because in the end, that hate will turn on you! And that same hate will destroy you!”

Flashes of memory about his uncle, the greatest Warrior of Minbar, returning from the unfinished Denn’sha, shaken to the bone by his revelation crossed Rastenn’s mind. If anyone, Neroon had indeed hated Delenn enough, thought her to be a serious enough threat to Minbar’s stability to even sacrifice his own honour and break Valen’s Ban – only to be shamed deeply by a human, who’d been ready to sacrifice himself to prevent that.

A human with a Minbari soul. Id’Minbari were clearly more than just a myth. And only Valen could tell how many of their own, reborn as humans, the Minbari had slaughtered in their war of vengeance.

Out of hatred.

Out of ignorance.

No-one had questioned the righteousness of their actions.

Rastenn shook his head in confusion. He could certainly understand why the discovery had shaken his uncle so much. His head was reeling, too.

The priest in the meantime had finished his sermon and now asked the congregation to rise. Sheets of paper with strange patterns (that Vir identified for them as music notes) were distributed among the humans, and then a beautiful, dark-skinned woman switched places with the priest, leading a joyous rendition of a song that many seemed to know, as they responded by repeating certain words. Her
voice was clear and strong, filling the chapel easily without the help of any amplifiers.

“No hiding place down here!” she began, and the congregation dutifully repeated: “Down here!”

“There's no hiding place down here!” she sang again, and the congregation echoed as one: “No hiding place!”

“What do they want to hide from?” Vir asked in confusion.

Nidell and Rastenn shrugged in unison and looked at Lennier, hoping that the young priest would know more about the confusing human beliefs. But Lennier shook his head.

“I am hearing this... hymn, or whatever it is, for the first time, too.”

“It sounds more like a battle song than a hymn,” Rastenn commented.

“But why would they invoke a battle song in a temple?” Nidell asked, perplexed.

The others just shrugged, and the human singer went on.

“You know, I went to the rock to hide my face but the rock cried out, "No hiding place!"
There's no hiding place down here!”

“Down here!” the congregation echoed, now all moving with the beat of the song, swaying slightly, and their eyes sparkled.

“You know the sinners are gonna running at the knowledge of their fate,” the lady singer continued. "They’re gonna run to the rocks and the mountains, but their prayers will be too late! Yeah, you know, they forgot about Jesus, not knowing the end was nigh – but they'll be runnin', tryin' to find a hiding place when it comes their time to die!”

“Who is this Jesus and what has he do with them having or not having a hiding place?” Rastenn was completely baffled.

“I think it’s one of their deities,” Vir replied, a little uncertainly.

He’d studied the major human religions but found the many parallels and discrepancies between them utterly confusing.

“No,” Lennier corrected. "According to some of their religions, Jesus was the son of their only God – similar to the one you call the Great Maker – who became human to sacrifice himself for the sins of humankind, and thus save them from utter annihilation.”

“Does this mean their god would have otherwise wiped out all its worshippers?” Nidell asked with a frown. "Why would any higher being do so? That doesn’t make any sense!”

Lennier shrugged. “Few things do, in the terms of human thinking. I believe this entire concept goes back to primitive times when humans sacrificed their firstborn to the various deities for good fortune or the protection of the tribe. The consensus is that if the God in which many of them believe – even though the interpretations of His nature go in very different directions – sacrificed His own son to wash away their sins, that is the ultimate proof of His love for them.”

“Sounds plausible,” Rastenn said after a moment of considerations. "So, this is all... symbolic?”

Lennier shook his head. "Oh, no. According to Marcus – and to Brother Theo, who represents a
different branch of the same faith, unless I’ve misunderstood them – this Jesus had once truly walked the Earth, preaching forgiveness and healing the sick. In fact, the current Earth reckoning of time starts with the year of his birth.”

The others exchanged surprised looks.

“And was he truly the son of a god?” Vir asked uncertainly. As a Centauri, whose first emperors had regularly been declared gods, the concept wasn’t entirely alien to him.

“That is a matter of perspective,” Lennier answered. “For Brother Theo and his brethren, he most certainly was, and Marcus shares this interpretation. Other humans, following different belief systems, see him as a great prophet; or a mere legend. I am told that so-called holy wars were fought about this a few centuries ago.”

“Holy wars in the name of love and forgiveness?” Nidell shook he head in exasperation. "Humans are a very contradictory race.”

“Not to mention young and enthusiastic... and that clearly rubs off to other people,” Lennier said, watching all sorts of humans and even some non-humans, like a bunch of Drazi, clapping their hands enthusiastically, as the lady singer built up the song to the great finale.

“No hiding place on the mountain!
No hiding place in the waters!
No hiding place down here!”

“No hiding place!” the humans from Earth, the humans from the parallel universe, the Drazi, even some of the Minbari present echoed enthusiastically.

“Yeah! I went to the rock to hide my face
but the rock cried out, "No hiding place!"
There's no hiding place down here!

“You know, when the world catch on fire, there'll be no hiding place!” the lady singer continued with gleaming eyes.
“Yeah, when the waters start boilin', there'll be no hiding place!
When the lightning starts flashin', there'll be no hiding place!
Lord! When the thunder starts rumblin’, there'll be no hiding place!
Can't you see the old gambler runnin', sayin’, "Lord, save my soul!"... Sayin', "Lord, Lord, have mercy! Won't you save my soul?"

“No hiding place down here,” the congregation sang and clapped hands.

“There's no hiding place down here!” the singer went on
“Yeah! I went to the rock to hide my face
but the rock cried out, "No hiding place!"
There's no hiding place down here!”

“A very effective way to make the believers fear the wrath of their god,” Rastenn commented.

“Perhaps,” Vir allowed. "But if that was the intention, why is the song so joyful?"

“Humans,” Lennier declared in a manner that would make a Vulcan proud, though he couldn’t have know that, of course, “are the most confusing species!”

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Alone on the bridge of *Voyager*, the ship's Vulcan tactical officer was staring at the main viewer – and on it the beautiful human singer cheerfully announcing the death and destruction of all sinners – in utter shock.

“T’Pel,” he whispered. "T’hy’la... how did you come here?"

Because but for the long hair and the lack of pointed ears, the lady singer was the mirror image of his wife, the mother of his four grown children, half a galaxy and now also an entire universe away, beyond his reach perhaps forever.

How was it possible, in a reality that didn’t even know Vulcan, he could not explain. But for the first time ever since *Voyager* had been lost in the Delta Quadrant, he felt the same heavy burden of homesickness and nostalgia as his human crewmates.

It was illogical, of course. He of all people needed to accept reality for what it was: an unshakable fact.

Back in the Delta Quadrant, he might have lived long enough to see the end of their journey and return home. Perhaps with a younger generation manning the ship; a generation born and raised in space. T’Pel would have waited for him, and they would have been reunited. Long periods of separation were fairly routine for a Starfleet officer and his civilian wife. Vulcans could afford them.

But now... now they were separated by more than just distance. Captain Janeway put her hope in the Great Machine – an amazing piece of technology, or so they had been told, down there on the planet under their feet, the planet that in their universe perhaps would be Vulcan – but Tuvok was not so optimistic.

Their coming here had not been planned; it had been an accident. There were no guarantees that the Great Machine could repeat the process, only backwards.

There were several possibilities, none of them promising.

One: the Great Machine might simply fail to transfer them anywhere, meaning that they would be stuck in this universe, forever.

Two: they might be transferred to any different universe, or to any random location within their own, being every bit as lost in space as they had been, only without a hope to ever get home.

Three: They might be brought back to the right universe and the right coordinates; but they might have been already changed so much due to the contact with this one that they would end up dead.

Granted, *that* was not a likely chance – a possibility less than twenty per cent, according to his estimate – but one could not rule it out completely.

Tuvok began to ask himself if they should not all accept what had happened and try to build themselves a new life here.

At least the Maquis would have little trouble adapting to their new surroundings. This was an old hat for them, only with a different Earth bureaucracy and with different aliens. Most of the crew were humanoid enough to blend in, and as for the rest, well, Babylon 5 had much more bizarre aliens. Fortunately, no-one represented their species alone – well, no-one save Kes and Neelix, but that could not be helped – so they could build small communities if needs must be.

He wondered if T’Pel would realize he had set her free if he chose to go through ritual separation. That was something he needed to consider, should they prove to be stranded in this universe for
good.

Minister Virini, perhaps the most influential member of the Royal Court (now that Lord Refa was conveniently dead), was not a happy Centauri. This visit to Babylon 5, meant to end the division between the two oldest Houses of Centauri Prime – an ongoing rivalry between Ambassador Mollari and Lord Refa, the current heads of said Houses – had turned out a lot more disturbing than he had expected.

Granted, the feud was now clearly over, with Lord Refa found on Narn, killed by his unlikely collaborators, if one could believe the proof found on his body, and its destabilizing effect on the Royal Court had ended. But Virini was no fool. He knew Mollari had not told him everything; and he wondered how much of what he had been told was actually true and if he would ever learn the rest.

Oh, he didn’t doubt that Lord Refa had planned to get him murdered eventually, just as he’d done with Prime Minister Malachi. Such things were part of the game within the Centaurum, and he noticed how upset Lord Refa had been when he had questioned the man’s authority.

It wasn’t really surprising, either. They had both grown too influential for each other – Lord Refa due to his supporters within the Centaurum, and the fact that Mollari’s dubious allies had played right into his hands, and Virini himself due to his personal influence on the Emperor and his uncle Milo’s position at the Court – and soon, Centauri Prime wouldn’t have been large enough for both of them. In that aspect, should Mollari have had a hand in Lord Refa’s untimely death, he had done House Virini a great favour.

What the Minister did doubt, though, was the statement that Lord Refa had been a traitor; and one bargaining with the Narn resistance, at that. Like most representatives of the old school, Refa had nothing but contempt for the Narns, considering them little better than animals, and had often voiced his opinion that they should have been completely eradicated.

Which he had tried, by using mass drivers against their homeworld. But the resilient barbarians survived – well, at least many of them had – and now they had apparently taken revenge on him for his role in the war. A role about which they had likely learned with the help of Mollari.

So why would Lord Refa have even considered collaborating with the Narns? It simply didn’t make sense.

No, there must have been some personal vendetta from Mollari’s side, using the Narns to get rid of a dangerous rival. Which, the Minister admitted, was an elegant solution. Having Lord Refa killed and his entire House discredited opened for Mollari the way to step in and fill the vacuum of power he had personally created.

That had been clever. Dangerously so.

Virini might have been the equivalent of a French aristocrat right before the Revolution, but he didn’t share his human counterparts’ lack of self-preservation instinct. Mollari no longer was the joke he’d been when assigned to his current position on Babylon 5; he had grown in power and influence during the recent years, mostly due to his mysterious allies among alien races.

Soon, he would present a danger for those at Court.

Getting rid of him however, as he had done with Lord Refa, was not an option. Not yet anyway; not for a while. The Republic still needed his allies; they were still not strong enough on their own. But it
wouldn’t be mistaken to keep a closer eye on him, just in case. Durano of the Ministry of Intelligence could take a deeper look into his disturbed relationship with the late Lord Refa... and into his other affairs.

And perhaps it was time for Mollari to be given some important position at Court. One he had coveted for a long time. That would force him to return to Centauri Prime regularly, where Cholini of the Ministry of Defence, Uncle Milo, Vole and the others will have the chance to monitor his activities more closely.

Coming to a decision, l Virini pocketed the data crystal with the supposed proof of lord Refa’s treachery – brought him by Mollari less than an hour ago – and summoned his aide.

“See that my luggage is being brought aboard the shuttle,” he ordered. "It is high time for me to return home.”

The aide – a trusted retainer, whose family had served House Virini faithfully for centuries – bowed in respect.

“IT is being done as we speak, Excellency,” he said. "We are ready whenever you are.”

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In the solitude of his quarters, Vir Cotto had also come to a decision. The experience made at the human prayer service had opened his eyes – on a rather personal level. He realized that there was indeed no hiding place from the truth. That he had to admit that, left to his own devices, Londo would destroy himself – or, at least what was still good in him – and that he, Vir, couldn’t stop him on that way without help.

So he was going to ask for help – from the most unlikely person. Whatever he might think of the Lady Timov personally, Doctor Hernandez had been right: she was a dutiful wife. She might despise London deeply – well, there was no doubt about that, she made no secret of it – but she would come to his aid if she saw the need. And Londo had always valued her brutal honesty… a trait rarely found in a Centauri, of noble birth or not.

Speaking to her face to face was out of the question, of course. Vir knew he wouldn’t be able to put together a single coherent sentence under the disdainful scrutiny of those small, piercing eyes. And babbling like an idiot would not convince the Lady Timov to come to Babylon 5. She was a very practical-minded woman if nothing else, with little understanding for dramatics. She’d always said that was Londo’s domain.

Therefore a recorded message would have to do. Vir knew he wouldn’t be able to put together a single coherent sentence under the disdainful scrutiny of those small, piercing eyes. And babbling like an idiot would not convince the Lady Timov to come to Babylon 5. She was a very practical-minded woman if nothing else, with little understanding for dramatics. She’d always said that was Londo’s domain.

Still, he’d spent half the remaining night with putting the message together. He even wrote it down to make sure every word, every argument would sound true. In this, he could not allow any mistake. Perhaps it was still not too late for Londo. Perhaps if no-one else, his unloved yet respected wife could still stop his downward spiral.

With a tired sigh, Vir straightened his aching back and looked straight into the camera. It was time to stop fretting and start acting. He could not put this off any longer.

“Computer, start recording,” he said.

The computer acknowledged the order and, after a nervous gulp of air, Vir began to read his
carefully composed message straight off the screen. He only hoped it would do any good. Because otherwise he was out of ideas.

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The Voyager crew returned from the prayer service to their ship in a wonderfully relaxed mood. Even Captain Janeway was smiling and talking easily to her junior officers; something that hadn’t happened for a time. Not since they had landed in this alternate universe, at least.

Having a piece of home again clearly had worked wonders for morale. Even if it hadn’t actually been, well, home. It had still been the closest thing to it.

“You should have come with us,” Harry Kim said to Tom Paris, paying him a visit in Sickbay after his return. “The Doctor could have kept an eye on Commander Chakotay for an hour or two. It’s not as if he’d need any actual treatment while he’s in the Reg tank anyway.”

Paris shook his head. “I haven’t stayed for Chakotay; he isn’t aware of his surroundings, at least not consciously. Besides, even if he were, do you think I’d be the person he would want to have around him?”

“Why did you stay then?” Harry asked in surprise.

“For her,” Tom nodded in the direction of the petite Creole woman sitting with Chakotay. “Watching a family member or a loved one in Reg-gel is not a pleasant experience. It is easy to loose faith in recovery.”

“How do you know that?” Harry wondered.

“Been there, done that, at the age of then,” Tom replied. “She needs to be reassured – repeatedly – that the treatment is working as it is supposed to, that Chakotay is improving steadily and will soon come out of the green slime, fully healed. And you know that the Doc’s bedside manner isn’t exactly reassuring.”

“Yeah; who doesn’t?” Harry replied dryly. Like almost everyone on board, he’d been on the receiving end of the EMH’s acerbic comments often enough. “By the way, when are you going off-duty?”

“At the end of Gamma Shift, at oh-six hundred, as always,” Tom said, mildly surprised by the abrupt change of topics. “Why?”

“Now that Marcus has recovered – more or less – he wants to go with us on another holodeck adventure,” Harry explained. “As he’s particularly fond of the Arthurian legends, I’ve put something together for him… something different than last time. I’d like if you could take a look at the program, though. I’m not bad at these things, but you are better.”

Tom nodded. “Sure, why not? Leave it with me.”

“You’re welcome to participate, too,” Harry offered while handing him the isolinear rod. “We’re still looking for more players.”

“Who’s already in?” Tom inquired. He loved holodeck adventures but was picky whom he shared them with. Preferring the ones who didn’t hate his guts, for starters.

“Well, I’m Arthur, B’Elanna is playing Guinevere, Marcus is Lancelot and Sue Nicoletti is Elaine,” Harry replied. “We still need a Merlin and an evil King Maleagant, though.”
“B’Elanna is playing a damsel in distress, in constant need of rescuing?” Tom grinned like a loon. “This I have to see. All right, count me in, I don’t care in which role. I see what I can do with your program to make it as exciting as possible. Though, personally, I think B’Elanna would prefer a Klingon calisthenics program, shared with those Minbari Warrior guys. Can you imagine that? With bat’leth and fighting pikes against imaginary holographic monsters. It would be epic!”

“Another time perhaps,” Harry replied. “Thanks, Tom. The holodeck reservation is for eighteen hundred tomorrow… well, make that today. You should try to get some sleep in the morning; you know that no matter what her role, B’Elanna won’t take any prisoners.”
Chapter Notes

Janeway being caved in is my invention, based on a similar adventure mentioned in some novels. So is the specific Centauri version of Parkinson’s disease. Some lines of dialogue are taken from the episode “And The Rock Cried Out No Hiding Place”. The idea of the catastrophic cascade failure is from Stargate, of course.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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PART 12

Captain Janeway’s mellow mood still lasted on the next day, and when Captain Sheridan invited her “for a little walk”, she promptly agreed, in the spirit of cross-dimensional human understanding (also known as “captains stick together”). Her enthusiasm was somewhat dampened, however, when she realized that the little walk was supposed to be taken outside the station.

On the forward cargo stabilizers.

In EVA suits.

“Don’t worry, it’s completely safe,” Sheridan assured her. "I step out to stretch my legs a bit from time to time whenever I’m in the need of a little peace and quiet. Besides, the Vorlon ship is scheduled to return today, and that’s a sight you don’t want to miss. Trust me, it is spectacular.”

Janeway gave him a somewhat pained smile.”I’m sure the sight would be just as spectacular from the front window of your C&C.”

“Oh, no, they cannot be compared,” Sheridan protested. "C&C is almost a mile away from the cargo stabilizers,” he cast a surprised look at her queasy face. “Have you never been outside, in open space, just you and the stars?”

“Not if I could avoid it,” Janeway admitted. “It’s those damned EVA suits, you see. I can’t breathe in them.”

“Are you claustrophobic?” Sheridan asked in surprise. “How did they accept you at officers’ school to begin with? At EarthForce, claustrophobia would be a reason to reject a candidate.”

Janeway shrugged. “Well, I’m not a combat pilot; and our ships are large enough to give me breathing space. Besides, I haven’t always been claustrophobic; only since I got trapped in a collapsed cave, during my Academy years.”

Sheridan nodded in understanding. Unfortunately, such things happened. She must have been an extremely capable officer otherwise if Starfleet kept her despite her handicap. Or the parallel Earth had simply different priorities.

“Is it very bad?” he asked. “Or can you manage for a short while? Because it is truly something you can only fully appreciate from space. Both the Vorlon ship and an opening jumpgate. Everyone
ought to see that at least once in their lives.”

His enthusiasm was so infectious that Janeway smiled and gave in.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s stretch our legs a bit. But I’m not cleaning the inside of the EVA suit, should I get sick; just to make that clear.”

“No need,” Sheridan grinned with boyish excitement. “We’ve got minions for that sort of work. Come on, Captain, let’s suit up, or we might miss the moment! We’ve only got about twenty minutes left!”

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Almost exactly seventeen minutes later, they were standing at the tip of the boom projecting from the front end of the station, held to the structure by magnetic boots, tiny and alone in the vastness of space. The five-miles-long station under their feet, with its quarter million inhabitants, seemed tiny and fragile, too, like some Christmas tree ornament in the all-encompassing, vast darkness, dotted only with the bright speckles of distant stars.

“How are you holding p?” Sheridan asked via helm communicator.

“Better than expected,” Janeway admitted. “Your space suits are much more comfortable than ours. They don’t make one feel caged. They feel like... well, more like actual clothes. And they aren’t so clumsy, either.”

“Yeah, we need to go outside all the time, for one reason or another,” Sheridan said. “So we need space suits that allow us to move more freely, so that we can actually work in them. Come, it’s almost time!”

He plodded to the extreme end of the stabilizer and, after a moment of hesitation, Janeway followed him. At the same moment the jumpgate came alive and a ship flew out.

Janeway had seen the Bajoran wormhole opening, several times, and that had been spectacular and literally breath-taking. This was something entirely different: less organic, more geometric and clearly man-made... but no less impressive.

The four powerful gate generators, seeming no larger than barbed sewing needles from her perspective, created a wide funnel of nettled yellow energy – strangely enough, quite similar to the chequered pattern of a holodeck when not in use – and from the centre of the funnel a ship emerged. A long, largely cylindrical ship, patterned predominantly in red and black, with minor yellow lines woven into the main pattern. To the rear end of it four large sails were attached, like butterfly wings or flower petals, their inside filled with liquid, shimmering energy.

As they watched, the jumpgate collapsed again behind the ship. It deployed its sails, as a flower closes its petals, and decelerated as it approached the station. As it lined up with the entrance, the ship moved aside and placed itself nose to nose with the humans. Then it turned slightly, so that they could see the colour pattern of its skin rearrange to briefly form a message in Vorlon script on its side.

A moment later the script was gone and the ship continued its way to the docking bay.

Janeway was perplexed. “What the hell was that supposed to mean?”

Sheridan shrugged, once again proving the flexibility of EarthForce space suits that, unlike their Starfleet counterparts, actually allowed such small gestures.
“Your guess is as good as mine. The Vorlons are cryptic, that is what they do – and apparently, so are their ships. Though this is the first time a Vorlon ship tried to communicate with us when its master wasn’t on board.”

“To communicate?” Janeway repeated in surprise. “You mean, these... things are alive? Perhaps even sentient?”

Sheridan shrugged again.”According to Delenn... yeah, they are. At least to a certain extent. It’s hard to tell with organic technology so far beyond our understanding, and the Vorlons are also a secretive bunch, aside from being cryptic. Sometimes I wonder if they see in us more than lowly insects.”

“And? Do they?” Janeway asked with a frown.

Frankly, she was thoroughly fed up with so-called superbeings messing up the lives of ordinary sentients.

“I’m not sure,” Sheridan admitted. ”Perhaps the old Kosh, the original one, did. This one... I seriously doubt it. He’s a lot less forthcoming; if one can call any Vorlon forthcoming.”

“Perhaps Ms Alexander could tell more,” Janeway suggested.”

“She probably could; but I doubt she would dare, and I wouldn’t blame her,” Sheridan replied. ”An enraged Vorlon is a fearsome thing to face. I only ever saw the old Kosh in rage, and that was bad enough. I would reconsider twice before provoking this one.”

“I thought the Vorlons were your allies,” Janeway said.

“They are,” Sheridan allowed with a grim smile. “I’m sure you know the old saying, though: with friends like these, who needs enemies?”

* * * * * * *

The Lady Timov, daughter of the late Odilo Alghul and since the previous year the only remaining wife of Londo Mollari, was a woman with surprisingly little interest for the intrigues, politicking and social climbing that usually filled courtly life. Nor did she appear at court, could she avoid it without insulting someone important (which would have been suicidal).

Most people believed that her reluctance to participate in the political scheming that was practically the lifeblood of somebody of noble birth came from the fact that she had been born to a lesser House. A noble one, granted, and one with substantial wealth, yet with little to no political influence.

She felt uncomfortable among her betters, it was said.

Which certainly had a kernel of truth, but not for the reason others might think. She felt uncomfortable among them because she despised them, plainly and simply.

She was a small person and not a particularly attractive one – a fact that others would find a disadvantage. Personally, she valued the fact very much. It helped to keep things in perspective, she found.

Plus, it made for her easier to blend in. To be overlooked. Which was the way she preferred to lead her life.

Being an only child, she was also the sole heir of her father. And Odilo Alghul, being a dutiful father, had seen to it that she could keep her independence... as far as it was at all possible for a Centauri noblewoman. Her marriage contract had been phrased in a manner that ensured that neither
Londo, nor any other member of House Mollari could touch her money without her consent.

Especially not the other wives... well, they were no longer an issue anyway.

And she’d had her own household since the beginning of her marriage. First in a remote wing of the ancient, pompous and tasteless Mollari estate; then, after the death of her father, she moved back to her childhood home and was still living there, far from the court and its intrigues... and out of the new Emperor’s eyesight.

Here she was as safe as anyone could hope for without actually leaving the homeworld.

Because leaving was not an option. As Londo’s only remaining wife, she had certain social obligations. Looking after his wards – the families of old friends he couldn’t save, despite his efforts – being the most important one of them.

She did that from a distance, though. Lady Marillia, the widow of Urza Jaddo, and the toddlers of her sister-in-law, Urza’s much younger sister (recently perished together with her husband, that young fool Timono Deradi), lived on the Mollari estate, protected by faithful retainers of Londo’s family.

Timov and Lady Marillia had never got on in the highday of House Jaddo, and it would have been delusional to hope that they would, now that their fates changed so drastically. Besides, this arrangement gave Urza’s family the illusion of independence. Even though they would all be dead by now without Londo’s protection.

The only people living with Timov were the old, trusted servants of her father... and their children, raised in the spirit of respect for their long-time employers. As it had been custom in all old families, they had served House Alghul faithfully for many generations, and they were as trustworthy as any Centauri had ever been.

Outsides might say that that wasn’t much, but Timov knew better. Like herself, her family servants still lived according certain moral principles, even if the rest of the Republic did not.

One of those worthies was now knocking on her door and entered upon being told to do so: a woman of Timov’s own age, one who she had practically grown up with.

“You have a subspace message, my lady,” she said quietly. “It is from Babylon 5.”

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

Vir had been preparing himself for the confrontation with Londo for the rest of the night, after having sent his recorded message to the Lady Timov. Trailing the older Centauri across Green sector while Londo was strolling towards some unknown destination wasn’t how he’d imagined it, though. By the time they finally reached the end of the corridor, Vir was practically seething with anger... so much that even Londo noticed it, despite his obvious distraction.

“All right, Vir,” he said wearily. “What is it? You have that look again.”

Vir had no idea what look Londo meant and frankly, he didn’t care.

“You used me!” he said accusingly.

Londo didn’t even attempt to deny it.

“Of course,” he replied. I knew Refa had a telepath with him. If I told you the truth, he would have found out. So I let you believe what I wanted him to believe. It was the only way to lure him into the
trap I had set for him.”

That was certainly true, but the casual manner in which Londo had put him at risk hurt Vir deeply.

“Londo, they could have killed me!” he exclaimed angrily.

“Nonsense,” Londo waved off his concern. “You’re not important enough to kill.”

Vir felt positively gutted by that throwaway remark – and he didn’t have the strength to hide it, either.

“But I’m important enough for you to lie to, am I?” he asked softly. He was no longer angry, just hurt beyond healing. “To put me at risk and make no thoughts about what might happen if things take a turn to the worse – and they did. They would have killed me, you see; if not physically, then mentally, for sure.”

“What are you talking about?” Londo frowned.

“Do you know what it feels like when a telepath enters your mind; tears through your pitiful defences effortlessly, and then peels away your memories, layer by layer, down to the greatest shame of your childhood, until there’s nothing left but emptiness and terror?” Vir went on in the same soft, frightening voice. “Do you? Because they did that to me; and if Mr. Tuvok hadn’t followed me to that empty place, I’d have been lost, forever. I am very fortunate that he decided to take such great personal risk; because if he hadn’t been so old and strong, he might have gotten lost there with me. Or do you believe that he wasn’t important enough, either?”

Londo didn’t say anything because really, what could he have said? He’d been so caught up in his plot to take revenge on Refa for everything the other Centauri had done to him and those he loved that he truly hadn’t taken the possible collateral damage under consideration.

But Vir wasn’t done yet; and now that the floodgates had been opened, he didn’t seem able to stop until he had said it all.

“And it’s not just the humiliation,” he continued flatly, all emotions burned out of his voice. “You see, a forced deep scan is likely to cause physical damage to the brain, too. And it did. It isn’t anything major – in that, I’ve been fortunate at least; the doctors say I could have ended up completely lobotomized – but it can’t be told if I’ll ever be whole again. I’ve developed a condition humans know as Parkinson’s disease.... or rather the Centauri version of it.”

“What are you talking about?” Londo finally found his voice long enough to ask.

“Meaning what?” Londo replied flatly. “Meaning that I will gradually lose the ability to control the functions of my body,” Vir went on in the same soft, frightening voice. “Hand movements will be affected first; then one after another, including the ability to father children. If I’m really unfortunate, even the ability of speech. That is what your little scheme had cost me, Londo. And now tell me: was it worth it?”

Again, Londo was too shocked and too ashamed to answer. And Vir, in for a penny in for a pound as humans liked to say, went on unerringly to deliver the final blow.

“I used to think I knew you, Londo; that I knew you better than others. You haven’t been very kind to me; not very often, at least. You’ve treated me badly, thrown me aside, kept me down. But I didn’t mind because I always believed that deep down you actually cared,” he swallowed hard, forcing back the tears that wanted to break to the surface. “But I never knew you at all, did I? I was just a pawn in your game; the loyal idiot you could throw to the leautit to distract them. Gods, I was such a fool!”
Again, there was a long, heavy silence. Then Londo cleared his throat.

“Do you want to leave?” he asked.

“And where am I supposed to go?” Vir asked bitterly. "To my uncle, who sent me here because I embarrassed him though he’d been the one to take advantage of me? To my almost-wife who took great pride in the murdering of Narns; the same Narns I was desperately trying to save? Or should I perhaps go to Lady Morella and beg her to give me shelter? I’m supposed to be the future Emperor, after all, and having a mad Emperor seems to be a new tradition in the making for Centauri Prime.”

“You could always return to Minbar,” Londo suggested.

“And do what?” Vir asked tiredly. "I no longer have a purpose there; Lyndisty made sure of that. Oh, they would welcome me warmly enough; after all, I’ve managed to make a few friends, even though I was there only briefly. But I don’t like being useless. At least here I can help you... as long as my condition allows. For good or worse, Babylon 5 is my home now. The only home I will ever have.”

He waited for a moment, in case Londo would want to say something. As that didn’t happen, he just nodded simply and turned away, heading back to his quarters.

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“So, how is Ms Alexander doing?” Sheridan asked Dr. Harrison.

The exotic-looking brunette (rumours said she had some alien DNA spliced with her own – Brakiri DNA was currently leading the poll – even though her medical file clearly ruled out the possibility) shook her head unhappily.

“She’s just checked herself out again, ignoring our warnings. She said the new Vorlon ambassador had ordered her to return to her quarters and pick up her duties again,”

“That was extremely careless of her,” Tuvok, who had come to check on his patient, said disapprovingly. “Her condition was still far from stable.”

“Yes, but try to say no to a Vorlon, especially if you’re employed by them; and especially by this Vorlon,” Sheridan countered; then he sighed impatiently. “Well, this couldn’t have happened at a more unfitting time. I’ve hoped that Ms Alexander could help us with the interrogation of this Biggs character.”

“You mean to take the information you need directly from his mind by force,” Tuvok said, clearly appalled.

Sheridan shrugged. “It that’s what it takes then yeah. The lives of a quarter million people are at risk on this station alone. I can’t afford to be queasy about this, Commander. Isn’t it your people who say that the needs of the many outrank the needs of the few... or a single person?”

“We do,” Tuvok said dryly. “But only if that single person is a volunteer.”

“Well, it’s not very likely that Mr. Biggs would voluntarily give us what we need, so we have to do this the hard way,” Sheridan replied dismissively. “That’s why I need Lyta. She’s a rogue; and ruthless enough to do as I ask.”

Tuvok nodded, his face expressionless.

“If ruthlessness is what you’re after, then I may have just the right man for you, Captain,” he said;
then he touched his comm badge. “Tuvok to Lieutenant Ayala.”

“Ayala here,” his second-in-command replied immediately.

“Lieutenant, release Crewman Suder from his quarters and escort him over to the station, to MedLab One. I shall be waiting for him here, with Captain Sheridan.”

There was a moment of shocked silence on the other end of the connection, and then Ayala asked carefully.

“Are you sure this is wise, Commander?”

“No,” Tuvok replied dryly. “But it is necessary. You have your orders, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, sir,” Ayala replied crisply, but there was a definite undertone of doubt in his voice. “We’ll be with you in ten.”

“Do I want to know who this Crewman Suder is?” Sheridan asked, equally doubtfully.

“Probably not,” Tuvok allowed. “But you need to. Mr. Suder is an extremely dangerous individual: a Betazoid of a particularly volatile temper. I would go so far as calling him a psychopath. While a Maquis freedom fighter, he could find a safe channel for his extreme aggression; however, aboard Voyager he had no such safe outlet, and after little more than a year, he murdered a fellow crewman without much of a provocation. He has been serving his sentence confirmed to his quarters ever since, save for one instance, in which he was of great assistance in saving both ship and crew.”

“And you still keep him locked up?” Sheridan asked, a little confused.

“It was his own wish,” Tuvok answered. “He did not want to endanger any of his crewmates again, due to his own temper. We have tried to work on his anger management, but... it was not very efficient.”

“In what way?”

“By infecting me with his own murderous instincts, instead of learning how to temper them for himself,” Tuvok said bluntly. “We have been trying alternate treatments since then but it is a long process, and the prognosis is uncertain at best.”

“And you believe that this man could be of use for us?” Sheridan asked doubtfully.

Tuvok nodded. “Like all Betazoids, Mr. Suder is a telepath; a particularly strong one, which is how he could infect me with his homicidal tendencies. Unlike Vulcans, Betazoids underlie no restrictions concerning the reading of other people’s minds; although they do openly warn others that they might do so, out of courtesy.”

“I see,” Sheridan said thoughtfully. “And would he be willing to help us?”

Tuvok nodded again. “I believe so. Mr. Suder does have a few redeeming qualities; one of them being that he likes to be useful. As long as you don’t demand from him to actually murder someone, he will do everything you ask.”

Sheridan was still more than a little doubtful about the whole affair, but he had not chance to keep arguing, because in that moment the massive shape of Lieutenant Ayala darkened the entrance. On his side came a pale, slender man with intense black eyes, his dark hair slicked back from his wide forehead.
A fleeting glance at his face nearly stopped Sheridan’s heart.

“Brother Edward!” he gasped. “But... but you are dead!”

“How is this possible?” Janeway asked in surprise. “This is the first time that we’ve found anyone’s equivalent in this universe.”

“From a different species, though,” Tom Paris pointed out.

“True; but strangely enough, both Mr. Suder and the one who had become Brother Edward, were murderers,” Janeway reminded them. “I wonder if there will be more such parallels.”

“We should hope not,” Seven of Nine declared coolly. “Two alternate versions of the same person, present in the same universe at the same time, would lead to catastrophic cascade failure, causing both individuals to die; the closer the two universes are to each other, the faster and more brutal the failure. We are fortunate that this Brother Edward was already dead when we arrived.”

“But if he was a murderer, how could a religious order have accepted him as one of their members?” Harry Kim asked. “Forgiveness is one thing; hiding a murderer, even a rueful one, is a different cup of tea.”

“He was not the same person as before,” Tuvok explained. “He had been tried and sentenced and undergone the death of personality for his crimes, and started his life anew in the service of society, with a clean slate.”

“What is this... this death of personality?” Janeway asked with an impatient little gesture of her hand.

“The local alternative to death sentence or life imprisonment,” Tuvok, of course, had already found the time to make himself familiar with the Earth Alliance laws and regulations. As chief of security, it was his job to know such things. “Basically, the mind of the guilty offender is erased of all memory, and then a more convenient one is left in its absence.”

“That is... barbaric!” Harry whispered in horror.

“Actually, it is considered a preferable alternative, as it does not present an unnecessary financial burden on the populace as imprisonment would,” Tuvok replied.

Tom Paris pulled a face. As one who had experience with imprisonment, he was probably best suited to form an opinion.

“I for my part would prefer the death penalty to having my mind wiped clean and becoming a mindless drone,” he said; then, with a glance in Seven’s direction, he added. “No offence intended.”

“None taken,” she replied, completely unruffled. “Borg drones are not mindless, after all. Just efficient. Very efficient.”

Apparently, the wipe does not necessarily erase the memories as much as deeply submerge them, so an experienced telepath can ‘reactivate’ the old memories,” Tuvok continued, before an argument could break out between Tom and Seven.”Which is obviously what happened to the late Brother Edward. The family of one of his victims hired a telepath to break the blockade – and then murdered him.”

“Weren’t it funny if the murderer were also sentenced to this death of personality farce and ended up in the same religious order?” Tom asked cynically.
Tuvok very meaningfully did not say anything, his face carefully expressionless. Which was clue enough to Tom to make the right conclusions. He took a sharp breath.

“No,” he said, perplexed. “It didn’t really happen... did it?”

“Indeed, that is exactly what happened, according to Mr. Garibaldi,” Tuvok replied simply.

Tom shook his head in bewilderment.

“These people are sick,” he said. “Not only have they come up with the worst possible punishment, but it doesn’t even work!”

“On the contrary, Mr. Paris,” Tuvok replied. “In most cases it does work rather efficiently.”

Tom gave him a look of utter disbelief. “Are you saying that you condone such barbaric practices?”

“No,” Tuvok said dryly. “I only said that it is usually effective. But again, inhumane methods usually are.”

There was a short, uncomfortable silence, until Harry shifted positions.

“I wonder what Brother Theo is gonna say, should he meet our Mr. Suder,” he mused. “I heard he had loved Brother Edward like a son. I hope he doesn’t get a heart attack.”

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Sitting in what had once been her father’s office and was now her workroom, the Lady Timov, born of House Alghul and now the wife of one of the most powerful noblemen on Centauri Prime, stared at the computer seen with the frozen image of one Vir Cotto unblinkingly. The young aide had asked, no, begged her in his recorded – and no doubt carefully phrased and rehearsed – message to come to Babylon 5 and keep Londo from “falling into darkness”, as he had put it.

In the solitude of her workroom, Timov allowed herself a very un-ladylike snort. In her opinion Londo had been in the darkness, one way or another, since his first visit to the Palace. Not that she would phrase it like that, of course. She was not one prone to needless dramatics.

Dramatics aside, however, she could see that Londo’s aide was genuinely concerned. Frightened, even; and that made her think. Appearances notwithstanding, Vir Cotto was a brave soul. Braver than most, in fact; who else could have spent years in Londo’s service and still keep a certain level of decency. Or innocence, almost. That was an extremely rare trait among Centauri males of a certain standing.

Or among females, for that matter.

She also knew that Vir was deeply loyal to Londo and would go great lengths for him. She might not understand it, but it was a fact nonetheless. So, if Vir was concerned enough to contact her, of whom he was justifiably terrified, something very bad must have been going on with Londo. Something even worse than usual.

Something that had thrown him off-balance to an extent that he might do something extraordinarily foolish.

Or dangerous.

Or both.
Oh, she had heard about his infatuation with that little slave girl from Davo, what was her name again? Adela... no, Adira. Adira Tyree. The ridiculous old fool had fallen for a pretty face and nearly ruined his entire House as a result. And yet he had played his connections to help the girl gain her freedom from the criminal she’d been indentured to. Even gave her the brooch of his mother – a family heirloom that, by right, should have gone to his wife.

To one of his wives anyway.

Yes, Timov knew all about this. All three of Londo’s then-wives had known. The Palace had its spies on Babylon 5, naturally, and Daggair used to keep track of all the gossip. So yes, they had all known.

The other two had been furious. Timov had simply shrugged it off as another proof for Londo’s lack of proper judgement. It hadn’t been the first time that he’d feel head over heel for a dancer at first sight. The first time had nearly prevented their marriage. She wished it had; but alas, the families had smoothed things over.

At least he hadn’t married this Adira on the spot. But he must have fallen for her very hard, if her death sent her on such a relentless path of vengeance against Lord Refa.

Yes, Timov knew that Londo blamed Lord Refa for Adira’s death. She might not be interested in politics, but now that Londo’s star was finally rising, people started to become interested in her. Mostly clients, of course, hoping that she would put in a word for them by Londo; she had learned to recognize them by sight and refused to even speak to them.

But she couldn’t refuse to see somebody like Minister Durano of the Ministry of Intelligence. And Durano, for reasons she couldn’t quite fathom, saw it necessary to tell her about Adira’s death, about Londo’s suspicion of Lord Refa’s involvement – and that Emperor Cartagia had ordered an investigation to learn the truth.

What the truth might be, the Minister hadn’t told her. But the mere fact that the Emperor had taken an interest filled her hearts with dread. And now that news of Lord Refa’s death and supposed treachery had reached Centauri Prime, she was getting positively frightened – for the first time in her life.

Because, regardless of whether Lord Refa had arranged Adira’s death, there could be little doubt that Londo had a hand in arranging his. Under that cheerful, clownish surface Londo could be terrifyingly ruthless in purchasing his goals.

Perhaps Vir was right. Perhaps she should go to Babylon 5 and try to stop Londo before he managed to destroy his entire House – including her and their wards – in his obsessive pursuit of his agenda, whatever that might be.

And when she was going to go anyway, she could take care of another problem close to their House at the same time.

“Computer,” she said, removing the data crystal containing Vir’s message, “give me a connection to the house of Lord Tavastani. I need to speak with Lady Drusella.”*

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As always, the little black ship shaped like an arrowhead and capable of things most people couldn’t even imagine, slipped through the sensor net of Babylon 5 unnoticed. It entered the docking bays alongside a Drazi transport ship and took up position in its usual little niche, shielded from both the dock workers and the scanners of the security people.
Invisibility was something technomage technology was very good at.

For the time being, Galen decided to remain aboard his ship. He had a great deal of thinking and planning to do, now that he’d reassured himself that Mr. Morden had indeed returned to Z’ha’dum, using a ridiculously roundaway route that couldn’t have fooled a blind cow.

Assuming that said blind cow had technomage technology at its disposal, of course.

In any case, all forces involved were now moving into the same direction. The great confrontation was right before them. Galen could see the pattern clearly, although he doubted that the people involved could see it for themselves.

Being a technomage, even an exiled one, did have its perks. It had enabled him to visit the Great Machine on Epsilon 3, long before that old Minbari would become its guardian, and to study the possible futures.

The Great Machine had not been built by and for the younger races. It had been built by a nameless race of the Old Ones, and its first guardians had been Taratimude – the very race the first technomages came from. It still had a particular sensitivity towards the order, which had enabled Galen to interface with it in the first place, despite being human and lacking the telepathic gene... even against the will of the alien who had been its guardian at that time.

The connection with the Great Machine had allowed him to realize what his role would be in the great pattern that was forming. That he would have to carefully intervene from time to time, to help certain events along and to prevent others from happening, to ensure that the future wouldn’t be changed.

He had accepted the gargantuan task, even though it meant going into exile. Now, however, a bit of a lull promised to last for a short time, therefore he could afford to rest for a while. Not for long, of course. Moments of rest were always short. But he intended to put this one to good use as long as he could.

Chapter End Notes

*Yes, I know that canonically Lyndisty’s family name is meant to be Drusella. I just don’t buy it, and here are the reasons:
1) It doesn’t sound like a typical Centauri surname.
2) It sounds like most female given names.
3) If “Lady Drusella” were a surname, Lady Morella should have been addressed as “Empress Turhan”, Lady Ladira as “Lady Kiro”, and all three of Londo’s wives as “Lady Mollari”. Which they weren’t.
4) The usual address seems to be Lord+ surname for a nobleman and Lady + given name for a noblewoman. So I chose a military character from the CD-Rom as Lyndisty’s father (since he was a high-ranking officer), and made her and her mother members of House Tavastani. That is my story and I stuck to it. *g*
PART 13

Whatever similarity Voyager’s infamous Crewman Suder might have had with Brother Edward, it was strictly on the surface, Sheridan found, while he was explaining the man what they expected his help with. Or rather, Lon Suder probably had a lot in common with the person Brother Edward used to be, before his original personality had been wiped out.

The Black Rose killer.

And while “Brother Edward” was admittedly an artificial construct, created using one of the several templates available for such cases, at least he had been pleasant and likeable and harmless. The man currently sitting across Sheridan was dangerous and unpredictable.

Especially as he was an alien. One that looked deceivingly human and – according to the Starfleet people – was even genetically fully compatible with humans; but still an alien.

Estimating the danger a human psychopath could represent was hard enough. Making an educated guess how an alien psychopath might react to a provocation was near impossible. Especially an alien psychopath with strong telepathic abilities, belonging to a race Sheridan had never met before.

He was walking a fine line here. A very fine line.

To his credit, Suder was clearly aware of the risk he represented. Had he not asked to be kept isolated for the rest of the crew, as a pre-emptive measure? And he was very open with Sheridan, too.

“I feel that I must warn you, Captain,” he said in the soft, cultured voice of Brother Edward; it was positively eerie. “The treatment and the meditative training I have been receiving from Mr. Tuvok since my latest... episode have helped me to temper my aggressions to a certain extent, but I am in no way fully healed. Perhaps I will never be. The contact with the mind of a ruthless murderer and a terrorist might cause a severe setback. I might lose control and murder them. There are no guarantees. I am dangerous. Extremely so.”

“I understand that,” Sheridan replied. “If you’re afraid that helping us would ruin your chances to heal, I’ll understand that, too. You’re not obliged to do this. We can call for a Minbari telepath. It will take some time, but...”

“But time is exactly what is an issue here, isn’t it?” Suder interrupted. “Lives are at stake... many lives, right?”

Sheridan nodded. "A quarter million on the station alone. More who are not here but depend on us.”

“Then you cannot afford to wait,” Suder said. “I’ll do it. I want to help. But Captain, I don’t want to kill more people. Not even criminals, who would deserve to die. Promise me one thing: have somebody with a gun outside the door and have me shot, should I lose control.”

Perhaps he wasn’t so different from Brother Edward, after all.
“But how could we hope to interfere in time if you choose to kill somebody telepathically?” Sheridan asked.

Suder shook his head. “I can’t do that... or, at least, I don’t think so. And even if I could, it isn’t so easy as people might think. I can’t simply make somebody die via mental order, and I’m not sure any other telepaths can; and even those few who might be capable of such things, couldn’t do so without special training. No; if I lose it, I’ll try to throttle these guys, or bash them over the head with a chair or something. Your people will have ample time to shoot me.”

“Is it truly what you want?” Sheridan asked.

Suder nodded. “This is my only condition, Captain. I would rather die than become again who – what – I once was.”

“All right, then,” Sheridan said after a lengthy pause. “I’ll inform Mr. Garibaldi about our agreement. Some of his men are awfully fast with a gun. And thank you for taking such risks for us.”

Suder nodded again. “You are welcome, Captain. I am glad to be of assistance.”

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Kes checked the readouts of the control panel connected to the regeneration tank before taking the lone seat next to Chakotay and saw in relief that everything was in perfect working order. From Voyager’s crew, only she and Ensign Crisa Jurot, a Betazoid, could bear to stay with the commander for more than a few minutes. The sight was too unnerving for everyone else.

Only telepaths could actually sense Chakotay’s presence in the deep artificial coma in which he was kept for the sake of a more speedy recovery. To everyone else – just like to Dr. Hobbs – he seemed quite dead. And, unlike Dr. Hobbs, the others didn’t have the medical background to interpret the readouts – or to believe them.

Like most other people aboard Voyager – with the possible exceptions of Lieutenant Rollins, who still seemed to hold grudges against the ex-Maquis in general and against Chakotay in particular – Kes hoped that the commander would make a full recovery. She liked the soft-spoken executive officer – even though one could see flashes at times that explained why he’d been called the Angry Warrior among his peers – and she knew many would be devastated by his loss.

Not only the former Maquis, either. She knew she would miss him greatly, too.

But first and foremost she wished Chakotay a quick and full recovery for Dr. Hobbs’s sake. She could literally feel the bond between them growing stronger with each passing day, and it made her worry what would happen to Dr. Hobbs, should Voyager find a way back to their own universe.

She also wondered if Dr. Hobbs was aware of her own state of elogium – and if not, should she be made aware of it? Kes usually preferred not to interfere with the private life of her crewmates, and Dr. Hobbs wasn’t even one of them. Still, she had a certain responsibility here; one she did not want to shirk. Perhaps she should talk to Dr. Hobbs when the lovely doctor next came off-duty to sit with Chakotay.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a powerful telepathic call...actually, not as much a call as a summoning. At first she was confused. The only one aboard Voyager she’d been in telepathic contact with was Tuvok, and it didn’t felt like the Vulcan. It was older, much older, utterly alien – and it clearly came from outside Voyager.

Now that she had spotted the origins of the call, she could also identify the “voice”: it was the alien
ship, the strange, disturbingly alive ship of the cruel Vorlon ambassador, with whom she’d had that unpleasant encounter in the docking bay. The ship was calling out to her again, and before she’d have realized what she was doing, her feet were already carrying her away from Sickbay on their own.

She’d almost reached the trap door in Voyager’s belly when she came to her senses and stopped. This was a bad idea. Last time she’d given in to the lure of the call, she nearly died. Only the fact that the Vorlon hadn’t been prepared for such a powerful reaction from her side had saved her life.

This time the Vorlon would be prepared. This time she wouldn’t have the advantage of the surprise on her side. This time it could end badly for her.

And yet she could not resist. That first contact with the sentient ship had thrown the floodgates of her mind wide open; she had continued to grow in mental strength ever since. Tuvok’s mundane exercises, the pitiful little tricks Thanis had shown her... they had been child’s play compared with what she could do now; and she could feel deep within her very core that this was just the beginning.

She was growing so fast she was sometimes afraid she would burn up in the process. At the same time, though, she knew that this was meant to happen. That she was meant to outgrow her current form of existence and become... she wasn’t really sure what she would become.

She only knew that this was a natural evolvement for her kind. Something that had been blocked when her people had become utterly dependent on the Caretaker and stopped using their abilities.

She was already well beyond that phase. She’d outgrown Thanis and the others, trapped in their own bodies by Suspiria’s well-meant but poorly executed attempts to help them along the path of their natural evolution. She was reaching the end of her short path of corporeal existence, ready to ascend to the next level.

She could not do it without help, though. Her people had long forgotten how to shed their cocoon. But the ship... the ship had recognized her as a being on the verge of such fundamental change and nudged her along.

Perhaps the Vorlons themselves had to go through such phases a long time ago. Perhaps their youths would still do so... if there were any youths among them still. Perhaps the ship was a symbiotic life form, whose function – or one of its functions – had once been to help such transformations along. Perhaps that was why the ship – the spaceborne creature – kept calling out to her.

And she knew she would follow the summoning. By now, she had no choice. The changes had already begun – the only possible way was forward. She could not remain stuck between then and now. The Vorlon would just have to deal with it.

Climbing down the ladder that led to the docking bay floor nimbly, Kes crossed the distance between Voyager and the Vorlon ship... and waited.

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Watching the scene via his magic bauble on board of his cloaked ship, Galen was shocked – to put it mildly. This was a possibility he had never taken under consideration. To his knowledge, no Vorlon
ship had ever sought contact to any other being than its own master; in fact, they only ever tolerated other people – even other Vorlons – when expressly ordered by their masters.

Oh, not the huge battle cruisers or the enormous planetkillers, of course. Those were merely machines. Built by using organic technology, for sure, yet without a mind of their own.

But the little ships, the personal vessels they were different. They were bound to one master alone and lived and died with that one master. And yet Ulkesh’s ship had reached out to Voyager’s little pixy, in spite of its master’s violent reaction at the first time.

What might have made it do so?

Galen admitted that his order didn’t know a shard of what they would have liked to know about Vorlons. The Vorlons despised the technomages because of their origins and gave them little to no credit for having freed themselves from the yoke of their creators. For the Vorlons, they were all tainted by the Shadows, and therefore suspect at best.

The Elders, however, feared that when it came to the final confrontation, the Vorlons would make no difference between them and the true Shadow Servants. They were a race grown rigid with age and self-righteousness; narrow-minded in pursuing what they thought would be the right path – the only right path. The Circle did not want to be eradicated, just because the Vorlons weren’t sure about them and chose to play safe.

Which was why the Order had decided to go into hiding in the first place. Why they looked at Galen’s contacts with the outside world disfavourably. They could not hope to be treated well by either side, so they saw no reason to put themselves at risk.

Galen and Alwyn were free spirits who dared to disagree. But that also meant that they were on their own, with no hope for help from the others. New allies would have been helpful, but so far they hadn’t found anyone strong enough to stand by them.

Not even now. As amazing as the girl’s evolving was, she was only one person. One not from this universe and not even in the fullness of her power yet. Galen found it interesting to watch her, but he would never risk her for his own purposes. Not without a real chance to win, that is.

Besides, he had already chosen a different path; a more promising one. There were no guarantees, of course – there never were – but it was promising, and at least he was on his own playground with the involuntary, telepathic cyborgs.

He closed his hands around the bauble, making it darken, and rose from his seat in determination. It was time to set his own chess pieces into movement.

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Malcolm Biggs wasn’t particularly concerned about the outcome of his interrogation. He’d been patched up after his unexpectedly violent encounter with Susan, given some industrial strength painkillers and a decent meal, and now he was waiting for his questioning with dark amusement.

They would get nothing out of him. He’d been specially trained to fool any investigations and even equipped with the 23rd-century equivalent of a cyanide capsule, in case Sheridan and his cronies would choose to have him tortured for information.

He didn’t really think they would, though. For a professional soldier, Sheridan was way too queasy to order another human being being tortured or killed in cold blood. That stupid, old-fashioned chivalry of his would play right into Malcolm’s hands.
They would probably send in some sorry alien excuse of a telepath, together with the questioner, to try and find the information they wanted in his head. Well, they could try till they turned blue. He had very firm blocks set up by a P12, for just such cases, and several layers of fake information spread above them.

They would get exactly what EarthGov wanted them to believe.

And if they did choose to use torture after all, Malcolm would not hesitate to use his poison capsule. His life, especially without Susan in it, was irrelevant. Only the case counted: to break the resistance of Babylon 5 and bring it back under the control of Night Watch, where it belonged.

And if a few hundred aliens died in the process, that was only an added bonus.

The door opened now, and in came Sheridan in that ridiculous new uniform of Minbari design that made him look like an employee of a funeral institute, followed by a man in a black jumpsuit. A jumpsuit with a yellow shoulder part and some sort of rank insignia on the collar.

That would be their resident telepath, then. Strange; Malcolm had been informed that Babylon 5 had no officially assigned telepath at the moment. The sleeper agent had been revealed and recalled to Earth, and not yet replaced. Nor would she; not before Earth had taken Babylon 5 back.

Sure, the rogue Lyta Alexander had been coming in and out for a while. But she was a mere P5; and besides, she worked for the Vorlons now. So where had Sheridan gotten this creepy guy from? Another rogue perhaps?

“Not in the way you think, Mr. Biggs,” the man said softly; there was something in his cold, black eyes that made Malcolm shiver.

“Let’s not waste time with idle chit-chat, shall we?” Sheridan asked rhetorically, taking the seat opposite Malcolm; Creepy Guy took the free chair on his left. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. You can tell me what I want to know, or Mr. Suder here will take it directly from your head. It’s your choice; so choose wisely.“

“I won’t tell you anything,” Malcolm replied with an arrogant sneer. “And unless your lapdog is a P12 or stronger, he won’t get anything from me, either.”

He needed to fake some resistance to plant the false information convincingly. It was a somewhat risky method, but he’d been trained thoroughly.

“Well, I don’t know,” Sheridan mused. “Are you stronger than a human telepath rated P12, Mr. Suder?”

“I really cannot tell, Captain,” answered the teep amiably. “We don’t use the same specifications on Betazed. But I’m ranking fairly high among my own people... we’ll just have to see, won’t we?”

Malcolm began to sweat profusely. He’d never heard of a planet named Beta Zed, but it was obvious now that Creepy Guy was an alien, despite his looks. He’d never heard of an alien race that would look so completely human, either – save for those cold, dark reptile eyes, that is.

The teep was probably somebody from the Earth ship of the parallel universe. If he was, then there was no way to tell what he’d be capable of. All of a sudden, Malcolm became very nervous. He sought his poison capsule with he tip of his tongue, just in case.

“Oh no, you won’t!” said the teep, coldly amused, and to his infinite horror, Malcolm realized that he couldn’t move his jaw to bit the capsule open.
Was the guy telekinetic as well?

“No, I’m not,” the teep said, reading him like an open book. “I’ve simply interrupted the neural impulses between your brain and your facial muscles.” He glanced at Sheridan. “Captain, I believe questioning him would lead nowhere. He’s ready to commit suicide rather than tell you anything. I suggest we simply go in and take what we need. It will spare us a lot of time and any further mess.”

“Agreed,” Sheridan turned to Malcolm. “Well, Mr. Biggs? Last chance to change your mind.”

Malcolm wasn’t in the position to speak, but his hateful glare told everything Sheridan needed to know.

“As you wish,” he glanced at the alien teep again. “He’s all yours, Mr. Suder. We’re going in.

The teep nodded and locked eyes with Malcolm, who could feel his layers of false information peeled away casually, one by one. And then his thought-to-be failsafe blockades began to crumble like dried clay.

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“So, what have you learned?” asked Neroon two hours later, when they gathered in the War Room again.

“A great deal of really bad news about certain circles of EarthGov collaborating with the Shadows; about secret EarthForce facilities using Shadow technology to update their ships; about the role PsiCorps might or might not have played in all of this,” Sheridan replied grimly. “Unfortunately, very little of what could be of immediate use for us against the Shadows. “

“Like what?” asked Garibaldi impatiently.

Sheridan shrugged. “The location of a few minor Shadow bases. The number of EarthForce destroyers equipped with Shadow technology. The fact that the shipment of frozen telepaths we’ve intercepted with Bester’s help was the first and so far only group of modified people sent to the Shadows... well, that part is of real importance, meaning that they still don’t have the means to break a telepathic blockade. But mostly just things relevant for the Earth Alliance.”

“Well, it was worth a try,” commented Garibaldi. “We might need that information later – who knows?”

“True; but I’m more concerned about the immediate risks,” Sheridan said. “We are at the verge of the greatest war of our millennium and frankly, we’re seriously outgunned and outnumbered,” he looked at Neroon. “Any word from the Warrior Caste?”

The captain of the Ingata shook his head apologetically.

“I’m afraid that the Warrior Caste still does not believe that the Sher’shok Dum, the ancient enemy, has indeed returned in strength,” he said.

“So I have been told,” Sheridan glanced briefly in Delenn’s direction. “Let me be blunt, Alyt Neroon: do you believe us?”

Neroon inclined his head in grudging respect.

“What I have learned from Anla’shok Cole, and what Rastenn had learned from Lennier about he ancient prophecies, make me willing to believe that it is so,” he admitted. “But Shakiri is Shai Alyt now, and he believes otherwise.”
“Shakiri is a coward and a fool, drunk with power, who would cause our entire race to fall under Shadow rule, rather than admit that we all have to unite our strength to escape,” Delenn snapped in annoyance.

“Nonetheless, he is a legendary warrior who commands great respect among our Caste,” Neroon returned. “He’s been elected as Shai Alyt by the majority of the Warriors...”

“... because you were Satai at that time and therefore not available,” Delenn interrupted.

“The reason matters not,” Neroon said. “He has been elected, and he is our Caste leader. I cannot go against his orders – that would be treason – and I cannot counteract his orders, either. I no longer have the sufficient authority. Not since you dissolved the Grey Council.”

Delenn paled but accepted the blame nonetheless. It was only justified, and every Minbari knew it.

“So you choose to do nothing?” she then asked.

“I didn’t say that,” Neroon replied. “I’ve already sent word to Shakiri that I will take the Ingata out on patrol, to see if there is any truth in the statements of the Religious Caste. If we get into a fight with the Shadows, I cannot be blamed for that; and if I can bring back proof of their return, that might be enough to force Shakiri’s hand.”

“We can’t be entirely sure about that, though, right?” Sheridan asked.

“No, we cannot,” Neroon admitted freely. “But this is the best I can offer.”

“Then it is fortunate that I can offer something better,” Delenn rose from her seat. “Meet me at the docking bay in an hour. I’ve got something to show you – both of you.”

A little less than an hour later, they were all on the bridge of the White Star – sans Garibaldi, that is, who had another problem of station security to solve – which was speeding through hyperspace. Neroon and Rastenn had been given the grand tour previously and were still amazed by the fast yet powerful little ship.

Sheridan, on the other hand, was impatient and morose.

“I wish you would tell me what this is all about, Delenn!” he complained – not for the first time since they had left Babylon 5.

Delenn just smiled mysteriously. “It’s a surprise.”

“I wouldn’t press her,” Neroon advised. “That never worked. Se was always good at hiding her true agendas.”

There was something in his voice that spoke of a long history between the two of them, but Sheridan wisely decided not to ask. Not yet anyway.

He kept nagging Delenn instead. “Give me a little hint at least!”

Delenn rolled her eyes. “Oh, all right, if you really cannot wait a moment longer... Now that we know what the Shadows have in mind, we have an advantage for the first time. We can rally all the other races, prepare to launch a major counterattack!”

“Good luck finding enough suicidal fools!” commented Neroon dryly.
Delenn ignored him, speaking to Sheridan instead. “I thought you might like to know what resources you have; since you seemed so worried about being outnumbered and outgunned.” She turned to the helmsman and spoke in Adronato, “Zu! Dahbi!”

The young man in the white Religious Caste robes nodded wordlessly and the White Star jumped back into normal space. Delenn led Sheridan from his chair to the window; Neroon and Rastenn followed them without invitation.

“Take a look!” she encouraged them.

Sheridan and the two Warriors looked out and saw – the White Star.

And the White Star.

And… they could barely catch their breath. Left, right, above, below, there were rank upon rank of duplicates of the ship they were currently riding.

“There are hundreds of them!” Rastenn exclaimed in awe. “Hundreds of White Stars!”

Delenn nodded. “The White Star was never intended to be one of a kind. It was only the first. We’ve been working around the clock to construct them.”

“You said you needed time to prepare,” Sheridan said, dazed. “This is why, isn’t it?”

Delenn nodded again, standing tall and proud. “The first wave of ships is finished at last! The Rangers will pilot them under our shared command. We are as ready for them as we will ever be! We finally have, as you say, a fighting chance!”

Sheridan was clearly thrilled beyond words. He looked from Delenn out to his new fleet, then back to her again.

“I don’t know what to say,” he admitted sheepishly.

Delenn raised a hand in a – for Minbari – shocking gesture of intimacy between two people not actually married (or at least officially courting) and caressed his cheek.

“Then say nothing,” she replied softly.

Neroon and Rastenn watched with ill-concealed discomfort as, with the White Star fleet behind them as backdrop, they embraced and exchanged a passionate, lingering kiss. In Minbari terms, such things counted as public indecency at best, and the way the crew was looking away from the two lovebirds it was clear that the Warriors weren’t the only ones uncomfortable with such blatant disregard of tradition.

As the kiss didn’t seem to end, Neroon cleared his throat pointedly.

“As the humans would say, get a room, you two! There’s no need to scandalize an otherwise loyal crew by making them watch actions that should be kept private.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I decided to keep Suder alive! He was an interesting character with great potential,
and it’s a crying shame that he was killed off so early on.
Part 14

Chapter Notes

The canon extensions to Minbari culture are borrowed from BanAduial’s excellent story, “A Minbari Courtship”.

I can’t imagine Janeway simply accepting the practice of death penalty, especially coming from what could be considered an unofficial source. As Sisko said in DS9, 24th century Earth of the Star Trek ‘verse is Paradise. It is easy to be merciful in Paradise. Babylon 5 is in a different situation.

You are free to disagree with me concerning the fate of the Ocampa, of course, but this is how I see it – and I have the right to form my own opinion, too. Since this is my story and all that.

PART 14

“So, what are you doing with Mr. Biggs and his co-conspirators, now that you’ve learned what you needed from them?” asked Captain Janeway on the next day.

She and Sheridan were having a stroll in The Garden, as the hollow interior of the rotating section of Babylon 5 was called, where a great deal of the local food was produced. It was very different from the airponics bay of Voyager; one could almost believe that one was on the surface of an M-class planet.

“In the case of Mr. Biggs and Officer Bruton, the case is clear,” Sheridan answered absently. “For treason stands the death penalty; and since we can’t hope that EarthGov would agree with us about it, we’ll simply toss them out of an airlock. As for the others, we’ll put them on a transport ship and send them through the Io jumpgate, with a message to NightWatch that they can pick their trash up if they want to.”

“You’re going to have two men killed in cold blood?” Janeway was appalled and didn’t even try to hide it.

“Not killed; executed,” Sheridan corrected. “Malcolm Biggs already tried to have several of the alien ambassadors assassinated two years ago; here in Babylon 5 as well as back on Earth. And Jack Bruton not only worked for Clark all the time, including when President Santiago was murdered, but also tried to kill his commanding officer – that would be Mr. Garibaldi, by the way – and very nearly succeeded.”

“But have they truly committed treason against the Earth Alliance?” Janeway argued. “I’m told that Mr. Biggs was a high-ranking member of a militant pro-Earth group. I agree with you that violent xenophobia is a dangerous thing and should not be encouraged, but it is clearly aimed at aliens, not against Earth itself. I’ve studied the Earth Alliance laws and regulations, and I’m sorry but I’m not buying this.”

Sheridan rolled his eyes. “Must you always be so obnoxious? Ever since you’ve arrived, you’ve
done nothing but questioning whatever I do. What is your problem with me?”

“My problem is that you’ve put yourself above the law,” Janeway replied. “You’ve created your own little empire here, made yourself jury, judge and executioner, without asking the quarter million people living on Babylon 5, just because you thought you were right.”

“Just as you did when you trapped your ship and your crew, half of which weren’t even your crew at the time, in an unknown corner of the galaxy, seventy thousand light years from home?” Sheridan retorted mercilessly. “Oh yes, Captain, I’ve studied your log entries, too, and I don’t think you really have the right to throw stones. You’re living in a glass house yourself.”

“That was different,” Janeway said defensively. “I did it to save the Ocampa!”

“And did you really save them?” asked Sheridan coldly. “Were they not dependant on the very Array you’ve blown up? Did you stay to help them find an alternate energy source? No? Then you’ve no right to judge me. I’m only going to have two dangerous criminals executed. You sentenced an entire species to death by leaving them behind, helpless and unprotected.”

For a moment it seemed as if Janeway would hit him. But in the end she just turned around and stormed off.

“That,” Delenn said, emerging from the Japanese stone garden, “was unnecessarily cruel.”

“I know,” Sheridan admitted ruefully. “I couldn’t help it, though. Her judgemental, self-righteous, know-it-all attitude drives me crazy. Besides, it is true.”

“Perhaps,” Delenn allowed. “Not all truths must be spoken out loud, though. Sometimes telling the truth may cause more damage than it does good.”

Sheridan shrugged. “I don’t believe in lies. Yeah, sometimes they are inevitable, but not between people who are supposed to trust each other.”

To that Delenn apparently had no answer. But there was a thoughtful expression on her face that Sheridan could not explain.

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“Regeneration cycle complete,” the computer announced.

Seven of Nine opened her eyes, stepped out of her regeneration chamber and walked over to the console installed in Cargo Bay 2 for her personal use. She checked on her search program running through the Babylon 5 database, looking for any clues on techno-mages in general and a man named Galen in particular – and frowned in displeasure.

Apparently, her latest search had come up without any new results. Just like the previous ones.

“You won’t find anything there that would tell you what you want,” a precisely accentuated tenor voice said from somewhere behind her back.

She whirled around, taking up a defensive stance instinctively.

“Show yourself!” she demanded.

She hated no longer being superior to fully organic beings. She hated no longer being part of a greater unit. It made her vulnerable, and vulnerability was not acceptable.
“As you wish,” a black-clad figure emerged from the shadows. Two strong, white hands folded back a wide black hood, revealing the semi-familiar face of the man she was trying to learn more about.

“Greetings, Seven of Nine, Tertiari Adjunct of Unimatrix Zero,” he said, clearly amused. “Since you’ve gone such lengths to find out more about me, I thought it would be only polite to drop by and give you some answers.”

She arched the eyebrow with the implant.

“You are offering free information?”

“Who said anything about free information?” Galen replied in unsmiling amusement. “Everything has its price... but not right now. Right now, I am suggesting an exchange of information.”

“About what?” she asked, not willing to make any promised.

“What, exactly, do you believe I need to know about you?” Seven asked doubtfully.

“That we are very similar, you and me,” Galen answered. “Our technology is based on biomechanical implants, just like yours. Which makes us basically cyborgs.”

“But you do not have a collective,” pointed out Seven. “You are alone; every single one of you.”

“Just like you,” Galen reminded her. “We do have an Order where we learn our trade, and The Circle that leads us and lays down the law for us, but otherwise we are allowed to keep our individuality.”

“You cannot be very efficient on your own,” Seven said. “Without having the others in your head you are severely limited.”

“Oh, you would be surprised just how efficient I can be when I put my mind to it, despite the comparative crudeness of my implants,” Galen removed his coat, then opened the dark purple tunic he wore underneath, to show her the biomechanical parts embedded into the skin of his back.

They seemed fairly crude indeed, compared with Borg implants.

“They must be uncomfortable,” commented Seven. “They don’t even fuse with the organic parts of your body seamlessly.”

“The implanting process is excruciatingly painful,” Galen admitted, putting his clothes back on. “So is adjusting to them. I hoped that by studying Borg technology I might be able to improve both.”

“That is a strong possibility,” Seven allowed. “But why should I be inclined to share our technology with you? You said everything has its price. What would I get in exchange?”

“A new collective,” Galen answered simply. “One in which you won’t be just one of countless drones but the very nexus of the entire network.”

If Seven was surprised by the offer, she gave no sign of it.

“Give me details,” was all she said.
Meanwhile in Sickbay, Lillian Hobbs was in deep professional discussion with Voyager’s holographic chief medical officer. This time, though, it wasn’t about Chakotay but about Marcus Cole.

“I have no doubt that he’d recover on his own, eventually,” she explained. “But as things appear right now, he might be sent off on some dangerous mission any time, soon. I’d prefer if he went fully healed; that would enhance his survival chances.”

“You can always file an official request to Captain Janeway,” the EMH suggested.

Lillian pulled a face. “I could. But seeing how she is mad at Captain Sheridan right now, she might refuse. I’d prefer not to risk that.”

“I cannot go against her orders,” the EMH reminded her. “Even if I were inclined to do so, my programming wouldn’t allow it.”

“Did she expressly forbid you to treat any of us?” Lillian asked.

“Not in so many words,” the EMH admitted reluctantly. “But she wasn’t very happy with us treating Ms Alexander and Mr. Cotto without asking her first. And in those cases we were at least backed by Commander Tuvok.”

“So you’re not forbidden to do it,” Lillian classified. “Which means that – theoretically – you can do it.”

“Theoretically, yes,” the EMH allowed. “The question is if I should.”

Lillian gave the hologram an unfriendly glare. “I’ve thought Starfleet doctors do swear a Hippocratic Oath, too. Or is that only true for the organic ones?”

“I didn’t need to swear that oath,” the EMH sniffed indignantly. “I was programmed with it!”

“Well, then I suggest that you follow your programming,” Lillian said snidely. “We’re about to face a far superior, ruthless enemy; we cannot afford to be less than fully prepared. And we cannot afford to wait until Captain Janeway finishes the debate with herself whether our actions are morally acceptable for her or not. We are on the verge of war, Doctor, and it will come to us, whether we want to fight or not.”

“I understand that,” said the EMH slowly, “but I was also informed that Captain Janeway doesn’t see this upcoming war of yours as our concern.”

“Then she is wrong,” Lillian returned. “The Shadows won’t stop to let Voyager pass, just because you’ve come from a different universe. I am fairly new to this knowledge myself, but the records I’ve seen are very clear: they destroy because they delight in chaos and destruction, and they’re not picky about whom they kill... unless they are stopped.”

“Very well,” the EMH rolled his holographic eyes very convincingly. “Send me that Mr. Cole of yours. I’ll see what we can do to make him fit again.”

“Thank you,” Lillian released the breath she hadn’t been aware she was holding. “Let me warn you, though: he’s a terrible patient. In fact, he can be positively nerve-wrecking.”

“Then I’ll assign Mr. Paris to the task,” replied the EMH blandly. “They’ll be a perfect match.”
To Lillian’s relief, the EMH kept his word; both in providing Marcus Cole with the necessary treatment and in assigning Lieutenant Paris to the task.

The latter turned out to be a stroke of genius, as Tom and Marcus had hit off instantly as soon as Voyager had arrived at Babylon 5 and had gone on like a house on fire ever since – mostly because they were both friends with Harry Kim. Harry had that effect on people; no matter how different they might have been, they became friendly, just because of him.

As soon as the Ranger arrived – hiding the pain any energetic movement caused him admirably but not well enough to conceal it from an experienced field medic – Harry and B’Elanna showed up as well. Tom didn’t mind; at least they kept his reluctant patient entertained during the not always pleasant process of bone knitting and dermal regeneration.

“Don’t worry,” B’Elanna said encouragingly. “It hurts like hell – unless you prefer to be sedated – but once it’s done, you’ll be as good as new.”

“The bone knitting device is a Klingon invention,” Harry added, grinning. “They do nothing by halves; they are highly efficient and impervious to pain.”

“Watch your loose mouth, Starfleet!” B’Elanna threatened him, only half-jokingly. “Or we’ll see how impervious you might be to pain.”

Marcus snickered – and then winced, as one of his barely healed ribs was righted and re-knit. It didn’t exactly hurt – not much, anyway – but it was a decidedly unpleasant feeling.

“Be careful, Harry,” he warned his friend. “Such threats would be considered part of the courting ritual among the Minbari Warrior Caste.”

Harry grinned. “They would? Well, perhaps Minbari and Klingons aren’t that different, after all. I certainly wouldn’t be adverse...”

B’Elanna gave them both a baleful look.

“In your dreams, Ranger,” she all but spat. “Or does this mean that you’re practically married to this Neroon character by now?”

Tom and Harry almost choked, seeing the horrified expression on Marcus’s face. It was hard to tell whether the mere idea was what terrified him so much, or that there might have been some truth in it. He was only tangentially familiar with Warrior Caste customs and now was starting to panic.

“Our customs don’t work that way,” another voice said, and Rastenn entered Sickbay, bowing in Tom’s direction. “Greetings, Hela’mer; I hope my presence isn’t unwelcome.”

Then he turned to B’Elanna. “While it is true that we Warriors often find our mates in battle, for a bond to be forged that way both parties ought to be interested in each other.”

“Let me guess: your uncle would never be interested in a lowly human,” Tom commented dryly. “Or do Minbari generally frown upon homosexuality?”

Rastenn blinked in confusion. “I’m afraid I am not familiar with that term.”

“Same-gender bonds,” Harry supplied, and Rastenn nodded in understanding.

“Ah, I see. No, that wouldn’t be a problem. We are a clan-based society, which means that – while
there is a primary set of parents, of course – the care of all children is the shared responsibility of the entire Clan. Consequently, the care of any orphaned children would fall to other couples within the Clan... and that can be a strain sometimes. That is why childless couples are often an asset to the Clan, in many ways.”

“So, basically, same-gender bonds are allowed?” B’Elanna asked.

Rastenn nodded. “They are not common, I’d admit; no more common than among humans. Perhaps even less. But we do not have any taboo on the subject as I have heard that humans once did.”

“What *would* be the problem, then?” Harry asked, ignoring Marcus’s murderous glare.

“The Alien Prohibition,” Rastenn answered; seeing their blank expressions, he explained. “According to our law, Minbari are not allowed to marry outside our species,” he gave B’Elanna a sideway glance. “Unfortunately.”

B’Elanna pretended not to have taken notice.

“And you guys just accept it?” Tom asked incredulously.

Rastenn shrugged. “It is our law. No-one has ever broken it.”

“Not even after you’ve been interacting with other species for millennia?” B’Elanna shook her head in disbelief. “I never thought you to be a bunch of sheep. Not the Warriors, at least.”

“It is their way, B’Elanna,” Marcus explained, much more relaxed now that the bone knitting was done (for the time being anyway), and Tom was now treating his healing wounds with a dermal regenerator.


Rastenn tried *not* to take offence. She was clearly upset on his – *their* – behalf, and he appreciated that, even though he didn’t understand *what* she had to be upset about.

“They don’t see it like that,” Marcus tried to explain. “In some aspects, Minbari are like a beehive. They live out their lives in the service of Caste of Clan, never straying outside the roles they have chosen at a certain age, never questioning the orders coming from their Caste of Clan leaders.”

“That is a rude simplification,” Rastenn protested.

Marcus nodded. “I know that; but this is the only way I can explain it to humans who have never lived among your people,” he turned back to the others. “Every single one of them functions in the safe knowledge that every other Minbari is in the proper place at the proper time.”

“*Everyone*?” Tom asked doubtfully. “Even Ambassador Delenn? Or Rastenn’s uncle? I find that a little hard to believe.”

“There are a few exceptions in each generation,” Rastenn admitted. “A small percentage of our people who are born with the ability to think outside of the pre-set raster. And since this ability is genetic, over time those families in which it is present have formed our ruling class. As one of the direct lines of the Warrior Clans, our family belongs to this minority.”

“And so is the family of Mir; the family of Delenn,” Marcus added.

Rastenn nodded. “So it is. The tensions you can sometimes see within our society, are mostly among
the leaders: Clan leaders, family heads, Caste leaders. The rest of our people – the common crowd as you would put it – simply accept that the leaders have examined the situation from various points of view, many of which they wouldn’t even understand, and then move on from there. They trust that their leaders will make the right decision for the good of the whole people, and in return they work to make the lives of said leaders easier, by performing the tasks at which they are individually most efficient.”

“Understanding is not required,” Marcus quoted. “Only obedience.”

“Quite literally so,” Rastenn agreed.

The two humans and one half-Klingon from the parallel universe shook their heads in bewilderment.

“I can’t understand how anyone can choose to live like that,” Tom said.

“We don’t choose it,” Rastenn corrected. “It is our nature, based on our biology. Due to the process of being reborn, we are all connected on some very deep level and, as a result, we are not physically capable of living any other way.”

“Not even your leaders?” Harry asked.

Rastenn shrugged. “The leaders serve in their own manner: by disputing over territory, over jurisdiction of power... anything that might affect the ones they are responsible for. No-one of us, leader or otherwise, would even consider abandoning their duties.”

“Does this mean you don’t get a divorce, either?” Tom asked.

Rastenn raised a disapproving eyebrow ridge.

“The mere concept of divorce is as alien to us as having hair on one’s head,” he said, suppressing a grin. “Minbari courtship is long and heavily ritualized and serves as an opportunity for the courting couple to make sure they have chosen well. Because once the imprinting has taken place, there won’t be any way to reverse it. We bond for life; in fact, it goes beyond that. In my entire life, I never heard of somebody remarrying after the death of their spouse.”

“That means you won’t even get a divorce?” Marcus asked.

Rastenn shook his head. “Not even then. Their marriage may no longer exist, but that doesn’t mean the husband would be free to form a new bond. Not because of the law; because he literally wouldn’t be able to do so. It is only possible if the imprinting has failed somehow... which happens, oh, once in ten generations.”

“Have you actually heard of such a thing to happen?” Marcus inquired, fascinated by the intricacies of Minbari life not even he’d known before.

Rastenn nodded. “It happened in my lifetime; within my own family, in fact. But I’m not allowed to say more. It is a deeply private matter.”

The others nodded in understanding. Dealing with Vulcans had taught humans to respect privacy a lot more than they would require among themselves.

“What about you, though?” Harry asked. “I got the feeling that Nidell wasn’t exactly your own choice.”

Rastenn hesitated for a moment. Discussing one’s courtship with outsiders was not the Minbari way,
but these aliens had honoured him with their friendship, so he might afford to be a bit more open with them.

“Choices are often helped along,” he finally said. “Matchmaking is a time-honoured tradition on Minbar, although the final decision is always ours. That’s what the long courtship is for,” he gave B’Elanna another sideways glance. “What are Klingon courtship rituals like?”

“I’m only half-Klingon,” she scowled. “And I don’t follow the stupid traditions of my mother’s people.”

“A shame, really,” Tom deadpanned. “Klingon courtship rituals are so extravagantly romantic, I’m told.”

“Yeah; the woman throws heavy objects at the man, while he recites love poetry,” Harry supplied, grinning.

“And ducks a lot,” Tom added, and they both dissolved in hilarity.

B’Elanna scowled at the fiercely, but that only made then laugh even harder. She clenched her fists to keep her temper under control.

“I see why you felt so uncomfortable playing Guinevere,” Marcus intervened hurriedly. “Next time we should do something more... martial on that holodeck of yours. What do you think, Rastenn?” he turned to the Minbari warrior. “Should we do a sparring demonstration with the denn’bok for them? They can create an illusion of any place we can describe in proper detail. Wouldn’t it be fun, fighting in the ancient arena of Tuzanor?”

“You are still healing,” Rastenn reminded him. “Haven’t you been beaten up by our family enough?”

“What makes you think you’ll be the one doing the beating up?” Marcus grinned at him.

Rastenn rolled his eyes. “I train with my uncle regularly, Anla’shok. You’ve seen what he is capable of; let me tell you, he doesn’t pull his punches when sparring with me, either.”

“I’m not challenging you to denn’sha,” Marcus replied. “Been there, done that, had enough for a lifetime. But I do need to build up my strength again, and the others might be interested in seeing how it is done on Minbar,” it was his turn now to glance at B’Elanna. “Perhaps you can show us how Klingons fight? I’m interested to learn new techniques, too.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harry said, before B’Elanna could have flat-out rejected it. “We could ask Vorik to show us some ancient Vulcan disciplines, too. He comes from an old family; I’m sure he was taught to wield the lirpa.”

“As long as he isn’t in the heat,” Tom muttered, but refused to explain the meaning of that to Marcus and Rastenn.

“I can call up one of the standard calisthenics programmes,” B’Elanna agreed reluctantly. “If any of you is man enough to fight mythical holographic monsters.”

“Excellent!” Marcus rubbed his hands in glee. “Just tell me when and where, and we’ll come, won’t we, Rastenn?”

The Minbari nodded. “My uncle and my bride might also have an interest, if it’s all right with you. Lennier probably too.”
“Oh, bring whomever you want; the more, the merrier!” Tom waved generously. “In fact, I might invite Vir; I guess he could use a little distraction, the poor sod.”

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Lillian Hobbs returned to the MedLabs in the middle of night watch and sought out her friend and colleague at once.

“Maya, do you have a moment?” she asked, looking troubled.

Dr. Hernandez nodded. “It’s been blessedly quiet for the last couple of hours. What’s bothering you, muchacha?”

Lillian glanced around to make sure no-one was within earshot.

“I need you to run a preliminary scan,” she said. “I think I might be pregnant.”

Maya Hernandez frowned. “Have you missed your shots?”

Lillian shook her head. “No; and that’s why I’m a little unsure. But they may have failed; or the fact that Chakotay is from a different reality might have played a role. I don’t really know.”

“What makes you think you might be pregnant anyway?” Dr. Hernandez asked. “Suffering from morning sickness already?”

“No,” Lillian answered thoughtfully. “But Voyager’s little pointy-eared sprite came to me while I was visiting Chakotay and told me she could feel a new life growing in me... and that I should know. You know she’s got some pretty unusual abilities, so I thought I’d check, just in case...”

“That’s only reasonable,” Dr Hernandez picked up a scanner and ran it over Lillian’s belly. “Well... you certainly have something in here. And if it isn’t a tumour, which I hope, it can only be a baby.”

“Are you sure?” Lillian didn’t know which one to hope for.

Maya Hernandez gave her a positively maternal smile.

“Let’s see what the deep tissue scanner says, shan’t we?” she said, closing the girdle-like arch over Lillian’s abdomen.

The machinery hummed quietly for a moment, and the image of... something appeared on the control screen. It was just a little cluster of cells; at most, it reminded a blackberry, both in shape and size.

“Oh, it’s a baby all right,” Dr Hernandez smiled. “Or rather something that will be a baby, eventually. According to these readings, it can’t be more than a few days old,” she gave Lillian a searching look. “Would that be a possibility?”

Lillian counted in her head – and then nodded.

“Yes, we spent the night together right before he was wounded,” she replied.

“I guess congratulations are in order, then,” Maya Hernandez said. “Unless... unless you don’t want to keep it. Do you?”

“I’m not sure,” Lillian admitted honestly. “I mean, I’d love to; I always wanted a baby, at least one, but the time was never right. First, I had to finish my studies, then the war with the Minbari broke out, then I got assigned to a deep space exploration ship and finally to Babylon 5... there was never enough time to meet a decent man, let alone date somebody. Not one I’d have wanted to have a child
with anyway.”

“And now?” asked the older woman gently.

Lillian shrugged. “If Chakotay were from our Earth, I wouldn’t hesitate for a moment; sometimes I have the feeling as if I’d been waiting for him all my life. But he’s not from our reality, and as compatible as we seem to be right now, there could be... complications later.”

Dr. Hernandez nodded in agreement. “That is certainly true. But you don’t have to make that decision just yet. You can wait at least six more weeks. We can watch the foetus for possible misdevelopment – and perhaps ask Voyager’s doctor for help. Their technology is a lot more sophisticated than ours.”


“Hologram or not, he’ll be bound to doctor-patient confidentiality, too,” Maya Hernandez reminded her. “Once we can be reasonably sure that the baby is healthy – or not – you’ll have a better basis for your decision to make.”

“I don’t think I’d be able to terminate the pregnancy if the foetus is healthy,” Lillian admitted. “Having this baby would not only fulfil an old dream of mine... it would also mean I’d have something of Chakotay when Voyager leaves.”

“Which raises another important question,” Maya Hernandez said. “Are you going to tell him? Once he comes out of that disgusting jelly bath, that is.”

Lillian shook her head determinedly. “No. He’d want to stay behind, for the sake of the child, even if the Great Machine could bring them home. He is that sort of guy. And I don’t want him to give up his entire life for us.”

“Shouldn’t that be his decision?” Dr. Hernandez asked gently. “What if he wants to give up it all for his family-to-be? For you and your child? It’s his child, too.”

“And that, exactly, is the problem,” Lillian said. “He would want to stay. He would want to raise our baby with me. He would consider it his duty, his responsibility.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” said Dr. Hernandez mildly.

“No, of course not,” Lillian agreed. “But I’m not his only responsibility. He’s got an elderly, widowed mother and nine siblings back home, one of whom is disabled and needs constant care. And there is an entire colony fighting for survival against an enemy that outnumbers and outguns them the same way we were outnumbered and outgunned by the Minbari. He is needed at home; he was one of the leaders of the resistance before ending up on the opposite end of the galaxy.”

“Which means that even if they do find a way home, they might spend decades getting back to Earth,” Maya Hernandez pointed out. “Decades that he could spend much better with raising his child instead.”

“And what if the Great Machine can deliver them directly back to Earth... to their Earth?” Lillian argued.

“Stop this!” Maya Hernandez said sternly. “You cannot base such a life-altering decision on what ifs. They can remain stuck here, or they can get back exactly where they’d come from, or they can be delivered directly to their Earth – what difference does it make? Fact is, you are pregnant with his
child, and he’s got the right to know it.”

“I will tell him,” Lillian answered defensively. “Just not right away. Not before we know whether the foetus is healthy or not.”

“Again: what difference does it make?” Dr Hernandez asked. “This is his child, too. Healthy or not, he has to be part of any decision you’re going to make. Or are you afraid he’d reject a damaged child?”

“No, of course not,” Lillian protested. “On the contrary. His youngest brother was born with Dawn’s Syndrome, and apparently, the family saw it as the most natural thing on the world to fully integrate the boy into the rest of the clan.”

“What is the problem then?” the other doctor asked.

“I’m not sure I can deal with a damaged child,” Lillian admitted ruefully. Maya Hernandez laid a supportive arm around her shoulders.

“But it seems to me that you wouldn’t have to deal with that hypothetically damaged child alone,” she said gently. “You should tell him, muchacha. It would ease your burden – and give him a reason to live. Even here.”

“I will,” Lillian promised. “Soon, I swear. But you must keep this to yourself at first, all right?”

“Muchacha,” Dr. Hernandez sighed. “I’m your doctor and your friend. I won’t breathe a word of this without your consent. Just don’t wait for the right time too long; you might miss it.”
Part 15.1

Chapter Notes

The kali-fe ceremony is based on the Classic!Trek episode “Amok Time” and on a similar scene in the TOS novel "Mind Meld", with the necessary modifications. The sparring match between Marcus and Rastenn is based on a similar scene in "A Minbari Courtship". The "dark fire of the soul" is, of course, fanon; if I remember correctly, it was Eirendel who came up with it.
This chapter has grown too long, so I had to break it in two.

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PART 15.1

The invitation to attend to a martial arts performance on Voyager’s holodeck came as a surprise for Vir. Sure, Lieutenant Paris had shown small signs of gratitude towards him ever since he’d stood up for the human, but those had been just that: small, private things. A bottle of excellent wine, a leather-bound journal made of thick, high-quality paper... things like that.

This, however, was an invitation that put him in the company of Alyt Neroon, Rastenn, Nidell and Lennier, aside from the Voyager crew. That, in itself, wouldn’t have bothered him. He got on with Minbari just fine. He was, however, wrecking his brain about the question how could he use this opportunity on Londo’s behalf.

Granted, with the death of Lord Refa Londo no longer needed an audience with the lady captain of Voyager so desperately. But it could still have been useful... had Londo been willing to listen to reason.

“You really should come, Londo,” he insisted.”It is an open invitation for all diplomatic personnel; accepting it would at least get your foot in the door.”

But Londo waved off his argument impatiently.

“Nonsense!” he announced. “I’m not some salesperson going from door to door, trying to sneak into the house and sell... what are those bizarre tools called? The ones humans clear their rugs with?”

“Hoovers?” Vir supplied uncertainly.

Londo nodded vigorously, his haircrest bobbing with the move.

“That is it, yes. I’m told that salespeople trying to sell these things are aggressive, annoying and therefore not respected. I do not intend to become one of them... metaphorically speaking. You go and keep your eyes and ears open for me; it would be a lot less suspicious. People are used to see you in the company of Minbari all the time. Go! I’ve got more important things to do.”

Vir shook his head in exasperation. In his opinion Londo had all the unpleasant traits of a human salesman; plus, as one keeping an eye on Londo’s schedule all the time he knew that Londo had nothing of importance to do at the moment.
Unless one considered getting drunk in his chambers alone a thing of importance.

But if his boss chose to be stubborn about the whole issue, there was nothing he could do to make him reconsider. So he simply sketched a bow and scurried off, secretly eager to visit Voyager again—and to spend some time with Lennier and yes, even with Rastenn, whom he considered friends. He didn’t have a great many friends and cherished the few he had.

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Tom Paris was waiting for him at the ladder that led up inside Voyager (since this was the first time Vir visited the ship on his own feet) and escorted him through brightly lit, gleaming corridors to the elevator cabin—that they called a turbolift here—and finally to the much-talked-about holodeck.

At first, he thought they’d go to one of the cargo bays. But when the huge metal doors opened, it was like stepping into a different world. Much colder air wafted against them, matching the pre-glacial climate of the Minbari homeworld. Fortunately, Tom had warned him to wear thicker clothes than usual, and he’d come in the tunic gifted upon him on Minbar. Then they made another step inside, the doors closed behind them with a resounding clang—and he found himself in the ancient arena of Tuzanor... or, at least, a very good facsimile of it.

It was a perfect copy, composed of several rooms, including a sparring hall, a weapons range, an obstacle course, something that resembled an old Earth waterpark but which was interactive, containing surprises and traps (as he had learned from his guides during his only visit in the original facility), and a few other multi-purpose rooms.

Vir wondered how the illusion might work, fitting everything into a single room, as he knew well how huge the arena of Tuzanor actually was. The small open-air amphitheatre alone, that had been the stage of ritual duels—and later of fighting demonstrations—would have been hard-pressed to fit in. And yet it seemed as if everything would have been reconstructed, for the sole purpose of the presentation.

They headed for the amphitheatre, of course, with its sanded wooden sparring floor, and the terraced wooden seats that allowed spectators to follow every oh-so-subtle trick of the fighters. At the moment the seats were mainly occupied by Minbari warriors, both from Babylon 5 and from the Ingata, and Voyager personnel, in equal measure. In the first row Vir could see Mr. Garibaldi and Mr. Tuvok, as well as Alyt Neroon, the Drazi ambassador, not to mention G’Kar, in the company of his bodyguard Ta’Lon and the captain of that Narn heavy cruiser docked to Babylon 5.

It made sense, actually. The Narns and the Drazi were warriors. They would naturally be interested. Still, Vir felt more than a little uncomfortable by the thought of having to join them.

Fortunately, Tom led him to the opposite side of the amphitheatre, where Lennier, Harry, Ensign Wildman and Rastenn’s fiancée, Nidell were sitting. Little Naomi Wildman was there, too, eager to watch the spectacle, and a few rows farther up Vir spotted the cyborg lady, observing the events with detached interest.

“I thought you’d be more comfortable with us than with the brass,” Tom said, and Vir nodded gratefully.

“Where is Lieutenant Torres?” he then asked. “I thought she, of all people, would be interested in a demonstration like this.”

“She and Vorik are readying themselves for their own demonstration,” Tom explained. “Let’s get comfortable; they’re just about to start.”
Indeed, Marcus and Rastenn came in at that very moment, both wearing loose Minbari-style training outfits, those used by karate fighters not unlike, just in black. The crier – a seasoned Minbari warrior from Neroon’s ship – instructed them to take up position within the ring, which they did without hesitation.

“Judges ready?” the crier then asked.

Three evenly spaced Minbari – also warriors from the Ingata – called back in the affirmative.

“Watchers ready?” the crier continued, and every single Minbari present – save for Neroon, of course, whose dignity wouldn’t allow such outward reaction – yelled enthusiastically. They all knew that the Ranger had fought their Alyt and survived, and were now eager to witness his skills in a less deadly situation.

“ Fighters ready?” the crier asked.

Marcus and Rastenn grinned fiercely, extended their denn’boks with the usual snick and clacked them together in salute.

“Begin spar!” the crier ordered.

Marcus and Rastenn bowed to the crier, and then to each other – and then launched into a fight immediately. They were fairly evenly matched; Marcus compensated for Rastenn’s greater physical strength with speed and with moves that would have put the fighting monks of ancient Japan to shame.

“Interesting style,” Neroon commented to Tuvok. “Had he used such tricks against me during denn’sha, I’d have a much harder time beating him.”

“Indeed?” Tuvok presented his best Vulcan eyebrow. “Why, do you think, would he give up such a potential advantage?”

Neroon shrugged. “It was a ritual challenge. I assume he wanted to play by Minbari rules. As you can see, our style is fairly rigid by contrast. It relies almost entirely on ingrained forms that we start leaving at a very young age.”

“Those forms appear to work well for you, though,” Tuvok commented.

Neroon nodded. “Usually, they do. But they can prove a serious disadvantage against an adversary who fights without rules. Which is why I wanted my nephew to interact with warriors from other races more often. It will be a valuable learning experience that could save his life one day. Watch!”

Rastenn lashed out, using his greater strength, trying to drive Marcus back several paces, closer to the edge of the ring. Marcus all but danced to the side as he slid along the edge of Rastenn’s pike. He dropped to the ground, attempting to kick the young warrior off his feet. Rastenn tried to counteract the move by leaping back, unwillingly giving Marcus an opening, as he clearly hadn’t experienced Marcus being so much faster than any Minbari could have hoped to be. The Ranger leaped back to his feet, twisted in underneath Rastenn’s guard and laid his pike along the young Minbari’s throat.

In a battle situation, that could have been the death blow. The Minbari spectators fell in shocked silence. Rastenn was the best of his generation, trained by Neroon himself; no-one had expected him to actually lose against the human Anla’shok.

But Rastenn wasn’t done yet. A Warrior of his calibre knew more than one way out of such a situation. With a lightning-fast movement, his pike connected with the back of Marcus’s knee,
sending him down to kneel at Rastenn’s feet. Both their pikes now rested at each other’s throats, and Nidell cheered her fiancé on gleefully.

“The spar is an even match,” the crier declared, and cheers erupted from all sides again.

Marcus accepted a towel handed to him by one of the Voyager crewmen and laughed.

“That was fun!” he said. “Now, let’s see what our hosts are capable of.”

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Meanwhile, Sergeant Zack Allan was having a dull afternoon at Customs... for which he was grateful. The steady inflow of fugitives had slowed down considerably in the last twenty-four hours – which was lucky for them, as the station was beginning to get rather full. The only ship scheduled for arrival was the regular Centauri starliner that came twice a week. Despite the distance, a series of strategically placed jumpgates shortened the journey between Babylon 5 and the homeworlds of the main powers considerably, making travel between them fast and short.

No-one would have imagined that ten years ago.

Sometimes he wondered whether this was a good thing or a bad thing. Not today, though. Today, he was simply enjoying the fact that he could be here, at the crossroads of the know galaxy. As Commander Sinclair used to say, everyone came to Babylon 5, sooner or later. And he, Zack Allan would stand here, waiting to greet them, and to weed out the bad elements, as long as the station existed.

The overhead loudspeaker announced that the Centauri starliner had finished docking procedures and the passengers wanting to get off on Babylon 5 were being released. Zack straightened and squared his shoulders, assuming his official persona as always when dealing with newcomers.

It was the principle of the thing, after all. He represented station authority here, at the first access point to Babylon 5.

The passengers started to pour in. Most of them were Centauri, of course, impatient in their self-importance, even those who were just small clerks and merchants... although the numbers of those had been declining lately. People of lofty titles, on the other hand, had become more frequent visitors, albeit Zack suspected that most of those titles were just show. The last truly important person had been Minister Virini.

There were quite a few humans, too – not surprising, given the close ties between EarthGow and the Centauri Republic. These Zack always checked with extra attention, to make sure no Nightwatch agent was trying to sneak back to Babylon 5. To his relief, he found no suspicious ID cards. Either the people were exactly whom they stated to be – or their ID cards were such excellent forgeries that they’d have fooled even the station computer.

Zack decided to be extra vigilant, just in case. Running a full background check on all human IDCs seemed a good idea. They’d just have to wait – and if they didn’t like it, they could leave with the next shuttle.

While he was running the check, a small group of four Centauri approached Customs in the diplomatic line, and Zack blinked, trying to figure out why he would find them so familiar.

The leader of the group was a small, stocky, bird-like woman of middle age. Her head was clean-shaven, of course, but she covered it with a crisp white veil, held in place by a jewelled gold circlet. Only the crown of her head was left bare.
She wore a richly embroidered gown of heavy, brocaded silk and probably a corset and multiple petticoats or a hoop beneath, because her back was ramrod straight and her bell-like skirts seemed to... well, roll about her would have been the best word for it. She had small, brown eyes, a thin line of a mouth painted dark red, and an imperious bearing.

Clearly, she was used to have her every whim fulfilled without hesitation.

The young woman at her elbow was just as richly clad, meaning that she came of a noble House as well, but her natural beauty outshone her rich attire. As it had become fashionable among the younger generation, she kept a long, luxurious golden-brown lock on the top of her head, which was otherwise shaved, too, and had a smile that would have left every man weak-kneed, regardless of their race.

The other two were even younger and clearly of lesser origins, wearing much simpler, although well-made clothing. The young man was probably a lesser clerk and his sweetheart – because there couldn’t be any doubt about that – pretty yet nothing extraordinary, sporting a clean-shaven head and a less elaborate version of the older woman’s headgear. She seemed a pleasant enough person, yet frightened and not very bright.

They were followed by some servants, carrying shocking amounts of luggage.

The small woman all but rolled forward, stopping right in front of Zack.

“I am Timov, daughter of Alghul,” she announced in a somewhat shrill voice. “I demand to be escorted to the quarters of my husband, Ambassador Mollari. I thought his aide would have, at least, the courtesy of waiting for me but clearly, I was mistaken.”

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“So, what comes next?” asked Neroon when his nephew and the human Anla’shok returned, after a quick sonic shower, wearing their uniforms again.

“A demonstration of ancient Vulcan combat techniques,” explained Tuvok. “They are no longer actually used in any fight – the weapons are too clumsy for modern warfare, even for hand-to-hand combat. But we are all trained to wield them still, in case we had to fight a ritual duel during koon-ut kali-fe.”

“During what?” inquired the Minbari.

Tuvok hesitated for a moment. This was not a matter addressed easily, especially in a conversation with outsiders.

“The marriage ceremony,” he finally answered. “In our barbaric past, the males won their bondmates by fighting any other suitor to the death. Today, we’re telepathically bonded to our future spouse at the age of seven and consummate the bond at the first onset of pon farr – the mating urge,” he added, seeing the Minbari’s confusion.

Under normal circumstances he would never reveal such things to a non-Vulcan, but if he wanted to learn the truly important things about Minbari, he had to offer something in exchange.

“You said first onset,” Neroon said thoughtfully. “Is it a returning event, then?”

Tuvok nodded. “It happens every seven Vulcan years. In those times our biology takes over, tearing down our self-control. If we cannot reach our bondmate in time, we go mad, violent... and finally die.”
“We do have something similar, although it only hits a few unfortunate ones,” Neroon said. “It is a condition called the dark fire of the soul, and it occurs if a Minbari imprints on a person who doesn’t imprint back – either because they are already bonded to another or are simply not interested. The results are the same: madness and death. This is one of the greatest tragedies of our people.”

“It is terrible to have one’s hard-won control torn away,” replied Tuvok in agreement. “Pon farr causes a hormonal imbalance in the body that quickly leads to the plak tow, the blood fever. In theory, there are three ways to get out of it: taking a mate, ritual combat or deep meditation.”

“And in practice?” Neroon asked.

The Vulcan almost shrugged. “I know mating and combat helps. Meditation… I am still not certain about that.”

“You are married, aren’t you?” Neroon asked, and the Vulcan nodded.

“Fortunately, my wife refrained from evoking kali-fe.”

“And if she hadn’t?”

“Then I would have had to fight the champion of her choice to the death,” Tuvok said. “It happens… rarely in these days, but it does. We are very particular about our traditions,” he touched his comm badge. “Ensign Vorik, are you ready?”

“Aye, sir,” a voice answered. “You can start the program at your discretion.”

“Very well,” Tuvok raised his voice just enough for the ship’s computer to pick it up as he ordered. “Computer, save current program and end it. Launch Program Vorik #7 instead.”


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The holographic representation of Tuzanor vanished, leaving them surrounded by the yellow grid of the holodeck for a moment. Then dry heat hit Neroon like a brick wall, and the gravity within the holodeck increased. For one used to the pre-glacial conditions of his homeworld, it was almost a shock.

“Must it be so baking hot?” he muttered angrily.

“These are normal Vulcan conditions,” Tuvok replied matter-of-factly. “Vulcan is a desert world with higher gravity than the Earth norm.”

“Which gives you an advantage when dealing with humans, I suppose,” Neroon commented.

Tuvok nodded. “Unless we are on a freezing planet… or a particularly wet one,” he said. “We are not good at those,” he gave the Minbari a searching look. “Are you sure you can bear it? I am told that Minbar is one of those planets; I can arrange for a Tri-Ox injection for you to make breathing easier.”

Neroon waved off his concern. “I have been to planets with hot climates before. It was just unexpected.”

He was not about to reveal that since Minbari did not sweat – a way of nature preventing their bodies to lose much-needed heat – hot climates were a hard challenge for them. He only hoped the demonstration wouldn’t be too long and he’d be spared the indignity of passing out.
He blinked a few times, allowing his eyes to adapt to the bright, merciless light of a red sun pounding
down at the stark plains and spindy peaks surrounding a high mountain. The Vulcan landscape was
practically glowing with the afternoon heat; a hot, dusty wind stroked their faces.

On this remote spot there was no sign of civilization, except for a shuttlecraft landing port in some
distance. At the base of the mountain stood the monoliths of a sacred grove.

Further away, Neroon could see processions converging all across the stark mountain. There were
bell ringers, clad in outlandish ceremonial clothes, carrying chimes and rows of perfectly tuned
miniature bells. Then came some half-naked athletes, clad only in an apron wrapped around their
hips, their faces hidden behind bird-like masks with cruel-looking beaks.

“These are the champions,” Tuvok explained, “from whom the bride can choose to kill her intended
mate.”

“You mean this can happen every time?” Neroon asked in mild shock.

Tuvok nodded. “It is the woman’s right to choose, and the man’s lot to be chosen or die. The
childhood bonding of the koon-ut kali-fe must be tested immediately, or it cannot be sanctified. It is
extremely rare, though. The last case I know of happened some eighty years ago. But it is a
possibility, and all males must be prepared for it. Today, however, we are presenting you a mere
training exercise. The other people are just background. And here comes Ensign Vorik.”

Vorik was of middle height (for a Vulcan), with the usual chiselled features of somebody coming
from a very old clan. He, too, was only wearing a silver apron wrapped around his hips, and a bird
mask covering the upper half of his face. In his hands he was carrying a long-handed weapon, with a
razor-sharp, curved blade at one end and a heavy bludgeon on the other.

“That is our ancient, ceremonial weapon, the lirpa,” Tuvok explained. “In the primitive times of our
past, it was used in hand-to-hand combat to behead one’s enemy... or to break his skull.”

“A rather dangerous and unhandy tool,” Neroon judged. “Can’t your ensign be accidentally killed,
even in a show fight?”

Tuvok shook his head. “The holodeck’s safety protocols would not allow it. I have double-checked
them to prevent such an occurrence.”

The procession stopped just outside the grove. The bell-ringers shook their frames, creating a rather
martial sound. Then an exceedingly beautiful Vulcan female, clad in a long gown of heavy, royal
blue silk and wearing an elaborate golden brooch of the size of a palm at her throat, entered the grove
and walked straight in the angular-shaped gong in the middle. She picked up a small hammer from
the dusky floor and hit the gong. The deep, vibrating sound echoed from the holodeck walls.

“Kali-fe!” she cried in a resounding voice. “As it has been from the beginning, I make my choice,”
she dropped the hammer and pointed with an outstretched arm at one of the half-naked athletes. “I
choose him!”

The bell-ringers shook their frame again, and Neroon leaned closer to the Vulcan.

“Who is she?” he asked. “She is exquisite.”

“Just a hologram, created specifically for this program,” Tuvok replied. “The Doctor calls her
T’Para, although she is not even modelled after a really existing person.”

Ensign Vorik, in the meantime, had accepted the challenge, and the ritual duel now began. Neroon
watched the moves with professional interest, and though the *lirpa* clearly wasn’t suited for modern combat, he had to admit that the young Vulcan showed a great deal of skill – not to mention unexpected strength – at wielding the clumsy weapon.

“The combatants are all created to be an even match,” explained Tuvok. “Theoretically, Ensign Vorik should be able to beat any of them – *if* he gives his best.”

“And when is the fight finished?” asked Nerooon.

“While under real circumstances *kali-fe* is a combat to the death, a training session traditionally ends when the first blood is drawn. Like now.”

At that very moment Vorik managed to duck under the guard of his holographic opponent and with an upward swing of his *lirpa* slashed him across the bare chest. The bell-ringers shook their frames again, and somebody sounded the gong, announcing that Vorik had won the duel.... and the right to claim his bride.

A few more ceremonial words were exchanged – in High Vulcan, which no-one but Tuvok understood, as their meaning was not for outsiders and therefore hadn’t been programmed into the universal translator – and then, to everyone’s relief, the program ended. Normal gravity and temperature were returned, and they found themselves on the empty holodeck again. Only the pre-arranged seats remained, as they were meant to serve all three demonstrations.

The Minbari, Vir and Marcus congratulated Ensign Vorik to his victory and complimented him on his fighting skills. The young Vulcan turned a bit green in the face, and they thought he was about to get sick, until Tom Paris explained that Vulcans had green blood and Vorik was simply blushing. Rastenn was impressed by the *lirpa* and the fact that it had once been actually used, though they all agreed that it wouldn’t be practical in modern days.

“So, what comes next?” Nidell asked, eager to see more. She might be serving as one of Neroon’s spies at the moment, but she, too, was a Warrior at heart and accordingly skilled with the pike.

Tom Paris grinned from ear to ear. “Something really savage,” he answered.”You are about to see what Klingons do for fun.”

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Ambassador Mollari of the once great Centauri Republic, whose star seemed to be rising again (although at what price he steadfastly refused to consider) was having a bad day. He’d had a long string of bad days lately, despite his major victory against Lord Refa, which had permanently removed his chief opponent from the equation.

Things were still extremely precarious at home, with a madman on Emperor Turhan’s throne, and while he still had powerful allies in the Centaurum, a considerable number of people had flocked over to Cartagia’s side... out of sheer self-preservation, most likely.

Vir’s failure on Minbar had also cost him a great many favours that could have been put to better use. Surprisingly enough, though, he couldn’t find it in his hearts to be angry with his aide – or to get rid of him. On the contrary – for the first time since having failed to save his nephew, Carn, he found that he actually cared for somebody.

He’d felt guilty for using Vir to get to Lord Refa from the beginning, but now that he’d learned about the consequences, his guilt had grown to self-hatred.

Which wasn’t exactly a new feeling for him; but it didn’t meant that he liked it. Still, he’d found the
closest thing to a son in Vir since losing Carn, and the thought that he might have lost his aide’s respect was unexpectedly painful.

He was about to seek comfort in another glass of *brevari*, when the door-chime sounded. He rolled his eyes. His life had been so full of “joy” lately, couldn’t have whatever idiot needed his help with their mundane problems come a day later?

Or a *week* later, preferably?

Unfortunately, things rarely worked that way.

“Come in!” he called, resigning to the inevitable.

The door slid open and revealed the last person he’d expected to see standing on his doorstep.

“Well, Londo,” Timov declared, entering his chambers without invitation and taking a disapproving look around her. “I see the rumours weren’t exaggerated: you did have fallen into criminal negligence where your personal affairs are concerned. I wouldn’t believe that my presence was needed here; clearly, I was wrong.”

She walked over to the settee and took place, arranging the heavy folds of her skirts neatly around herself.

“I have come in company,” she then told him. “But I think we need to talk in private, first. I have disturbing news, and measures need to be taken to ensure the safety of those who depend on you. So I would appreciate if you listened to me, for a change.”

She looked at him expectantly. Londo, however, too shocked by having found his wife on his doorstep, was momentarily unable to give her any answer.
Part 15.2

Chapter Notes

This chapter has grown too long, so I had to break it in two. The creatures in the Klingon calisthenics program are all canon, either from the classic series or from the animated one. The scenario is based on a similar one in the TNG-novel Reunion by Michael Jan Friedman. Go and read it, it is excellent.

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PART 15.2

The holodeck program was changed again, launching something called Calisthenics #6, whatever that was supposed to mean, and they found themselves on some unnamed alien planet. Right in front of them loomed the ruins of a temple of some sort, not bearing remembrance of any existing (or dead) culture, but it was positively barbaric-looking. The sky overhead was angry red like molten lava; the ground was hard and ash grey, broken in places and pocked with steaming, smoking holes.

Statues of unknown deities stared at them, either from tall columns to which they had been erected, or from out of the rubble into which they had fallen. They seemed to be vaguely humanoid, yet had monstrous features.

“Are these Klingon gods?” Lennier asked with interest.

Harry Kim shook his head, grinning. “Nah; according to Lieutenant Worf, they are all dead. Ancient Klingon warriors killed them a millennium ago. Apparently, they were more trouble than they were worth.”

Lennier pulled a face. “Charming.”

“But practical,” Vir said, thinking of all the dozens of completely useless Centauri deities, none of them actually considered as higher beings and rarely worshipped, unless out of social obligations.

“Klingons are an eminently practical people,” Tom Paris agreed, “although one with a questionable sense for aesthetics.”

Rastenn looked around, taking in the whole of their surroundings. The program doubtlessly addressed all senses. There were bird cries, savage and shrill, presumably of carrion-eaters, although the birds themselves were not visible. Long, snake-like creatures slithered over the crumbled stones, hissing as they went. The smoking holes in the ground smelled faintly of sulphur and other unsavoury things. All in all, it was a very authentic scenario, whatever it was supposed to represent.

“The place does have its own strange appeal,” he said with an indifferent shrug, and Nidell nodded in agreement.

Marcus rolled his eyes, “Warriors!” he muttered in mock disgust, and Vir actually giggled.

B’Elanna Torres now entered the scene, wearing a skin-tight leather outfit in deep burgundy red that left nothing to imagination, and wrist guards of some intricately woven metal mesh. She carried a
weapon that had some vague similarity with a lirpa: it was a long staff with a vicious hook at one end and a metal ball at the other.

“A Gin’tak spear,” noted Harry. “Still very popular when hunting for wild targs. B’Elanna prefers it to the bat’leth because it extends her range.”

“And you know that... how exactly?” Tom asked.

Harry shrugged. “She told me. I’ve participated in this program before... and survived Level One. She usually trains on Level Two. You’re about to see some amazing things. Just don’t break her concentration. Even with the safeties in place, this is a dangerous exercise.”

“I’d like to give it a try,” Rastenn said, his eyes glittering.

Harry shook his head. “I wouldn’t advise it. Not when you’re unfamiliar with Klingon calisthenics scenarios.”

“I don’t need to be familiar with them,” Rastenn declared indignantly. “I am a Warrior. I am trained to face unknown adversaries.”

Tom and Harry exchanged exasperated looks; then they shrugged in unison.

“It’s your funeral,” Tom finally said; then he called out to B’Elanna. “Hey, Torres! You’ve got yourself a volunteer here!”

B’Elanna gave them a predatory grin. “Well, come on then,” she said to Rastenn. “Let’s see what Minbari Warriors are made of.”

Rastenn jumped down from the spectators’ seat, opening his denn’bok eagerly, heading to the most congested part of the ruins. Already he could feel his instincts kicking into high gear – his senses were becoming sharper, the fire in his blood awakened.

He followed B’Elanna at a distance of a few metres, and Neroon nodded in satisfaction. It only made sense. When things heated up, it wouldn’t have been a good idea to become entangled with one another.

The invisible carrion birds shrieked, clearly sensing something coming. The snake-like things became agitated, twisting among the rubble in a great hurry. High above them, the distant thunder of an upcoming storm could be heard.

Out of the corner of his eye Rastenn saw movement, and his first impulse was to attack, to draw out whatever it might be. But it was on B’Elanna’s flank, not his, and the first thing every Warrior trainee was taught was to trust each other. To trust each other’s perceptions and abilities.

That made Minbari Warriors to such an efficient, deadly force: the knowledge that the other ones would be where they were most needed. Where they were supposed to be.

A moment later he was glad that he had practiced restraint. Because if he had gone after the first hidden adversary, he would have been too distracted to notice the second one – a large, white-furred, ape-like creature with dorsal spines and a cranial horn – that leapt down at him from one of the god-monuments.

He brought up his denn’bok just in time to absorb the furred creature’s downstrike... a powerful one if he’d ever experienced one. The thing must have weighed at least half a ton and had an accordingly mean punch.
Recovering, he launched an attack of his own, ramming his pike into his enemy’s throat. When the creature shook its head, dazzled, slowing down for a moment, Rastenn used the chance to smash it in the face with enough strength that it sank to its knees, unconscious.

“Impressive,” commented Tuvok. ”The skull of a Mugato is three inches thick; your nephew must be much stronger than he looks, rendering it unconscious with a single blow.”

“You mean such creatures actually exist?” asked Neroon in surprise.

Tuvok nodded. “Indeed, they do. They are native to Zeta Bootis III and are very hostile. Little to no provocation will spark an attack by them, and what is worse, their bite is highly poisonous – and fatal if untreated.”

“So there is an antidote?” clarified Neroon in relief.

“There is; but not easily acquired,” Tuvok answered. “The only known antidote for the Mugato bite is the proper application of the native Mako root, which has the ability to draw the toxin out of the humanoid nervous system. Unfortunately, as Zeta Bootis III has been wracked by civil war for the best part of the last century, any trade with them has been sporadic at best. You do not need to worry, though. The holographic version of the beast is not equipped with the deadly poison.”

Neroon nodded his thanks and turned his attention to B’Elanna who was exchanging blows with a seven-feet-tall bipedal reptile that had scaly, grey-green skin and a row of sabre-like teeth in its large maw. The... thing had multifaceted eyes and wore a leather tunic scattered with what appeared to be jewels. Its movements were slow and deliberate yet very powerful; by all her Klingon strength, B’Elanna’s chances clearly lay in speed and dexterity.

“Does this creature also have a real life model?” Neroon asked.

“It does,” Tuvok said. “This is the representation of a Gorn; a race of intelligent reptiles from Tau Lacertae IX. The Federation had first contact with them in the 23rd century and we have avoided a war by a hair’s breadth. Ever since, there has been heightened awareness along the disputed border.”

“You do have your fair share of hostile neighbours,” commented Neroon, and the Vulcan nodded sagely.

“Unfortunately, very few so-called intelligent species can be persuaded to consider the benefits of logic,” he said dryly, and Neroon wasn’t sure if he was supposed to laugh or not.

According to the data... er... acquired by Rastenn, Vulcans generally did not make jokes. In fact, they were considered to be a species that completely lacked any sense of humour.

Of course, ignorant outsiders said the same about Minbari. Perhaps their two races had more in common than one would think.

In the meantime Rastenn whirled around just in time to face another attacker that had sprung from behind a ruined altar. This one was even larger than the first, almost fourteen feet, with short, powerful legs, disproportionally long, muscular arms and bulging red eyes with slanted pupils. Its tough skin was a disturbingly bright lime green, save for its chest and belly that was protected by large yellow scales; it had three clawed appendages on both hands and feet and three sets of nostrils that grew gradually smaller as they got closer to the bridge of his nose. There were a pair of mandibles at both corners of its maw and it had razor-sharp teeth. It used its short tail to balance itself, as walking was apparently not its strong suit.

“A Scora from Vega IX” Tuvok supplied. ”They are quite hostile but strictly herbivorous. The real
danger comes from their size and the strength of their arms; they tend to hang from the large trees of
the jungle areas of their home planet.”

“Fortunately for the planet’s civilized inhabitants, they prefer to remain in the remote lowland areas
surrounding the planet’s numerous mountain ranges,” added Ensign Wildman, who was sitting on
Tuvok’s other side. She was a xenobiologist, after all; she knew such things.

Unaware of the discussion about his opponent’s nature, Rastenn was having a hard time to deal with
the huge creature that literally towered over him. Fortunately, as all primarily arboreal creatures, the
Scora had difficulties moving on the flat floor. It was also unarmed, but its enormous fists served as
excellent weapons. Shuffling to one side, Rastenn avoided its initial charge. Then, as they faced off
again, he smashed his pike with all his considerable strength across the creature’s sensitive nostrils.

The Scora gave a guttural roar. Rastenn could smell its fetid breath, hear the screams of the carrion
birds drawn by the scent of blood. His pulse pounded in his ears, feeding the fires inside him. He
took a quick look around. Nearby, where the wall of the temple had crumbled down, he spotted
some large, jagged boulder that looked like granite. With a lightning-fast stroke he whirled his
denn’bok around, bringing it down onto the creature’s kneecaps. The Scora roared again – it must
have been a vulnerable area – but lost its balance and hit its head on one of the boulders, cracking it
open... just as Rastenn had intended.

He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction before turning around to see how B’Elanna was doing.
She had apparently dealt with the Gorn in the meantime and was now fighting a bearded humanoid
giant with wild, springy hair, clad in a furry west made of some animal hides. It was clearly a
member of some primitive race.

“It is a Kalar from Rigel VII,” Tuvok informed Neroon. “Technologically quite primitive, the rate a
D-plus on the Richter Scale of cultures.”

“That means they’re only a little above Neanderthals,” Ensign Wildman added helpfully. “Which is
why it has become general practice to avoid Rigel VII altogether. They want to be left alone and are
rather... direct in expressing their wish, as you see.”

B’Elanna caught the Kalar’s mace on her staff. For a moment they grappled, B’Elanna snarling with
effort to gain the upper hand; Neroon found it amazing that she could hold her own against an
opponent twice her size and apparently oblivious to pain. Klingons were clearly a very tough race.

And she did more than just hold her own. With a mighty surge, she thrust the big brute back, creating
thus enough space between them to swing her weapon. The metal ball caught the Kalar on the side
of the head, spinning him around, sending him sprawling into one of the steaming hell-pits. Roaring
with pain, hed struggle desperately to climb out of the hole. B’Elanna hit him again viciously, to
make sure he couldn’t.

“Program complete,” the computer announced, and all holographic figures froze mid-twist.

“The program automatically stops, once all holographic opponents are beaten beyond doubt,” Tuvok
explained; then he turned to B’Elanna. “Congratulations, Lieutenant. For a Level Two training
program, this one was certainly ambitious.”

“And you fought well,” added Neroon. “A shame, really, that you are not Minbari. Every Warrior
Clan would consider it a great honour to have one of their members court you – including mine.”

Rastenn inclined his head towards his uncle, acknowledging the allowance no-one else could
understand. B’Elanna, however, misunderstanding the actual meaning of Neroon’s words, stared at
the older Minbari in surprise.

“You aren’t married yet? At your age?”

“In Minbari terms Alyt Neroon is still fairly young, Lieutenant,” Marcus intervened hurriedly, before things could escalate into something ugly; with Minbari, it was always a possibility. “And regardless of that fact, it is not their custom to ask – or answer – such personal questions,” he bowed to Neroon. “My apologies, Alyt. I’ve forgotten to warn Voyager’s crew about this.”

Neroon waved dismissively with a gloved hand.

“No offence taken, Anla’shok. We cannot expect people coming from a different universe to know about our... sensibilities. Besides I was the one who started about courting,” he turned back to B’Elanna. “You are right, Lieutenant; at my age most Minbari are already bonded. So would be I, hadn’t my marriage failed.”

It was now Marcus’s turn to be surprised... shocked even.

“Failed?” he repeated in utter disbelief. “Is that even possible for Minbari?”

“It is extremely rare, that is true,” Neroon allowed. “But possible, if the imprinting goes wrong; meaning that it never happens, on one side or the other.”

“On which side did it fail in your case?” asked Tuvok with clinical scientific interest.

Neroon shrugged. “On both. It was a political arrangement to keep up the peace between our respective Castes, right after the Earth-Minbari war; but it only ever existed on paper. We honoured the agreement for as long as it was necessary. After that, my wife returned to the Temple of Valeria, and the marriage was annulled.”

“So, in theory, you would be free to seek a new bond,” Tuvok classified.

Neroon shrugged again. “In theory, yes. But my failure has already shamed our Clan enough that I would be extremely reluctant to risk it again,” he gave his nephew a grim smile. “Our hopes to continue the bloodline now lie with Rastenn.”

“No pressure, Sherlock,” Tom muttered, but Rastenn just shrugged, and winked at his bride.

“There are worse obligations,” he said, and the young people laughed.

Tuvok, however, being the observant person that he was, suspected that things weren’t quite that simple as they seemed. For some reason he felt sorry for Nidell, illogical though such feelings might have been.

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Vir returned from his outing to Green Sector in relatively high spirits. He’d enjoyed the time spent with his friends, humans and Minbari alike. Of course, he could not compare himself with Minbari Warriors, and the only somewhat combative sport he had some skill at – fencing – was now beyond him due his condition, so actually partaking in the activities was no longer possible for him, but it had been good to spend time with other young people who didn’t look down at him as if he’d been some lesser life form.

Consequently, he approached Londo’s quarters with an actual spring in his step to ask if the ambassador needed something before he’d retire for the night. He’d been ordered by Doctor Hobbs to sleep more than was his wont, to allow his system to deal with the remaining effects of the shock,
but that didn’t mean he would neglect his duties.

He had nothing else left, after all.

“Come in!” came Londo’s usual bark as he sounded the door-chime.

Vir obeyed; and then he stopped a mere two steps into Londo’s living room and stared.

And stared.

And stared some more.

The presence of the Lady Timov wasn’t really surprising. He had been the one to practically beg her to come, after all. Given Londo’s increasing importance at the Imperial Court, it couldn’t have been hard for her to get a place on whatever transport ship she chose.

But she had Kiron with her.

And Aria.

And Lyndisty, of all people.

What was going on here?”

“What happened?” he asked the foreshadows of impending doom descending upon his head... or whatever the correct expression had been in the contraband romance novel he’d last read.

“Something neither of us would have expected,” Londo replied, his disgust with himself apparent. “I think my lady wife would be best suited to explain the details to you.”

“If only because I am not inclined to unnecessary dramatics,” the Lady Timov agreed. “Well, the facts are these: Lyndisty’s mother, the Lady Drusella, publicly accused your uncle of deliberately misleading him about your person and your importance. House Maray’s reputation suffered greatly from that. So your uncle decided to get his son back and arranged for Adilo Mollari to be poisoned.”

“And with their guardian dead, Kiron and Aria would have been sent back to their families, to be married off to the people the families had chosen for them,” Vir realised.

Lady Timov nodded. “Exactly. Fortunately, this time they had the mother wit to flee to somebody who actually could help them,” she added with a rather un-ladylike snort.

“So you’ve brought them here,” Vir said, baffled. “Why?”

“Because on Centrauri Prime, it is not a safe thing to be affiliated either with House Mollari or with a certain Vir Cotto,” replied Timov tartly. “Londo’s star might be rising, but it only means that certain people will be trying their level best to hit him now, before he’d grow too powerful for them. Therefore I decided to remove our wards of House Jaddo – together with their aunt, the Lady Marillia – from Centaurei Prime and sent them to the colony on Davo, where they would be safe,” she gave Londo a jaundiced look. “I’m sure you’ll appreciate the irony.”

Londo gritted his teeth. Davo was the home planet of Adira, forever connected to her memory in his hearts. But he had to admit that Timov’s move had been a strategically sound one.

“Are you planning to send the two lovebirds to Davo as well?” he asked.

Timov shook her head. “No; it wouldn’t be wise to put all our eggs in the same basket as, I think, the
humans would say. No, I think they would be better off on Minbar.”

“But I’m no longer ambassador there,” Vir protested weakly.

Timov snorted again. “Believe me, boy, the entire population of Centauri Prime knows that by now. It was the scandal of the month, in certain circles. But you still do have connections to Minbar, correct?”

Vir nodded uncertainly, thinking of Lennier, Rastenn... even Neroon.

“And the embassy still needs basic personnel, right?” Timov continued.

Vir nodded again, because that was also true.

“Well, then,” Timov said in satisfaction. “You’ll send the boy there as a clerk and the girl as a housekeeper. The higher schools in the capital accept foreign students – I know. I checked. Send the boy to learn something useful, so that he won’t need patrons in the future and can support a wife. It’s high time you children learned to take care of yourselves.”

Vir had to admit that it was a good idea... one that also took the lovesick couple out of his hair, for which he was grateful. Kiron and he never got on as children, due to their vastly different status in the family, and while he was willing to fulfil his family obligations, the last thing he needed was to have them underfoot on Babylon 5.

There was only one question left unanswered.

“Why did you bring Lyndisty with you, Lady Timov?”

“For you to marry her, of course,” Timov replied impatiently. “She is your bride, isn’t she?”

“But... but I thought her parents were reconsidering the marriage,” Vir stuttered, shocked, while Lyndisty beamed at him like a miniature sun.

“They were,” Timov agreed dryly. “I’ve persuaded them of the wrongness of their way. Lord Tavastani was remarkably quick to realise that his close allegiance with the late and unlamented Lord Refa may no longer be supportive for his career and was eager to accept our outstretched hand.”

“Our hand?” Londo repeated sarcastically.

Timov shrugged. “You always left the household chores in my hand, Londo, to deal with them as I saw fit. Are you complaining, now that I’ve managed to get the general to reconsider his decision and to silence his wife?”

“Of course not, my dear,” and really, Londo had nothing to complain about.

General Tavastani, whatever his deeds on Narn might have been, was an influential military officer – the very kind of supporter that Londo had lacked so far. Timov read him like an open book, of course, and knew that he was actually very satisfied with the outcome of things – save for the tragic fact of the assassination of his second cousin.

“As I said, the intricacies of politicking and social climbing have always been Daggair’s ambition,” she said. “But I was always good at recognising an opportunity when it came my way. That was the talent that made my family wealthy.”

“Excellent,” Londo said jovially. “I so love a good wedding! That will give the people on Babylon 5
a good opportunity to be amazed by our customs.”

“But Londo, you know I can’t marry her!” Vir protested. “Not with my condition...”

“Nonsense,” Timov interrupted. “Londo explained us what happened. It’s tragic, but it doesn’t really matter. Not all marriages are meant to bring forth children; mine isn’t such a one, either.”

“But – but I wanted children!” Vir complained, defeated. “I was looking forward to be a father!”

“We can’t have everything we want, Vir, you ought to know that by now,” Londo dismissed his protests. “Or else I’d have had that datted audience with this strange lady captain from the alternate universe twice over – the audience you still haven’t managed to organize for me, by the way.”

“Why is it so important for you?” Timov asked. “It isn’t so as if she were some high-ranking diplomat of her people.”

“Because she’d met with everyone else already!” Londo snapped. “The humans, the Minbari, the Drazi, the Gaim... even G’Kar! Her refusal to meet me – for whatever reason of high-handed morale – makes me look weak; and that is something I can’t afford right now. Not while my position at home is still precarious at best.”

“I see,” Timov rose and smoothed out her skirts. “Well, unlike young Kiron Maray here, you apparently still don’t know whom to turn for help to. Don’t worry, though; I’ll take this problem out of your hands.”

Londo gave her a doubtful look. “What have you got in that devious head of yours?”

Timov smiled thinly. “You always said about me and your other wives that our personalities could destroy entire planets. I’m about to give mine a try.”

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Lieutenant Rollins loved being acting executive officer during Chakotay’s reconvalescence. This was how it was supposed to be on a Starfleet ship: proper Starfleet personnel in all key positions. Perhaps Captain Janeway would consider making the change a permanent one. After that, they would only have to promote Lieutenant Carey over Torres, and the ship would be safely back in Starfleet hands. As it ought to be.

Until then, he’d see to it that proper Starfleet discipline was reinstated. They’d been way too negligent about procedure ever since they had got stranded in the Delta Quadrant. Even Commander Tuvok had grown lash, although he of all people should have known better.

So Lieutenant Rollins took it upon himself to run extra inspections all over the ship. It was tedious but necessary; plus, it made people realise that he was calling the shots in the captain’s absence now. That Voyager still was a Starfleet ship, despite the destructive Maquis presence on board.

He arrived at the trap door leading down to the docking bay floor just in time when a strange alien woman showed up at the lower end of the ladder. She was small, rotund, with a clean-shaven head – clearly one of those pompous Centauri people – and dressed as if she’d stepped out of some historic movie.

“Is someone here?” she demanded in a shrill voice. “Can somebody hear me?”

Rollins hurried down the ladder.

“Lieutenant Rollins, acting executive officer of Voyager, ma’am,” he introduced himself, instantly
regretting that he hadn’t omitted the acting from his title. It would have sounded better, and how should she know he was slightly bending the truth? “How can I be of assistance?”

“I am Timov, daughter of Alghul, wife to Ambassador Mollari of the Centauri Republic,” the little woman announced in a rather imperious manner. “I require to speak with your Captain... Janeway, I think, is her name?”

“I am sorry, but Captain Janeway isn’t available right now,” Rollins said smoothly.

The point-blank refusal didn’t seem to bother the Centauri woman, though.

“In that case you better get used to my company,” she said calmly.

She snapped with her fingers, and two servants carried in a heavy, ornate, throne-like armchair, She sat down, ordered her ample skirts around her and made herself comfortable, clearly willing to wait, no matter how long it might take.
Chapter Notes

Janeway’s appearance in the Schönbrunn scenery is based on a painting of Austrian Empress Elizabeth, also known as Sissi.

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PART 16

“She did what?” Janeway stared at his acting exec as if the man had grown a second head.

Rollins shrugged. “She had a comfortable armchair – well, rather a throne, in fact – brought to the docking bay, made herself comfortable and seems determined to camp out there until you’re willing to meet her, Captain.”

“And you think she will...?”

“Oh, yes. This one has a determination that would put Queen Victoria to shame. She’ll hold out until you let her in, or she’ll keel over from hunger or the lack of sleep... neither of which would be very fortunate for our relationship with the Centauri.”

“We don’t have a relationship with the Centauri,” Janeway pointed out.

“Perhaps we should,” Rollins suggested. “This Londo character seems to be the only one Sheridan can’t manipulate. We might need him as a counterbalance, should things between us and the local humans get ugly... which is a distinct possibility.”

“You might be right,” Janeway allowed. “Very well, let her in; let’s see what she has to say.”

“Er... Captain, perhaps we should beam her directly to your ready room,” Rollins said. “She’s not young, and she’s dressed like Maria Theresia, the Empress of Austria. She won’t be able to climb the ladder.”

“Maria Theresia, you say?” Janeway broke into a wide smile. “I think I’ve got the right environment for her. Beam her to Holodeck Four and I’ll run the Schönbrunn scenario for us.”

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Upon his return from the visit to Voyager, Neroon was surprised to find a message from Delenn, asking him to join the meeting with the League ambassadors in the Council Chambers.

“We are in desperate need of all ships they can spare, but it’s not going to be easy to persuade them to part with those ships,” she said. “If the two leading Castes of Minbar show a united front, they may be more willing to listen.”

Her logic was faulty in several places, of course. The Castes were of equal importance, at least in theory, and Neroon could by no means speak for the Warrior Caste as a whole; only Shai Ayt Shakiri could do that, and even he only with restrictions. Nonetheless, Neroon decided that it would be interesting to see the inner workings of the League with his own eyes.
“I might be able to persuade the Shai Alyt of the danger if I can prove that everyone else takes it seriously,” he explained it to Rastenn. “Besides, I’d like to know just how steady is Delenn’s grip on the League.”

“That could be useful,” Rastenn agreed. “Do you think I could go with you, Uncle? I would like the experience.”

Neroon gave him a feral smile. “You are my nephew and my heir. I’d like to see them try to keep you out.”

Rastenn grinned like a shark and the two left together, heading for the Council Chambers.

When they reached their destination, they found the League ambassadors raising an uproar, shouting on the top of their voices at Delenn who was also shouting to be heard.

“Please! If I could just… If I could just finish,” she was close to tears from frustration, which Neroon found utterly fascinating, as Minbari didn’t have tear ducts – at least not the same way humans did. The changes in her must have gone very deep indeed if she was capable of producing actual tears now.

Finally, the noise died down and Delenn dialled back her voice accordingly… though not her urgency.

“We have before us an opportunity to strike at our mutual enemy, the Shadows,” she began. “If our information is correct, this could be the biggest engagement of the war to date. We do not know how many of their ships will be involved, so our only chance is to have as many as possible on our side. We need all of you to cooperate.”

“If you wish cooperation, then why do you not tell us what the mission is,” the Drazi ambassador interrupted her rudely, and there were assenting rejoinders from the other ambassadors.

“Discussing the mission openly would be tactically unwise,” Neroon said as he sauntered into the Council Chambers with Rastenn in tow. “The recent events have shown that security on Babylon 5 is not quite as tight as we would all like. Not even the Gold Channels can be completely trusted.”

“If we discuss this openly, there is every chance that the enemy will learn of our plans,” Lennier, who had naturally come to assist Delenn, added. “You must trust us.”

“That would be preferable indeed, if you want this alliance to work,” commented Neroon with a thin, mirthless smile; then he bowed to Delenn in the Warrior fashion. “Delenn. Forgive us for being late.”

Delenn’s mildly annoyed look revealed that she knew all too well that Neroon was intentionally late to make a lasting impression. But she couldn’t deny that it worked. Upon the sight of the two grim-faced, black-clad Warriors in full battle regalia the League ambassadors suddenly rediscovered their manners. Neroon had a fearsome reputation well beyond the borders of the Minbari Federation, and he was willing to throw his weight around a bit on Delenn’s behalf… at least for the time being.

“How can we trust you when you will not trust us?” the Brakiri ambassador asked in a much more moderate tone.

It was a justified question, of course – at least from a civilian, Neroon admitted. One needed a specific mindset to think as a Warrior. Not everyone had the makings of that.

“Because so far, we have kept every promise we have made,” Delenn returned. “We told you that
telepaths could be used to slow down the advance of the Shadows. We supplied you with telepaths if
you didn’t have your own. We have saved the lives of many of your people. If we haven’t earned
your trust by now, then please go. Nothing more will be required from you.”

Her voice rose slightly at the end of her speech and Neroon suppressed the urge to flinch. It was
never wise to lose one’s tempers when dealing with an excitable crowd, but Delenn had always been
a little high-strung (the very start of the Earth-Minbari war was proof enough for that), and her
change did not help things.

There was a strong possibility that the League ambassadors would simply up and leave, taking her
by word. And then Sheridan’s plan would fail spectacularly.

Fortunately, nothing of that sort happened… yet. For a long, awkward moment the ambassadors fell
silent, thinking over the situation. It was the Drazi who finally moved.

“Ambassador Delenn, if we give you all the ships you ask for, it will weaken our defences around
Homeworld.”

“I know it is a risk…” Delenn began, a bit defensively.

“… but it is absolutely necessary,” Neroon interrupted before the others could have latched at her
slight uncertainty. “We must hit the enemy hard enough to force him into retreat, at least for a while.
We need some breathing time to build up our forces further."

He positively radiated the arrogant self-confidence Minbari Warriors were known for… and it
worked.

“Where are we supposed to launch this attack from?” the Drazi asked.

Neroon, having no idea himself, looked at Lennier.

“The ships will gather in a holding area in hyperspace, approximately two hours from their final
destination,” the young priest explained. “Then, and only then will their destination be revealed.”

“And what will you bring to this arrangement?” the Brakiri ambassador asked with thinly veiled
hostility.

“As many Minbari cruisers as can be spared,” Neroon replied smoothly, before either Delenn or her
aide could have made the mistake of revealing the actual numbers. “I shall lead them myself from the
Ingata.”

“And some additional forces you have not seen yet,” supplied Lennier, but the ambassadors seemed
more impressed by the fact that Neroon – a living legend among his own – would personally
participate in the upcoming battle.

Delenn realized it, too, and did not seem very happy about it.

“Let us know when you’ve finished your deliberations,” she told the ambassadors in a clipped tone.
“But do not take long. Our time is short – and growing shorter.”

With that, she whirled around and left, Lennier hot on her heels. Rastenn looked at his uncle, raising
a hairless eyebrow ironically.

“And she calls herself a diplomat? This could have been handled much better,” he said in Vik, the
Warrior Caste dialect.
“She is a diplomat… but not a tactician,” Neroon answered thoughtfully. “Let us hope that I have impressed these aliens enough to give us what we need.”

Rastenn’s eyebrow climbed another inch higher.

“What we need?” he echoed. “Have you identified with Delenn’s goals, Uncle?”

Neroon shrugged. “We have been given proof beyond doubt that the Ancient Enemy has returned, have we not?” he asked. “We are Warriors; it is our duty to protect our people, regardless of who else might be fighting on the same side.”

“Even humans?” Rastenn asked doubtfully, knowing his uncle’s deep-rooted hatred for that particular race.

Neroon nodded. “I am not above admitting my mistakes, Nephew. Let us go and speak with the crew of the Ingata. We have preparations to make.”

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If she wanted to be honest with herself (which she always did, regardless of any given situation), Timov was a little taken aback when a blue-skinned alien woman (at least she thought it was a female of its unknown species) who’d introduced herself as Ensign Golwat, led her to the huge metal doors of what had to be a cargo bay.

“Is this were your captain entertains ranking visitors?” she asked, vaguely insulted. The blue alien smiled at her.

“This can be every place you want it to be,” she replied cryptically. “Captain Janeway hoped that you would appreciate the environment.” She laid her palm on a sensor pad on the left side, and the doors slid apart, revealing an eerily familiar sight behind. “Welcome to Schönbrunn Castle, Lady Timov.”

The room Timov entered now seemed to be an audience chamber of some sort, its walls covered with gold-framed murals that reached from floor to ceiling, from which an enormous crystal chandelier hung. The window-frames were gilded, too, as well as the wooden parts of the overstuffed, silk-covered seats and ottomans that were arranged around a low, delicate coffee table.

A tall, thin woman, wearing a dress with a bell-shaped skirt of heavy, embroidered mauve silk, rose from one of the seats to greet her. She had brown hair, arranged in long, decorative tresses on her bare shoulders and held a closed fan in her lace-gloved hand.

“Greetings, Lady Timov,” she said; her somewhat rough, not very feminine voice broke the illusion at once. “I am Katryn Janeway, the captain of Voyager. I am told you wanted to speak with me.”

Timov looked around again, taking in the abundance of gold, silk and other decadent stuff and frowned.

“I didn’t know that humans tended to travel in such lush environment,” she said.

Captain Janeway smiled. “We don’t. This is but an illusion, based on holographic imaging and transporter technology. I thought the surroundings would be more familiar to you than my ready room that is, frankly, rather utilitarian.”

“Ninety per cent less gold would suffice,” Timov replied bluntly, looking around her again. “So, this is not a real place at all?”
“It is the facsimile of a real place, back on Earth, that has been a museum for over four hundred years,” Janeway clarified. “Schönbrunn used to be the summer residence of the Austrian emperors. Based on pictures I’ve been shown of Centauri Prime, I found a remarkable resemblance to Imperial Austria, which is why I chose this location. Was I wrong?”

“Not if you planned to meet the Emperor – or my husband,” Timov replied with a snort. “They are both very much into overdone pomp. I’ve got much simpler tasks, myself.”

“I see,” Captain Janeway thought for a moment, and then she raised her voice slightly. “Computer, change environment to program Janeway #117.”

“Acknowledged,” a disembodied female voice answered, and the room around them changed immediately.

They were now standing in a small pavilion in the middle of a manicured garden, consisting of geometric flower beds and grass patches, interspersed with bushes that had been cut in the form of cones or cubes or bulbs.

“Better?” Captain Janeway asked and gestured towards the white chairs with their red leather cushions that stood around a circular white table. On the table stood a delicate china coffee set and a serving woman with a white apron over her black dress was waiting to pour for them.

“Much better,” Timov took the proffered seat and arranged her ample skirts so that she could sit comfortably. “Is this tea?”

“Coffee, actually,” Captain Janeway sat opposite her and nodded the maid to serve them. “Vienna, the capital of Austria, was also the capital of coffee culture… in a way, it still is. I’ve taken the liberty to order one of their specialities for us; and also the sweets that traditionally go with it: Wiener Melange with Sacher Cake. We can discuss politics afterwards.”

Timov hesitated for a moment. She did have a sweet tooth, always had, but she rarely indulged. As a lady of a Noble House, she had to keep up appearances. This one time, though, perhaps it would do no harm to accept the hospitality.

“Very kind of you, Captain,” she said, reaching for the small golden fork.

In front of her stood a large china cup, with a mouth-watering aroma rising from under the small cone of whipped cream, and the maid placed a generous slice of dark chocolate cake on her plate. She sighed ruefully. Humans might be a bit barbaric for her taste, but they made cakes like no other race in the universe.

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Leaving the Council Chamber, Neroon and Rastenn went directly to Sheridan’s office, where they met with him, Ivanova, the human Anla’shok and Voyager’s tactical officer.

“… so we don’t have a lot of time,” Ivanova was saying when they entered. “The Shadows have been driving refugees and support ships into Sector 83 for two months now.”

Sheridan nodded. “My guess is, when enough of these ships are gathered at one place, the enemy will hit them and hit them hard.”

“Which would doubtlessly demoralize your side,” commented the Vulcan.

Sheridan nodded again. “Exactly! The number of refugees escaping into Sector 83 has dropped off considerably for the past few days…”
“Meaning that they may strike any time now,” the Vulcan said thoughtfully. “Do you have a theory when the attack is most likely to happen?”

The Babylon 5 officers shook their heads in unison.

“Not a clue,” Sheridan admitted. “It can happen today, tomorrow, a few days from now… there’s simply no way to tell.”

“And if we wait until we hear about an attack, it will be too late to strike back,” the human Anla’shok added. “They’ll be long gone by the time we got there.”

“It’s a large sector, too, with a lot of potential targets,” Ivanova said grimly. “It’s equally impossible to predict where they’ll strike first.”

“Delenn is working out that part right now,” Sheridan replied. “We’ll have as many ships as we can standing by in hyperspace…”

“Which will do us no good,” Neroon interrupted. “For this to work, we have to know the second the enemy shows up… otherwise the refugees won’t stand a chance.”

This was undoubtedly true, and a long, unhappy silence spread out in Sheridan’s office.

“There is a way,” the Vulcan finally said. “It is risky but doable. You shall have to send out an advance scout patrol in that area.”

“One ship?” Ivanova echoed, but Sheridan nodded in agreement.

“Mr. Tuvok is right. Any more would draw attention and they might change their plans. I was thinking of something similar before I’d ask you here.”

“Which ship do you intend to send, Captain?” the Vulcan asked.

“There’s only one suited for this kind of mission: the White Star,” Sheridan replied promptly. Then he looked at Ivanova. “I want you and Marcus to go, Susan. You’re the only ones I can trust unconditionally.”

The two nodded as one.

“What is the exact mission?” the Anla’shok then asked.

“You are to enter Sector 83 and maintain radio silence until the enemy comes out of hyperspace,” Sheridan explained. “Now, they may come out all at once or in small groups. Either way, as soon as you see them, notify the fleet and get the hell out of there. Is that clear?”

Ivanova nodded again.

“You are not, I repeat, not to engage their forces unless fired upon first,” Sheridan continued. “Now, if that should happen, do what you have to go. But get out fast!”

“Understood,” the Anla’shok said crisply. “Anything else?”

“Yes,” Neroon said before Sheridan could have answered. “I want Rastenn to go with them. I need somebody with first-hand experience where the Ancient Enemy is concerned. We cannot build up our battle plan on hearsay.”

“Are you sure about that?” Sheridan frowned. “We’ve seen how fast those damned Shadow ships
can move. If they see our people before the *White Star* can escape… It is the fastest ship we’ve got, and they’ll need it! Cause even if everything goes right, our best guess is they’ve only got a fifty-fifty chance of getting back alive. You’d be putting your heir at high risk.”

Neroon shrugged. “We are Warriors, Captain. Risk is our business. Sooner or later, Rastenn *will* have to face the Ancient Enemy. It will be beneficial for him – for us all – to gain some experience outside of combat situation.”

“If he survives,” Ivanova commented dryly.

Neroon nodded. “Is that not the case every time we face an enemy? I’d go myself, but I’m needed to get some additional cruisers for the battle – if I can. Shakiri may be willing to listen to me. He will not listen to Delenn… or anyone else.”

“Unfortunately, that is true,” Marcus Cole agreed; then he turned to Rastenn. “Welcome aboard. See you in the docking bay within the hour. The sooner we leave the better.”

The Vulcan raised a dark, elegant hand. “If I may, Captain…”

“Sure, go on,” Sheridan replied, a little surprised.

“I’d also like to go with the scout ship,” Tuvok said. “As the tactical officer of *Voyager* I, too, need to see the enemy with my own eyes. Also, it will be necessary to test if Vulcan telepathy could be used to block Shadow ships, despite the fact that we are touch-telepaths, mostly.”

Sheridan hesitated for a moment. “What does Captain Janeway say to your request?”

“Nothing,” the Vulcan replied calmly. “I shall take some of my accumulated leave and go with you as a volunteer.”

“She’s not gonna like it,” Ivanova warned.

“Of course not,” Tuvok agreed. “But she cannot hinder me. I am very good at using the regulations to my advantage.”

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At the same time Garibaldi and Zack Allan were strolling down the corridor that led to Security Central in Blue Sector. Despite the danger represented by the Shadows, Zack felt better than in a long time. The Night Watch posters were finally gone and new ones had taken their place – ones that were a lot more to his liking. One of them said in big, bold capital letters: BABYLON 5 NEEDS YOU! Which, in Zack’s opinion, said everything that needed to be said.

Plus, he’d brought up the courage to ask out Lyta Alexander for coffee, and while she couldn’t promise him anything (not with the Vorlon pulling her strings like those of a puppet), at least she hadn’t refused the invitation outright. That was something, wasn’t it?

Everything was again as it was supposed to be… save one thing.

“Any news from Doctor Franklin?” he asked the Chief.

Garibaldi shook his head morosely. “He hasn’t been seen since Ivanova got the info regarding the fugitive telepaths from him. Damn it, it’s my fault! I should have confronted him about the stims again, should have gotten him off them earlier.”

Zack snorted. “Chief, you did everything you could. He… he just walked away.”
“Yeah, I know,” Garibaldi sighed in frustration. “But the thing is: sometimes people walk away because they want to be alone. Sometimes, though, they walk away because they wanna see if you care enough to follow them into hell. I think I went the wrong way.”

Zack didn’t agree and saw no reason to hide it. “Look he’s gotta get his head screwed on straight. You can’t do that for him.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Garibaldi admitted reluctantly. “It’s just… you know, I’ve had my own problems. I’ve been where he is. I’ve walked away from a lot of things in my life. I just hope he can find his way again… and come back.”

“That would be nice,” Zack agreed. “Although how the others in the MedLabs will react when he shows up again is everyone’s guess.”

Garibaldi stared at him in surprise. “Why would they mind his return? He’s their boss and they all love him!”

“That was before he would abandon them in a middle of a crisis,” Zack pointed out. “I can’t imagine that Doctor Hobbs is happy to do Doctor Franklin’s job on the side of her own, without a pay rise or as much as a thank-you. Had Doctor Henderson not got stuck here due to the severing of our ties with Earth, Doctor Hobbs would have run herself ragged by now. Doctor Franklin would have done better to delegate than to shoot himself full with stims.”

That was, unfortunately, very true, and so Garibaldi couldn’t find any fitting answer.

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The object of their discussion, in the meantime, was sitting in the bazaar, just off the traffic, trying to sleep with his jacket pulled over his head. His wandering attention, however, was caught by a woman and a little girl who had just entered the bazaar.

They were both blond, the woman wearing a blue jumpsuit… no, it was one of those uniforms from the strange ship that had docked at Babylon 5 a week or so previously. Like everyone else, Franklin had seen pictures of the ship on one of the BabCom screens… and spotted members of the crew strolling all over the station. They were a regular sight in Red Sector, but it was unusual to see any of them in DownBelow.

The woman was clearly human; and a lovely human being at that. The girl, wearing a short beige dress and thighs in the same colour, seemed human enough, too, but she had a row of thorny spikes going down right in the middle of her high forehead; they seemed wicked sharp. Franklin wondered what species she might belong to. He’d never seen an alien like her – and he had seen his fair share of them, more than most people.

The woman was examining the displayed delicate Minbari textiles, letting the girl explore the bazaar on her own. The girl strolled around, taking interested looks at all the knick-knacks displayed on the various counters, finally settling for a complicated 3D puzzle cube of Brakiri make.

“Look, Mum…” she held it out for the woman to see.

“Good choice, Naomi,” the woman, apparently her mother, smiled down at her. “Wait a moment while I select the right cloth, and then we can pay and go on to Red Sector to meet our friends.”

The girl, whose name was obviously Naomi, nodded in agreement and began to play with her puzzle cube. She clearly was a calm and well-behaved child – not to mention highly intelligent, if she found delight in such challenging toys.
At this moment a family of Earth tourists walked into the bazaar: a woman with a pronounced superiority complex, her plain and timid husband and their child who seemed to be about kindergarten age – roughly the same as Naomi. The woman held a printout of the station map in her hand and read out loud the information from it.

“Apparently, this place is called DownBelow,” she announced in a shrill voice, and Franklin poked his head out to glare at her in dismay. Why people felt the need to be so loud was beyond him. His headache got just a bit worse.

The woman, meanwhile, was taking a look around her in disapproval. “I don’t understand,” she said. “It says here this is a marketplace. Hah! I don’t see much I’d want in my house. You’d think they could take better care of the place. Don’t stray, Jessie!” she reprimanded her daughter who’d begun to gravitate in Naomi’s direction, clearly glad to have found another child of her age. Jessie stopped ruefully.

“It says this is the kind of place to mind your purse,” the woman continued. “Well, I heard all this is because of their so-called revolution. Breaking away from Earth like that, what were they thinking?”

“Well, Barbara, we do have homeless back home,” her husband reminded her timidly.

That earned him a spontaneous and thorough dressing down on the spot.

“Ssh! James Cooper, I’ve told you before not to contradict me in front of Jessie! It’s not good for her…”

Jessie, obviously used to her mother’s tirades, used the opportunity to slip away, pretending to follow her playground ball that she’d allowed to bounce around deliberately, until she was standing right next to Naomi.


“Naomi Wildman,” Naomi replied, looking up from her puzzle cube. She listened for a moment to Jessie’s mother and grinned. “Your Mummy’s a bit bossy, isn’t she?”

“You have no idea!” Jessie answered with feeling. “I’m so glad I could go away with Dad to Grandma’s for a while. Grandma is very nice; and she’s not afraid of Mom, unlike Dad.”

Naomi looked at Jessie’s father who was still listening meekly to his wife’s lecturing.

“He looks nice, though,” she said, a bit wistfully. “I wish I knew my Daddy.”

“What happened?” Jessie asked. “He’s not dead, is he?”

Naomi shook her head. “No; at least I hope he’s not. But he remained back at Deep Space Nine when our ship got lost in space, four years ago. I wasn’t even born yet, so I never met him.”

“You were born on a spaceship? In deep space?” Jessie’s eyes grew large and round as saucers. “Wow! How old are you?”

“I’m almost four,” Naomi replied.

Jessie frowned. “You look much older.”

“That’s because my Daddy is a K’tarian,” Naomi explained readily. “His species matures much faster than humans. See this?” she pointed at her forehead spikes. “Were I a full K’tarian, they’d
have grown out by now, forming the typical forehead ridges. But I’m only half. Mummy’s human.”

“May I?” utterly fascinated, Jessie reached out with a tentative hand to touch the spikes. Naomi held very still.

“Careful,” she warned the other kid. ‘They’re very sharp!’

But Jessie never got the chance to actually touch the spikes. Her mother rushed over to grab her, scolding as she was doing so.

“Jessie! I’ve told you to stay away from strange people! You don’t know what a creature like this is capable of; or where it has been. Come!”

She tried to hustle the little girl off, but Naomi’s mother deliberately stepped into her way, so that she had to stop.

“Excuse me,” the blue eyes of the gentle-faced woman were blazing with fury. “I’d thank you if you didn’t call my daughter a creature! She’s a hybrid, that’s true, but that doesn’t mean that she’d be worth less than you. On the contrary, since you’re obviously an ill-mannered, ignorant and bigot woman. You shouldn’t be allowed to leave Earth and insult people so far above you that you wouldn’t be able to see them through a radio telescope. I feel sorry for your daughter. She seems like a nice kid; it’s a shame that you can poison her soul with your xenophobia unhindered,” she took Naomi’s hand. “Come, sweetheart. We’re done here. Let’s not make Mr. Cotto wait.”

Going with her mother obediently, Naomi glanced back over her shoulder at the new friend she’d found and lost in such record time. Hiding behind her father, Jessie gave a sad little good-bye wave.

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Sam Wildman chose to walk from DownBelow to Red Sector instead of using the transport tube. She was too livid to sit in a transport cabin; she hoped the physical activity would help her calm down. Naomi, gauging her mood, wisely remained silent. She knew her mother rarely got truly angry, but when she did, it was always for a good reason.

“I feel sorry for Jessie,” she offered after a few moments of silence. “It must be horrible to have a Mum like hers. I am lucky to have you.”

Sam glanced down at her precocious little daughter and smiled involuntarily. “And I’m lucky to have you, sweetheart. Let’s hurry up, shan’t we?”

Naomi nodded eagerly. “We haven’t seen Mr. Cotto for too long. He’s always so nice. Is it true that he was hurt by bad people?”

Sam looked at her daughter in surprise. “How would you know that?”

“I asked Marcus,” Naomi replied with a shrug. “He said that bad people hurt Mr. Cotto but Commander Tuvok helped him with the memories and he’s all better now. Is it true?”

“I don’t know the details, sweetheart,” Sam made a mental note to have words with the Ranger about what should be told a four-year-old and what shouldn’t. “But I wouldn’t ask Mr. Cotto directly. Whatever happened to him was pretty bad, and perhaps he wouldn’t like to be reminded of it. Especially at the dinner table with friends. All right?”

“Sure,” Naomi shrugged again. “I’ll ask Tom later. Or Seven. She always knows everything.”

Sam suppressed a sigh. Her daughter’s fascination with the former Borg drone was, while
understandable, a little unsettling. Especially where information was concerned. She could ask Tom Paris not to tell Naomi any details about the nature of Vir’s injuries; no-one could tell Seven what to do, though. Not even the captain.

“Well, here we are,” she said, steering Naomi through the door of the Fresh Air Restaurant. “Try not to be too inquisitive. Mr. Cotto is introducing us to his fiancée and she might not like being asked too many questions by a child. Not everyone does.”

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Lyndisty watched with wary interest the tall, gentle-faced human woman and her child as they approached their table. The woman was wearing one of those odd-looking jumpsuits all personnel of the strange Earth ship seemed to wear – they were supposed to be some kind of uniform, which was ridiculous. Who’d ever seen a uniform like that: a black coverall with shoulder parties in different colours? Where were the rank insignia, the epaulettes, the golden fringe, the weapons belt… the weapons?

Of course, the regular EarthForce uniforms completely lacked any aesthetics as well; and the new ones Captain Sheridan had made for his staff were grim and depressing, too. At least the ridiculous jumpsuit seemed practical and comfortable; even if it was shameless for a woman – for any woman, regardless of her species – to wear such form-hugging clothes.

Despite her outrageous outfit the human woman seemed harmless enough. Lyndisty guessed that she’d count as attractive among her own people; it was a known fact that the majority of human males had a soft spot for blondes. It was ridiculous to define a woman’s sex appeal by the colour of that fairly unattractive fur growing on their heads – there was a reason why Centauri women shaved their heads – but humans were a ridiculous species with rather low standards. Lyndisty never understood why anyone would be attracted to them – they weren’t a particularly refined people as a whole – but if she wanted a future with Vir, she had to make compromises.

And right now marrying Vir appeared the best choice, politically. Life on Centauri Prime was more than a little dangerous; no-one could be certain of their positions – or of their very lives – given Emperor Cartagia’s wild mood swings. As the wife of Londo Mollari’s insignificant aide she would be able to avoid the spotlight – which was the safest thing possible at the moment – and she could count on Lady Timov’s protection; both aspects crucial for one’s well-being. Mingling with humans was a small price for that safety.

Vir made the introductions and Lyndisty eyed the child with interest while exchanging meaningless pleasantries with the mother. The girl – Naomi, her name was Naomi – was surprisingly tall for a four-year-old, with a somewhat old-looking face. She appeared human enough, save for the row of thorny spikes practically bisecting her high forehead. She also appeared fairly mature for her age, mentally; precocious even.

Lyndisty felt immediate dislike for such an unnatural little creature but was diplomatic enough to hide her true feelings; more so as Vir obviously adored her. Oh, she knew the child was a hybrid. She’d even been shown pictures of K’tarians, a vaguely felinoid species with large, intricately ridged foreheads and lion-like manes, to whom the child’s father supposedly belonged. She just couldn’t understand why a human would choose to mate with one of them. It seemed uncomfortably close to bestiality in her eyes… disgusting, really.

Of course, considering the fact that Mariel, Ambassador Mollari’s youngest wife – well, ex-wife now – had lowered her standards deeply enough to have an affair with a Narn (and with G’Kar, of all people!) this human tendency to mate with aliens didn’t seem half as bad, after all.

Still, she couldn’t understand why they would choose to have offspring as well. Hybrids were
infertile as a rule, weren’t they? So, even between species with compatible genes, there was a ninety per cent chance that the bloodline would end with their spawn. Where was the reason in that?

Nonetheless, if human women were this ready to indulge in affairs with alien males, she needed to keep a gimlet eye on Vir. Their marriage might be arranged, but she wasn’t willing to step back and play second fiddle, as the humans would say, to some wanton alien female. And if Vir was so interested in having children, she’d try to give him children, despite his potential infertility. There were always methods to get around such minor problems.

*Where there’s a will, there’s a way*, the humans liked to say. And willpower she had enough for a dozen people.

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In the meantime Neroon was sitting with his nephew in his temporary quarters in Blue Sector, giving the young Warrior last instructions.

“I have arranged for several Clan warships to join Starkiller’s fleet in hyperspace, near the endangered sector,” he said. “However, since *Shai Alyt* Shakiri has yet to officially acknowledge the return of the *Sher’shok Dum*, they won’t be able to interfere – unless they have to rescue a Clan brother of sufficiently high standing.”

Rastenn frowned for a moment; then, being the bright young Warrior that he was, he nodded.

“You want me to send a distress call?”

“On a particular frequency, as soon as *Anla’shok* Cole has alerted the fleet,” Neroon handed him a data crystal. “It won’t be easy. The *White Star* does not have your voice pattern among the authorized ones, so you shall have to do it manually – while Ivanova is watching you like a hawk. Do not underestimate her; she is twice the warrior Sheridan could ever hope to become.”

“I shall not disappoint you, Uncle,” Rastenn pressed his fists to his chest in warrior fashion. “I have only one question to ask.”

“Which were…?”

“Do you really believe that Sheridan will have a fleet to send to the endangered sector? Because the League of Unaligned Worlds hasn’t come to a united decision yet. And if they chose not to send their ships, not even our *Sharlin*-class warships can hope to survive the encounter, no matter how good Delenn’s new *White Star* ships might be.”

“I cannot answer your question,” Neroon said after some lengthy consideration. “I’ve done my best to support Delenn in this, despite what I may think about her personally, but not even I can predict what those people will decide. It matters very little, tough. We are Warrior Caste; it is our calling to protect those who cannot protect themselves. By our oaths, we are honour-bound to fulfil our obligations. Even if it costs us our lives. Death before dishonour – that was always the most solemn oath of our Clan, and no-one of us has ever been an oath-breaker. Go now and may Valen protect you!”
Barely had Rastenn left when Neroon received a call – from Delenn, none less.

“I am about to return to the Council Chamber to receive the League’s decision,” she said. “I would like you to join me; your presence was helpful last time, and I might need all the help I can get.”

Neroon inclined his head. “Of course. As you said, we need to present a united front; even if the rest of the Warrior Caste chooses not to support my decision.”

“Thank you,” she seemed genuinely grateful, perhaps for the first time since they had known each other. Neroon could not suppress a bit of smugness but was diplomatic enough not to show it.

“We all live to serve,” he said smoothly before breaking the connection.

Which was the simple truth for every Minbari. He left his quarters, heading for the Council Chamber.

He found Delenn already there upon his arrival – but no-one else. For a moment his heart sank, and Delenn’s face – much easier to read since her transformation – mirrored naked despair. Neroon couldn’t blame her. Without the support of the League, the White Stars, relying more on speed and skill than on firepower, wouldn’t stand a chance. The few warships Clan Star Riders could spare would not be enough.

After a moment, though, something moved in the dimly lit room and the bulky shape of the Drazi ambassador emerged from the otherwise empty pews.

“The others have gone to speak with their governments,” he said simply. “They have authorized me to speak in their place. You will have all the ships we can spare, Delenn. I only hope that you are right, because it would cost us greatly if you are wrong.”

“She is not wrong,” Neroon replied, giving Delenn a moment to get her relief under control.

The Drazi shot him a baleful look. “Why don’t we see any warships of your Caste then, Alyt Neroon?”

“Because they are on their way already,” Neroon answered calmly.

The statement silenced the Drazi, and after a lengthy pause he simply turned around and left them alone.

“Did you tell him the truth?” Delenn asked. “Will the Warrior Caste join us in Sector 83?”
Neroon sighed. “Not the Caste as a whole, I am afraid. But I summoned as many warships as my Clan can spare; and the Moon Shields signalled their willingness to help. Unfortunately, their fleet is positioned at the other end of our sector; they might not arrive in time.”

“Still, every single ship with trained Warriors on board will count,” Delenn said. “But how are you going to explain your presence without the Shai Alyt’s direct orders? You may be accused of undermining his authority.”

“Not if our ships are racing to rescue my heir,” Neroon replied with a grim smile and Delenn nodded in understanding.

“So that is why you’re sending him with the scout ship. Ingenious move. It won’t be easy for him, though, sending a distress call. Not with Ivanova breathing down his neck. She will mistrust him for the mere reason that he is your heir.”

“I hope that he will come to an understanding with Anla’shok Cole,” Neroon admitted. “They are both resourceful enough to see it done; and if anyone, Marcus Cole will believe that our intention to help is genuine.”

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To say that Janeway was not happy about Tuvok’s decision to go with the White Star scout ship to Sector 83 would have been the understatement of the century. She was positively furious; more so with Tuvok, of whom she would have expected to support her attitude towards this foreign universe, than she would be with anyone else.

“Just which part of non-interference does he not understand?” she fumed. “It is bad enough that we’ve got involved in the conflict between Babylon 5 and those Nightwatch people; now we’re supposed to pick a fight with these Shadow creatures as well?”

“It isn’t us who pick a fight,” Chakotay replied dryly. “As far as I understand the facts, these Shadows attack everyone on principle; everyone not already on their paylist, that is.”

“And who can be sure that their side is the wrong side?” Janeway asked. “We only have the word of the Minbari for that; and they are but the tools of the Vorlons. Let me tell you, Commander: what little we’ve seen from Babylon 5’s resident Vorlon so far doesn’t induce a great deal of trust in me.”

“Not in me, either,” Chakotay agreed. He’d been just released from Sickbay and was still weak like a kitten, restricted to light duty; which currently meant serving as the sounding board for the captain. “I cannot shake the feeling that the Vorlons and the Shadows are but the two sides of the same coin and both equally dangerous to cross.”

“What makes the difference then?” Janeway muttered.

Chakotay shrugged… very, very carefully. The newly grown muscles still needed some practice, even for the simplest everyday functions.

“In my eyes?” he clarified. “Their allies. I find the Minbari an honourable species, even if their rigid moral principles and traditionalism can lead them down a terribly wrong path if they aren’t careful. A bit like Vulcans, really. Their intentions seem good, though. Besides, so far I haven’t heard of the Vorlons attacking and destroying entire worlds just because they can. So I’d consider them the lesser evil, at least for the time being.”

“We shouldn’t be involved in this war,” Janeway insisted. “This isn’t our fight; this isn’t even our universe.”
“True,” Chakotay allowed. “Yet we are here now, for who knows how long, and under the circumstances I’m afraid we don’t have the luxury of remaining neutral.”

“I won’t allow Voyager to enter the fight,” Janeway stated categorically.

Chakotay nodded. “I agree. We could change the balance of power; or we could be destroyed. There’s no way to know what those Shadow ships can do, not before we’d actually encounter one. But we could allow those who want to partake in this fight to volunteer.”

“You mean the Maquis,” Janeway said with an unhappy grimace.

“No, not only the Maquis,” Chakotay replied coldly. “There are quite a few among the Fleeters as well who are eager to help our fellow humans. I suggest that we allow them to do so… or else some might decide to leave Voyager and join Captain Sheridan’s forces for good.”

Janeway stared at him in shock. “You are serious.”

“Very serious,” Chakotay said. “You must understand them, Captain. The Earth of this universe is not necessarily the place where I would like to live. But in the eyes of the crew, at least the humans among them, they’re among their own people here, no matter the circumstances. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them chose to remain here, even if we do find a way home.”

“But why would they do that?” Janeway shook her head in bewilderment.

Chakotay shrugged. “Because back in the Delta Quadrant all they have got is a vague hope. Here they have something real, even if it isn’t their reality. If you want names, I expect Jarvin would want to stay in this universe. In fact, I’d bet on it.”

“Why Jarvin?” Janeway asked.

“He’s been more uncomfortable about being on a Starfleet ship than most of the Maquis,” Chakotay explained. “And he’s gotten involved with a young woman from Quantum Mechanics. I think they’d like to settle down, raise a family.”

“If we want to theorize, the person I’d expect to stay is Baxter,” Janeway said thoughtfully.


“He’s adventurous, a risk-taker,” Janeway pointed out. “I can see him wanting to take on the challenge of building a new life in this alternate reality.”

Chakotay considered the possibility for a moment. “I’d hate to loose Baxter,” he then declared. “He’s a good man; not only an excellent security officer but he maintains an interest in several scientific areas, including archaeology and geology.”

“And I’d hate to loose Jarvin,” Janeway countered. “I don’t want to loose anyone. We’ve all been through so much together, it wouldn’t seem right.”

“Perhaps not,” Chakotay allowed. “But I couldn't blame anyone for staying behind.”

“What about you?” Janeway asked after a meaningful pause.

“Oh, I’d definitely prefer returning to our own reality,” Chakotay replied. “I’m still hoping that we’ll find a way home – to our home. There are people counting on me: family, friends, brothers-in-arms. I won’t abandon them if there’s a chance to get back. Besides,” he added with a self-deprecating
grin, “in my current state I’d be of no use in a battle.”

“You’d be of much use for me, though, if you’d deal with the volunteers,” Janeway sighed. “Frankly, I could save face through that, and it would give me the time to meet Ambassador Mollari.”

Chakotay raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Oh? You’ve changed your mind about that? What happened?”

“His wife happened,” Janeway confessed. “She showed up in the docking bay, determined to camp out there until I talked to her and believe me, she would have done so, even if it took her days… or weeks.”

“She must have an extraordinarily strong will if she manages to live with Londo Mollari, given the things that we’ve heard about him,” Chakotay commented.

“They don’t actually live together,” Janeway corrected wryly. “According to her, the secret of their successful marriage is as little personal contact as possible. But yes, she is a remarkable personality with no illusions towards her husband whatsoever.”

“And you’re willing to meet Ambassador Mollari nonetheless?”

“Yes, I think it’s necessary. Lady Timov told me a few things about the Centauri court and the current Emperor that persuaded me that supporting Londo Mollari in keeping his current position would be in the best interest of all parties involved.”

C&C seemed strangely… abandoned without the strong presence of Ivanova, Sheridan thought, as he entered the place and occupied the position usually held by his second-in-command. In Susan’s absence her aide, Lieutenant Corwin was in charge; and it was Corwin who turned to Sheridan, as soon as he entered the room.

“Captain, I’ve Commander Ivanova on Channel 4.”

Sheridan sighed. Ivanova was aboard the White Star already, with Rastenn, Marcus, the enigmatic Vulcan from Voyager and a skeleton Minbari crew, ready to go.

“Put her through,” he ordered.

Corwin did as he was told and Ivanova’s image appeared on the main communications screen. She was sitting in the command chair, with Marcus at her side, looking a bit tense. Which, considering the nature of her mission, was understandable.

“We’re ready to go, captain,” she reported. “Any last-minute instructions?”

Sheridan shook his head. “Aside from an old Egyptian blessing, I can't think of a thing.”

Ivanova gave him a terse nod. “Then we'll see you… when we see you,” she raised her voice. “Full ahead.”

Marcus repeated the order in Adronato – the crew exclusively belonged to the Religious Caste – and the ship pulled away from the station.

Tuvok, standing out from the elaborately robed Minbari like a sore thumb in his utilitarian black and gold uniform, turned to Ivanova with a raised eyebrow.
“An old Egyptian blessing?” he echoed.

"May God stand between you and harm in all the empty places where you must walk," she quoted.

The inquiring Vulcan eyebrow climbed even higher.

“Fascinating. Do humans of your time still believe that their well-being is dependent on the mercy of higher beings?”

“On occasion, yes,” Marcus replied in Ivanova’s stead. “Why? Don’t Vulcans believe in higher beings?”

“Not in the manner you do,” Tuvok explained. “All Vulcans are born with the ability of directly experiencing the immanent power that holds together the universe; a power called A’tha in ancient High Vulcan. However, we never anthropomorphised this power the way humans – or indeed many other sentient species – trend to do. It has been our experience that it does not interfere with the events of our lives; except of keeping the universe intact and functional, that is.”

Rastenn, listening to the conversation from the position of a visiting observer, watched with mild amusement as the humans struggled to grasp the meaning of that enormous statement. Before either of them could have reflected to the Vulcan’s revelations, though – if, indeed, they would find the words – the jumpgate opened right in front of them and the White Star jumped to hyperspace.

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Neroon watched the departure of the scout ship from the tactical centre of the Ingata, together with his senior staff. Not all of those were Warriors – his personal aide, for one, was of Worker Caste, and his chief healer Religious – but all were Star Riders, members of the Clan that had been led by his family from the dawn of time.

“And so it begins,” he intoned before turning to Siarann, his second-in-command. “Any news from our ships?”

“They will reach position at about the same time when the White Star arrives at Sector 83,” she reported. “The Shok’nas have pressed the engines to the limits. They know they cannot afford to be late.”

Neroon nodded in satisfaction. He expected nothing less from the Warriors he had hand-picked to command the best warships of the Clan.

“What about the crew?” he asked. “Are there any questions about our lingering at Babylon 5?”

“They are wondering,” Siarann admitted. “I told them that we are expecting an encounter with a dangerous, unknown enemy – which is the truth, for who among us can say that they know the Sher’shok Dum and what they are capable of? – and Rastenn went ahead to scout the territory for us. Which is also the truth.”

“How do they feel about us working with Delenn and the humans?” Neroon asked.

This time it was his aide who answered. “They are somewhat surprised, Alyt, but they trust you to act in the best interest of Clan and Caste. We all do.”

“They must be bewildered, though,” Neroon said. “I am well known for my express dislike for both Delenn and the humans. They must also know that I let the human Anla’shok live after denn’sha, dishonouring myself by doing so.”
“Everyone on Minbar knows that by now,” his aide replied dryly. “But we of the Clan also know your reasons; and we know that you have made amends through revelation and trying to right the wrongs you have caused. We respect that and trust that you know what you are doing. As for the rest: understanding is not required; only obedience.”

Neroon nodded gratefully. He had always known that his crew was loyal to a fault, but in this particular case, when he saw himself forced to make the most unusual alliances for Minbar’s sake, their support was invaluable.”

“Very well,” he said. “Have the ship prepared for battle. We shall leave the station as soon as the full system’s check has run its course.”

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Janeway had the meeting with the Centauri ambassador arranged through Vir, who usually made Londo’s appointments for him. Said meeting was scheduled right after her check-in with Chakotay and took place on Babylon 5, in a small conference room of Blue Sector. She didn’t want the man who, according to Sheridan and his allies, was associated with their enemy, to see Voyager. Granted, his wife had already done so, but Lady Timov clearly wasn’t a person of great technical knowledge (or interest), so that was an acceptable risk. Allowing Mollari direct access to 24th century Starfleet technology would not be.

Thus a conference room it was, and Janeway made the precaution to take Ensign Jurot with her. It might not be entirely fair to have a telepath present – and a Betazoid at that, whose people didn’t have any qualms to read other people’s thoughts – but she had the impression that Londo Mollari was dangerous and anything but straightforward.

Granted, Ambassador Delenn had pointed out several past occasions when Mollari had proved helpful; even a decent person. But that had been in the past and – according to his own wife – the exception, not the rule. And his association with those Shadow creatures and the horrible consequences of said association – for the Narn, for Vir Cotto personally and for people back on the Centauri homeworld – made Janeway extremely wary towards him. She might have accepted Lady Timov’s word that it was in everybody’s best interest to keep Mollari in his current position because every alternative would have been much worse; but it didn’t mean that she liked to have part of it.

She checked her appearance in the mirror. Her dress uniform – a concession to the diplomatic situation – was immaculate, every single hair on her head in place. Good. She had been told that in the eyes of the Centauri appearances were important; she wanted to make a lasting first impression.

“Come on, Ensign,” she said to Jurot who, also in dress uniform, was waiting at the door. “Let’s face the inevitable.”

“Aye, Captain,” Crisa Jurot replied dutifully and followed her commanding officer to the turbolift, hiding her dismay with practiced ease.

Not that she would be as reluctant to poke around in other people’s heads as Vulcans were – far from it, she was a Betazoid, after all – but she had originally made other plans. Plans that would have been more fun than trying to figure out the truth beneath multiple layers of lies offered by the Centauri ambassador. But, as her room-mate at the Academy used to say (she was of German origins and had the oddest comments sometimes), duty was duty and schnapps was schnapps, and one should not mix one with the other.

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Having parted ways with Delenn, Neroon sought out Sheridan’s company to inform him about the League’s willingness to support them with ships. The human quickly read through the report but
didn’t seem happy with it. On the contrary.

“They’re still holding back!” he declared in angry disappointment.

Neroon nodded. “Of course they do. They are afraid, Sheridan, and unlike you, they have a lot to lose, weakening the defences of their respective homeworlds.”

“None of the ships they’re holding back would do them any good if we don’t stop the Shadows before they could reach those homeworlds,” Sheridan muttered angrily.

Neroon nodded again. “I know that and you know that and Delenn knows that; but all they have is our word. With the possible exception of the Narn, no-one of them has ever had directly to do with the Sher’shok Dum. It is understandable that they would want to keep the illusion of safety; even if it is ultimately futile.”

Sheridan checked the numbers of the offered ships and shook his head in dismay. “This is still not enough. Far from it.”

“It will have to do,” Neroon replied philosophically. “Getting them was hard enough. We should not waste any time now, that we finally have them, though. Keeping them as this drags on, that is going to be really hard. The Ingata and the Dogato are standing by, waiting for us. As soon as we are aboard, they will join the rest of the fleet.”

“I still think Delenn should stay here,” Sheridan muttered as they left his office and were heading for the docking bays. “I mean... Ivanova, Marcus, and me gone, Garibaldi will be up to his ears, with the combat pilots, Franklin’s still on walkabout...”

“She cannot,” Neroon interrupted. “She is more than just the representative of Minbar on Babylon 5. She is Entil’zha, the leader of the Anla’shok; it is her duty and her privilege to lead them in battle. Besides, she is not as fragile as she might seem to you. By all due respect to your protective instincts, she was Satai, just like me, used to make choices that could decide the fate of entire planets. She has the strength and the determination to deal with this.”

“I’m not questioning her strength,” Sheridan said unhappily. “It’s just... I find it hard to see a woman to whom I’ve become close to walk into deadly peril with her eyes wide open.”

“Close?” Neroon echoed, alarm bells beginning to ring in his mind as he tried to put together the signs he had half-consciously noticed lately to a complete picture. “Just how close have the two of you become, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Actually, I do,” Sheridan returned dryly, “but if you are willing to give me some answers I might be ready to overlook the indiscretion. The question is: are you willing?”

“It depends on the nature of the answers you require,” Neroon said evasively.

The last thing he wanted was to discuss Minbari traditions with Starkiller, of all people. But he, too, needed information about Delenn’s further plans, so making concessions might be necessary.

Sheridan gave him a doubtful look, as if he could guess what Neroon was thinking, but in the end his curiosity won over his doubts.

“She said something about watching me sleep in three nights in a row?” he said uncertainly. “Is that a religious tradition of some sort?”

“Yes,” Neroon replied as blandly as he could, while his mind was awhirl with the possible
ramifications. “During the day, we all put on the face we think will do us the most good. But at a certain point in your sleep, as you relax, your true face is revealed.”

“I still don’t understand,” Sheridan admitted; and really, it wasn’t his fault. Humans were just too different.

Therefore Neroon tried a different approach, without revealing that which was not his to reveal.

“She will watch you for one night first,” he explained carefully. “If she approves of your true face, she will stay two more nights and continue to observe.”

Sheridan frowned, still not getting the full ramifications and how could he? He was not a Minbari, nor did he have a Minbari soul – that much appeared painfully obvious – and he lacked the necessary references, too.

“What if she doesn’t like what she sees?” he asked.

“Then you will go your separate ways,” Neroon replied airily, as if they were talking about a light romp in human fashion.

The human really did not need to know that there might be anything else; not from him anyway. Delenn had started this whole disaster; it was up to her to come clear.

Sheridan wasn’t done just yet, though.

“What if she does like what she sees?” he asked.

“In that case the two of you will have to decide how to continue with things,” Neroon said grimly. “I strongly suggest that you ask her about the Alien Prohibition, though, before you get involved in any further rituals. It would spare you a great deal of headache.”

He refused to say more, no matter how much the human insisted, more so as they had to head for their respective shuttles to take them to their ships. But as he was piloting the Alota towards his warship, Neroon had to withstand the urge to bang his head against the instrumental board.

What in Valen’s name was Delenn thinking, initiating a courtship with a clueless human at the brink of a devastating war? And not just with any human but with Starkiller himself! Even if the Alien Prohibition were no longer valid – although it still was, very much so – her family would never allow this… this mockery.

Not to mention what Sheridan would say if he were aware of Delenn’s pivotal role in the Earth-Minbari war.

“Oh, Delenn,” he muttered to himself, “you really know how to stir things up!”
Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Shadow Dancing”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications.

There are different opinions about what the Warrior Caste dialect is called: I’ve seen Lenn’ah, Vik and Fik so far and decided that Lenn’ah was the one I liked best.

Reed and Mayweather are not identical with the “Enterprise” characters, of course. I just needed to give the Babylon 5 pilots names and faces.

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PART 18 – 15 December 2260

Meanwhile, the White Star had been lying silent near a moon in Sector 83. Marcus was sitting in the command chair, having relieved Ivanova but a few minutes previously, while the Minbari crew was doing their jobs without the need for any specific instructions. Rastenn, who had spent as much time on the bridge as he could without resting, reluctantly admitted that they weren’t bad at what they were doing.

Especially if one considered that they were Religious Caste, with no proper Warrior training.

Marcus clearly thought the same, because he mainly let them work as they saw fit. He did order the computer to run another check on the weapons systems, though; just to be sure they were ready. Rastenn nodded in approval; when facing a potentially superior enemy, one could never be prepared enough.

“He appears reasonably fluent in Minbari,” somebody said, and the pointy-eared alien officer from Voyager walked up to him.

“The Anla’shok coming from outside Minbar cannot finish their training until they can speak and think in our language,” Rastenn explained. “At least in one of the three main dialects, although more than one would be preferable.”

“True,” Marcus added, having caught the tail end of their conversation. “I’m pretty fluent in Adronato, which is the language of the Religious Caste, but I’d be lost without at least a smattering of Lenn’ah, as over ninety per cent of the vocabulary concerning weapons and combat was created by the Warrior Caste.”

“Interesting,” Tuvok commented. “One would assume that when training the members of a paramilitary organization they would emphasize infiltration and combat techniques, not language skills.”

Marcus shrugged. “To them it's all the same thing.”

“And meditation,” Rastenn offered. “Only one who is rooted firmly in oneself as well as in the universe can hope to emerge from a fight victorious; or to fight the right combat to begin with,” he flashed Marcus a wry grin. “Apparently, my uncle meditated more after having fought denn’sha with
you than he had done in the last ten cycles in his life... for which you should be grateful. Otherwise our Clan would not fight on your side in the upcoming battle.”

Marcus seemed more than a little surprised by that bit of news but before he could have replied – if he had an answer indeed, which Rastenn doubted – the door slid open, allowing Ivanova back to the bridge.

“What are you doing here?” Marcus asked in surprise. “You should be resting. You’ve been awake for thirty-six hours or longer; you’ll need your strength later.”

Ivanova rolled her eyes. “Assuming I could get any sleep on those stupid tilted platforms, No offence intended,” she added hurriedly with a side glance at the smirking Rastenn. “The captain warned me about the things, but I had no idea!”

“They’re very restful,” Marcus replied serenely. “Good for the back.”

Rastenn bit the inside of his cheek to suppress his grin. The utilitarian platforms on a warship were the Minbari equivalent of the human military bunks – meant to keep the soldiers on constant alert, even in their sleep, not to make themselves comfortable.

Ivanova shot the Anla’shok a dirty glare but obviously held back the first answer occurring to her in front of third parties. “Yeah, sure. Well, if everything is quiet here I’ll just have to give those torture benches another try.”

“I’m sure you’ll conquer them eventually,” Marcus said, amused; then he added in slow, deliberate Adronato. “Nu zin falani en allys midhron.”

The bridge crew, while pretending not having heard a word, involuntarily stiffened; and so did Rastenn. That was unexpected, to say the least – and at such a time, too. On the verge of battle one usually did not declare oneself.

“And what does that mean?” Ivanova asked warily. She had noticed the reaction of the crew, slight it might have been, which was another proof of her excellent abilities as a commanding officer.

Marcus smiled at her innocently. “It’s just a greeting. It means: 'My words are inadequate to the burden of my heart'."

“Liar!” Rastenn muttered under his breath, so that neither the humans would hear it.

Tuvok, however, clearly had, because he raised an interested eyebrow… but chose not to ask just yet.

“Well,” Ivanova clearly wasn’t buying the explanation, “that’s an unusual greeting.”

“Well, they’re an unusual people,” Marcus replied with an enigmatic smile. “Go and rest. I’ll wake you in four hours.”

After a moment of hesitation Ivanova did just that and Marcus leaned back in the command chair with a strangely satisfied smirk. Tuvok waited for the door to slide shut behind Ivanova before turning to Rastenn.

“Am I right to assume that Ranger Cole did not translate that Minbari phrase truthfully?” he asked in a low voice so that no-one else present would hear.

Rastenn gave him a surprised frown. “I thought that communication device of yours would translate
foreign languages for you as soon as they are spoken.”

“Only those that are already programmed into the universal translator,” Tuvok explained. “Our database of Minbari words and expressions is still far too limited for that. So, what did Mr. Cole say in truth?”

“He said: ‘You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met,’” Rastenn said.

The Vulcan nodded. “A compliment then; with the usual human exaggeration.”

“It was more than that; at least in Minbari terms,” Rastenn corrected. “Making such a statement in the presence of witnesses means he has declared his intention to court her.”

“Mr. Cole is not a Minbari, though,” Tuvok pointed out logically.

“But he chose to live among Minbari and has been trained to think as a Minbari,” Rastenn answered. “And, according to my uncle, he is id’Minbari: a human with a Minbari soul. That recognition was what stopped my uncle from killing him during denn’sha, a fight that, by right, should have ended with the death of one of the participants.”

“That is right,” Tuvok called up in memory the basic information about Minbari that Voyager had been given. “Your people believe in rebirth.”

Rastenn nodded. “It had been the topic of much discussion ever since our numbers started to diminish, where those souls have gone. Then, at the peak of our war with Earth, the Grey Council captured one of the human pilots – who happened to be Jeffrey Sinclair, the first commander of Babylon 5 – and they realised that he had a Minbari soul.”

“How?”

“There is a device left behind by Valen himself that recognises a Minbari soul, even in an alien body. The same device Delenn used for her transformation.”

“And after this your people simply surrendered, although they had practically won the war,” it wasn’t a question, but Rastenn nodded nonetheless.

“Minbari do not kill Minbari. There hasn’t been a murder on our world for a thousand years, which is why the last millennium is generally known as Valen’s Peace.”

“And yet Alyt Neroon was willing to kill Ambassador Delenn, not so long ago,” Tuvok reminded him bluntly.

“That wasn’t an easy choice,” Rastenn sighed. “You see, Commander, ending the war was the decision of the Religious Caste. They persuaded the Grey Council of the rightness of that action, but the other castes were never told the reason. My uncle learned the truth when he was chosen as Satai, a member of the Grey Council, but...”

“... but he did not believe it,” Tuvok finished, as it seemed the logical conclusion.

“Not at first, no,” Rastenn admitted. “Not until he looked into the eyes of a beaten Anla’shok Cole who was ready to die for Delenn – for the same Delenn Uncle was willing to kill for Minbar’s sake, regardless of the damage to his own honour – and recognised him as a kindred soul.”

“I must admit that I lack the necessary references to fully understand the logic behind your beliefs,” Tuvok said after a long moment of consideration, “therefore I have to accept your word for it. So, if
Mr. Cole thinks as a Minbari and has a Minbari soul, he just initiated a courtship between himself and Commander Ivanova?"

"In the presence of witnesses," Rastenn emphasized. "Otherwise it wouldn’t be valid. Our courtship rituals are time-honoured and rather… rigid."

"Which would make his claim a valid one, I presume; at least in the eyes of other Minbari," Tuvok continued thoughtfully. "However, I doubt that Commander Ivanova has any idea what just happened between them."

"That is unlikely," Rastenn agreed. "Our rituals are not widely known among outsiders."

"In that case perhaps Mr. Cole would have done better if he stated his intention simply and clearly," Tuvok said. "It has been my experience that most humans are rather ignorant towards the subtleties of foreign cultures."

"Perhaps," Rastenn allowed. "But I shan’t be the one to tell him that; not being bound to either one, not by blood neither by oath, it is not my place to play matchmaker. They will have to figure it out on their own."

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Garibaldi, in both Sheridan and Ivanova’s absence acting commander of Babylon 5’s combat pilots, eyed the volunteers from Voyager lining up in the Cobra Bay warily. Ayala was there, of course, together with Nozawa and Trumari and a couple of others Garibaldi didn’t know by name but recognized them as Maquis – the same ones that had helped taking out the Nightwatch base in Red Sector.

He wasn’t particularly surprised to see them – they were freedom fighters, after all, so it seemed logical for them to join the fight. But there was also B’Elanna Torres, wearing her old Maquis garb and, to general surprise, Fleeters like Walter Baxter, Harry Kim and even Tom Paris. They wore borrowed EarthForce uniforms instead of their own ones.

Garibaldi looked at Babylon 5’s own pilots who were waiting impatiently to board their fighters.

"Are you sure they’ll be able to fly our machines?" he asked doubtfully.

The ranking one among them, a young lieutenant named Malcolm Reed, nodded confidentially. "Yes, Chief. We gave them a thorough crash course at flying the Cobras last week. They’re all pilots; all they needed was to make themselves familiar with our instruments. They’re okay; even though that one," Reed winked at Paris, "is a little crazy behind the joystick."

"Hey!" Paris protested. "I’m the best damned pilot you can possibly get!"

"That doesn’t mean he isn’t crazy," Sergeant Mayweather, another Babylon 5 pilot, commented, grinning like a loon. "But crazy or not, he’s too good to leave him out of this. I vouch for him, Chief. I trained with him."

"What about the others?" Garibaldi asked. "Can you vouch for them all?"

"One of us for each one of them," Lieutenant Reed said. "They’re ready to go, Chief. But even if they weren’t – we don’t have enough people to put into all the cockpits. Do we have a choice?"

"I won’t send unprepared people into battle," Garibaldi declared categorically.

"You’re not sending us anywhere, Chief," Ayala said with a grim smile. "We’ve all volunteered,"
remember? Don’t worry about us; impossible odds are our bread and butter, and we want to help.”

“That’s all well and nice, but does your captain know about it?” Garibaldi asked.

“She left the matter in Chakotay’s hands, and Chakotay said we can,” Ayala replied. “He’s coming, too.”

Garibaldi shook his head in exasperation. “You’re a bunch of crazy fools, you know that? The commander is in no shape to get into a fight.”

“He’s not coming with us,” Ayala clarified. “He’s going with that Minbari Warrior, what’s his name? Perón or something similar.”

“Neroon?” Garibaldi asked in surprise. “He’s going with the Ingata?”

Ayala nodded. “As an observer and a tactical advisor, yes.”

“And Neroon agreed to that?” Garibaldi still couldn’t quite believe it.

Ayala shrugged. “Chakotay can be very persuasive when he puts his mind to it,”

Garibaldi shook his head again. “You know what? I don’t even want to know. Board your fighters, all of you; and try not to get killed before we actually engage the enemy.”

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“You are doing what?” Janeway had the feeling of having fallen down the rabbit hole like Alice – and that not for the first time since their arrival in this alternate reality.

Frankly, she was way beyond pissed by now. The meeting with the Centauri ambassador had been a complete waste of time; Mollari very obviously only wanted to save his own reputation with this audience and was not the least willing to share any information. Not even Jurot’s presence helped much. The Centauri was clearly used to have telepaths poking around in his head – with or without his consent – and had developed a confusingly circular way of thinking, full of lies and half-truths that would have maddened even an experienced investigator.

Oh, there was a great deal of information; only that most of it was likely useless. It would take a long time – and Tuvok’s analytical mind – to sort out everything Jurot had picked up from him and part the junk from the very small bits of useful facts.

Only that Tuvok had gone with the White Star to make his own impression about the Shadows and see if his telepathic powers would be any help against them.

That was bad enough. The fact that a dozen or so of her crew had volunteered as fighter pilots to help Babylon 5 was worse. And now this…

“I’m going to accompany Alyt Neroon aboard his warship in the upcoming battle,” Chakotay repeated calmly. “This is a unique opportunity to see the Warrior Caste and their warships in action; we can’t afford to lose it.”

“Why not?” Janeway massaged her temples against an upcoming headache. “We have nothing to do with the Warrior Caste. They don’t seem to think much of us humans as a whole.”

“Exactly,” Chakotay said. “And considering how uncertain the situation is on Minbar itself, we can’t be sure that the majority of the Warrior Caste won’t turn against us – against humans in general –, should the tensions between them and the Religious Caste escalate. If that happens, tactical
knowledge may be crucial.”

Janeway shook her head unhappily. “We’re getting more and more involved in a conflict not our own. I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I, but we can’t really avoid it,” Chakotay pointed out reasonably. “We are humans; and neither the Shadows, nor the xenophobic Minbari Warriors would care that we’ve come from a different reality.”

“That still doesn’t mean we ought to take sides,” Janeway replied stubbornly.

Chakotay shook his head and sighed. “If we want to survive at all, we have to take sides, Captain. As you’ve said before, we’re but one ship, with a small crew, and we happened to show up here in the middle of the greatest conflict of the millennium.”

“All the more reason to remain neutral!” Janeway insisted.

“That is not an option,” Chakotay declared coldly. “You are an able scientist, Captain, but, by all due respect, you are not a tactician. I am. So try to trust me in this, because I know what I’m talking about. If we want the help of that mysterious alien machine down on the planet beneath us, we need the help of Babylon 5. And if we want their help, we ought to give them something in exchange. It’s that simple.”

“I can’t accept that,” Janeway protested. “This goes against every principle we were taught as Starfleet officers.”

“Perhaps,” Chakotay allowed. “But Starfleet and its principles and regulations are beyond our reach, a hundred years ahead of us, in a different reality. If we want to ever get back to them, we need to be a bit more flexible in our thinking.”

Janeway wouldn’t have given in any time soon, but their discussion was interrupted by Hogan, currently on duty in the transporter room.

“Hogan to Chakotay.”

Chakotay touched his comm badge. “Go on.”

“Commander, the Ingata is ready to accept you now. The coordinates are all set and they want to leave the station as soon as you’re aboard.”

“I’m ready to go,” Chakotay replied. “Lock on to my comm badge and beam me over.”

“Understood,” Hogan’s voice said. “Initiating transfer now.”

In the next moment Chakotay turned into a sparkling column of energy and disappeared.

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What he didn’t know yet was the fact that Janeway wasn’t the only one who didn’t take his decision to go to battle with Neroon well… to put it mildly.

“Sometimes I think all men are insane,” Lillian Hobbs complained to Maya Hernandez in the relative privacy of her – well, Franklin’s – office.

The MedLabs were quiet and semi-abandoned, with only duty personnel at their stations, but both doctors knew that this was merely the calm before the storm. After the battle, regardless of its
outcome, they’d be up to their eyeballs in blood and gore.

They were prepared for it. They were both professionals, with a great deal of experience where battlefield trauma medicine was concerned. That didn’t mean the knowledge would make them happy, though.

“It was rather… reckless of him,” Maya Hernandez agreed. “I still don’t fully understand how that regeneration gel therapy of theirs works, but last time I checked Voyager’s medical logs, the most the commander was capable of was sitting upright and walking without aid.”

“You got into their medical logs?” Lillian was impressed. “How did you manage that? I thought our systems weren’t compatible.”

Hernandez shrugged. “I told that holographic doctor of theirs that I needed the data for our medical logs, since we were the ones who began the immediate treatment of the commander, and he simply sent me the results.”

“Just like that?”

“Well… he demanded all possible details on Centauri physiology and illnesses that we could give them in exchange, but that’s okay. I think they’re trying to treat Vir’s condition… if they can. Nerve damage is something even their technology may not be able to repair fully.”

“I hope they can help Vir,” Lillian said. “He’s such a kind person; he doesn’t deserve to be permanently damaged because of Londo’s political scheming.”

“Unfortunately, bad things often happen to good people,” Hernandez replied with a shrug. “Even to those who do not take unnecessary risks,” she paused; then she lowered her voice to prevent being overheard. “Did you find the chance to speak with the commander in private?”

Lillian shook her head unhappily.

“I see. So he still doesn’t know about the baby?”

Lillian shook her head again. “That isn’t something I’d discuss via comm channel.”

“But you visited him, several times. Spent hours in their Sickbay with him,” Hernandez said in surprise.

Lillian sighed. “Yes, but we were never alone. The healing process was constantly monitored; and he wasn’t even fully conscious, most of the time. I didn’t want the whole ship know it before him.”

“I understand that,” Hernandez said. “Still, it would have been a good opportunity to tell him. I don’t believe the medical personnel would have violated his privacy. They might not have sworn the same oath as we, but at least the hologram was programmed with the necessary medical ethics, or so I’m told.”

“Perhaps; but I don’t think that either Lieutenant Paris or the alien girl have sworn any kind of oath,” Lillian replied. “They’re not trained nurses or med techs; they might not even know what they’re supposed to keep quiet about. They could have babbled, without meaning to…”

“I seriously doubt it; they seem to take their jobs very seriously,” Hernandez looked at her colleague searchingly. “Are you sure you aren’t just looking for excuses why you haven’t spoken to the commander about the baby?”
“No, I’m not!” Lillian’s face crumpled. “You’re right; I was a coward, and now he’s gone and might never come back, and I might never get another chance to tell him, and the baby might never know him and…”

She burst out in tears. It was as if a floodgate had opened; she simply couldn’t stop. All the stress, the fear, the tension of the recent months broke loose and she just sobbed her heart out.

Hernandez took the younger woman in her arm and made quiet, soothing noises that didn’t really mean anything. She knew Lillian needed to let out all that pent-up tension to be able to function again. So she simply held her and let her cry.

Lillian just began to calm down when the intercom system came alive.

“Security to MedLabs,” Zack Allan’s scratchy voice said. “We need a med team on the Zocalo at once. We’ve got a victim with a knife wound and he’s bleeding out rapidly.”

“Understood,” Lillian pushed her personal problems to the side and was full the professional again. "Mr. Kiriyama, take your team and a gurney and bring in the patient. Doctor Hernandez and I will prepare the operation room in the meantime.”

Kiriyama, the ranking med tech of the shift, nodded once crisply, and a minute later four medics were running with a gurney towards the elevator. They were the senior team that had weathered many conflicts since Babylon 5 had come online; very few things could shock them in these days.

That this would be one of those few things no-one could have known in advance.

Endless minutes of tense waiting followed. Lillian and Hernandez scrubbed up and prepared everything for the arrival of the presumably critical patient, but despite keeping themselves busy, time seemed to stretch on and on into eternity.

Finally, after what seemed forever but hadn’t likely been longer than ten minutes altogether, the med team came running in, pushing the gurney before them. Lying on the gurney was a dark-skinned man in dirty rags. On his chest the knife wound was still bleeding profusely. He was unconscious.

“Let’s move him to the operation table and cut these filthy clothes away,” Lillian ordered.

Under normal circumstances she would have helped to move the patient, but in the first trimester of her pregnancy it would have been too risky. So she left the task to the experienced med techs and approached the patient when it was done, to cut away his clothes.

She was about to start when she accidentally took a glance at the man’s sweaty face that was twisted into a pained grimace. Her hand stopped with the scissors and she felt a sudden wave of dizziness.

Because the supposed lurker with the ugly knife would in his chest was no lesser person than Doctor Stephen Franklin.
Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Shadow Dancing”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications.

The background on the Ocampa is entirely my doing – I just find it unbelievable that they would only live nine years, procreate only once in their life and still haven’t died out completely. So I thought we would need a better reason for these things. Feel free to disagree.

To the psychic powers of Vulcans: It is established in Diane Duane’s Spock’s World that early Vulcans indeed possessed incredible psionic powers that got lost during their evolution. I bent book canon a bit to make Tuvok’s actions possible.

PART 19 – 15 December 2260

At the edge of Sector 83 the White Star was still waiting silently for a sign of Shadow activity. Marcus was sitting in the command chair and watched the tactical display with the patience of a sphinx – not that Rastenn would have the proper references to make that comparison.

However, what he did have was a great familiarity with Minbari tactical systems, and thus he was the first to spot the small object that was just coming into sensor range.

“There,” he said. “What is that?”

“Definitely a ship,” Marcus ordered a scan and frowned at the results. “Scanners indicate it's composed of materials similar to the Shadow vessels, but smaller.”

“A scout ship?” Tuvok offered, watching the spidery image on the tactical display.

Marcus nodded. “Our opposite number. Sent in to make sure the area is clear before the main armada comes in.” He hit the intercom button. “Ivanova to bridge. Ivanova to bridge.”

Ivanova couldn’t have been asleep yet because she came running within a few minutes. “Are they here?”

“Not exactly,” Marcus relinquished the command chair and stepped forward to get close to the tactical display, “but you’d better take a look at this. We picked it up a few minutes ago.”

Ivanova stepped up next to him. “It looks even more spidery than the big battlecrabs,” she stated. ”And it's close. Has it seen us yet?”

Marcus glanced at the Minbari crewman sitting at Tactical; the Minbari shook his head.

“I don't think so,” the Ranger then said. “We're not picking up any transmissions.”

“It is fortunate that we spotted the ship just as we were about to correct course to stay in the shadow
of that moon,” Rastenn added, generously not mentioning the fact that it was he who had spotted the
enemy vessel. Even so, Ivanova did not take his interference kindly.

“Well good, don’t!” she replied impatiently. “It can read the energy if we use the engines. It would be
like sending up a flare!”

Not for the first time since his original assignment to Babylon 5, Rastenn wondered why would
humans feel the urge to state the glaringly obvious. All of them. All the time. It had to be a genetic
defect, shared by the entire species.

“Yes, but unfortunately, we're about to move out of eclipse,” Marcus pointed out, “and as soon as
we're out in the light...”

The bright sunlight suddenly falling through the bridge windows interrupted him. The ship had
moved out of the shadow already.

“Oh, hell!” Ivanova yelled. “Maintain stations!”

They both ran for their stations. Recognizing the unique chance he might never get again, Rastenn
hurried to the currently unmanned communications station, trying to figure out if it worked any
differently than the ones on a Sharlin-class warship.

Meanwhile, the Shadow scout had changed course abruptly.

“It's seen us!” Ivanova added something in Russian that made Tuvok raise an eyebrow; the universal
translator was programmed with all major Earth languages, after all.

The Minbari crewman at Tactical said something in Adronato.

“Picking up a transmission!” Marcus translated. “Looks like a warning signal.”

“Jam it!” Ivanova ordered. “Engines at maximum! We have to stop it before it can warn the others!”

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Having materialized aboard the Ingata, Chakotay looked around and couldn’t help being impressed.
He was standing in the middle of a large, dark, open expanse with something like a huge grey
umbrella overhead that shone spotlights directly down onto him and Neroon – the only people
currently present.

“What is this place?” he asked in awe.

“Tactical centre,” Neroon replied. “From here we can keep track of the battle.”

“How?” Chakotay asked. “I don't see any displays!”

“You will see when the time comes,” Neroon pushed a rotating chair at him. “Sit. You are still weak,
and you’ll be of no use to me if you faint in the middle of the battle.”

“I doubt I’d be all that useful even if I don’t faint,” Chakotay replied dryly but he took the chair with
relief. “I’m not familiar with your technology; or with that of the Shadows. That’s why I asked for
this chance: to see both first-hand.”

“You don’t need to be familiar with our technology; we are,” Neroon said. “But I am told that
humans are more flexible in their thinking than we are. I do not know if that is true; but if it is, I am
willing to use it to our advantage. Your insights may prove helpful; you are used to fight against
overwhelming odds.”

“Is that what we’re gonna do here?” Chakotay asked. “Fighting against overwhelming odds?”

“I am afraid so,” Neroon said. “Our only advantage is the element of surprise; and even so, it will be brutal.”

“I’ll do what I can to help,” Chakotay promised. “Anything yet from Commander Ivanova?”

“No,” Neroon replied. “It probably means the enemy hasn't appeared yet.”

“What about the rest of the fleet? Are they moving out already?”

Neroon nodded. “According to Lennier, the other *White Star*-class ships have been alerted. They'll meet us at the other end.”

“And your own cruisers?”

“They are already on their way, waiting for Rastenn’s distress call. Each one has at least one telepath on board to help them slow down the enemy.”

“That is good,” Chakotay said. “But do you have a strong enough telepath on your ship?”

“The *Ingata* does have a telepath assigned to her all the time; all Minbari warships have,” Neroon explained. “I cannot tell if he is strong enough to block a ship of the Sher'shok Dum; but fortunately, we have just got reinforcements in that area,” he turned slightly to the left. “You can come out now, little one.”

Another spotlight shone down from the ‘umbrella’, and illuminated – to Chakotay’s shocked surprise – the small, fragile shape of Kes.

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Meanwhile the *White Star* was chasing the Shadow scout relentlessly. Rastenn had to admit that the secret shipyards of the Religious Caste had done an excellent job; no other Minbari vessel would be able to keep up this speed any longer than a few seconds.

“I have never been on a ship *this* fast,” he murmured to Tuvok who was standing nearby, keeping an eye on the tactical display from afar. Vulcan eyesight made it quite easy for him.

The Vulcan nodded in agreement. “And the structural integrity does not seem to suffer from it,” he said. “Impressive. I do not think the Shadow vessel will be able to outrun us.”

The pilot of the Shadow scout must have come to the same conclusion because the little ship suddenly flipped end-for-end and fired, scoring some hits.

“Direct hits on Decks Two and Three,” Rastenn reported, checking the automated damage reports that came in through the communications console. “No damage.”

“Keep on his tail!” Ivanova instructed Marcus. “If he gets out of jamming range, we've had it! Stand by weapons systems! Prepare to fire!”

“What happens if the scout does not report in?” Tuvok asked, while Marcus acknowledged his orders with a terse nod. “Would that not raise suspicions by the Shadow fleet?”

“I don't know, but I do know what'll happen if he gets away!” Ivanova replied. “Let's just hope they were only supposed to break radio silence if there was a problem.”
Tuvok shook his head slowly, thoughtfully. “That is highly unlikely, assuming that the manoeuvres of the entire fleet depend on this single scout.”

“Look, we can discuss this later, when we’ll have the time for it; assuming there will be a ‘later’,” Ivanova turned to Marcus. “Stand by! Fire!”

Marcus pushed a button, and they all watched on the tactical display as the White Star’s beams sliced off two of the little spider’s ‘legs’. The scout tumbled, then righted itself and charged the White Star.

“It's gonna ram us!” Marcus yelled.

“Hard to port!” Ivanova ordered. “Fire!”

Precious seconds were wasted while Marcus translated the orders to the Minbari crew, making Rastenn wonder about the stupidity of assigning people to the ship who did not speak English. Every Warrior serving on Minbari warships had been instructed to learn the official language of EarthGov, for the express reason of preventing such tragic misunderstandings as the one that had started the Earth-Minbari war. One would have expected that the Religious Caste – the one with the most contact to humans and not exactly blameless in starting aforementioned Earth-Minbari war – would take the same precautions.

Clearly, one would have been wrong with that expectation.

And indeed, the short delay was enough for the scout to complete its kamikaze run and impale itself on the frigate's nose. The White Star shuddered violently.

“Damages report!” Ivanova yelled.

“Engines hit,” Rastenn reported calmly. “Automatic repair systems engaged. Repairs will take approximately…”

“Wait a minute!” Marcus interrupted his report. “I'm picking up an energy surge. Distance: five thousand kilometres!”

“Show me!” Ivanova ordered.

Marcus relayed the order to the crewman at Tactical, and they all watched with the sinking feeling of inevitable doom as on the tactical display dozens of Shadow battlecrabs and fighters began to ripple into normal space.

Then more.

And still more.

“That's a lot of ships!” Ivanova said in a low voice.

“That's a bloody awful lot of ships,” Marcus agreed, all levity gone from his voice, and for the moment Rastenn could not blame either human for stating the obvious.

The Shadow fleet was indeed huge. Much larger than estimated. Too large for them, even with the cruisers of the Star Raiders and the League ships entering the battle.

“Jump engines back on line yet?” Ivanova asked tonelessly.

Marcus shook his head. “No.”
“But communications does work,” Tuvok pointed out. “Captain Sheridan needs to be alerted that the enemy has arrived, or he will lose the moment of surprise.”

“Yeah, but if I signal the fleet, this lot might pick it up,” Marcus reminded him. “If they do and we can’t get away…”

“… we shall be the first ones to die,” Tuvok finished for him. “We all knew that when we accepted this assignment. Now we must act. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

Ivanova shrugged. “True enough; besides, who wants to live forever?”

“I do, actually,” Marcus replied in mock exasperation, but his hand was moving towards the button already. “But what the hell?” he pressed a button. “Signal away!”

As everyone was watching on the tactical display he Shadow fleet move closer, Rastenn used his chance. He inserted the small data crystal into the slot on the communication console and sent the distress call.

He did not notice the dark, observant eyes of the Vulcan following his every move.

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“Kes?” Chakotay stared at the fairly-like girl in utter shock. “What are you doing here?”

Kes gave him a gentle smile. “The same thing as you, Commander. I am trying to help.”

“Does Tuvok know that you’re here?” Chakotay asked. “Or the Captain, for that matter?”

Kes shook her head. “No; for they would have objected.”

“And rightly so,” Chakotay said. “The battlefield is no place for people like you. You’re no solider; and way too young anyway.”

“That is not true,” Kes replied calmly. “By the measure of my people I am an adult; and I know what I’m doing. None of you have any idea what my people are capable of when we’re allowed to unfold our full potential. Not even Tuvok; which is why he tends to be a bit over-protective. But this is not his decisions; or yours or the captain’s. It is mine; and I know that I’ll be needed here.”

“How can you possibly know that?” Chakotay shook his head. “Are you now seeing the future, too?”

“No,” she replied simply. “I know it because the ship showed me.”

After a moment of confusion Chakotay understood what she meant… and bleached.

“The Vorlon ship?”

Kes nodded. “It keeps calling to me, all the time, and since I cannot read its thoughts – at least not yet – it has shown images to me.”

“What kind of images?”

“Of the Shadows; how they operate, what they are capable of, what is their true agenda,” she shuddered. “It was terrifying.”

“And you still decided to come with us and face them?”
“Yes. Because I can only evolve if I face challenges that bring me to the brink of my abilities.”

“Evolve,” Chakotay repeated slowly. “Is this something like what the Caretaker’s mate did with the Ocampa who lived on her array?”

Kes shook her head, her face turning unexpectedly hard all of a sudden. “No. In fact, Suspiria was hindering them in their evolution by lengthening their life span.”

“How that?” Chakotay asked with a frown.

“We were meant to have such a short physical existence,” Kes explained. “This is – or rather was, before the Caretaker destroyed the biosphere of our planet – only the first phase of our existence; a cocoon, if you want, which should have broken up after nine local years, allowing us to become beings of pure energy. Only that after the destruction of our environment we no longer had the strength for the transformation. We were – our entire species – like larvae dying in their cocoons.”

“You never told us any of this,” Chakotay said.

“Because I didn’t know,” Kes replied. “Five hundred local years have gone by since the arrival of the Caretaker. That means many, many generations, and we kept devolving with every new one. Things got forgotten; just like our mental abilities.”

“So how comes that you know it now?” Chakotay asked.

“It was the Vorlon ship,” Kes explained. “It tapped into the racial memory every Ocampa carries in their subconscious. It showed me many things from the past of my people. Now I remember – well, sort of – what we once were and what we could become again.”

“And the way to that leads through the confrontation with the most dangerous creatures of this universe?” Chakotay asked doubtfully.

“Right now, right here… yes, it does,” Kes’s smile was calm and serene as if she could see things that remained unseen to everyone else. “There will be other tests and challenges later, of that I am certain. But first I have to face this one.”

Chakotay still wasn’t quite buying it, but their conversation was interrupted by the Minbari Warrior at the communications station.

“Alyt Neroon, we are receiving the appointed signal,” he said. “The Sher’shok Dum have arrived.”

“Finally,” Neroon said. “Synchronize our moves with the Dogato and prepare to jump. Siarann, put the ship on battle alert. We are going in.”

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Meanwhile – deprived of the use of its engines – the White Star was still lying dead in space in Sector 83.

“Engines?” Ivanova demanded.

“Not yet,” Marcus replied grimly.

Everyone was eyeing the tactical display in concern, with the exception of Tuvok whose face was as expressionless as only that of a deeply troubled Vulcan could be.

“They're getting closer,” Ivanova muttered.
Marcus rolled his eyes. “I know.”

“In my estimate they are three hours from this system's target,” Tuvok offered, having made the necessary calculations in his head.

“Which means less than twenty minutes from us,” Marcus added.

“That is correct,” the Vulcan agreed. “However, that is enough time for young Rastenn here to tell us whom he sent that message when he thought himself unwatched – and why.”

Before Rastenn could have even thought of an answer, there was a blur crossing the command deck, and a denn'bok swished open, one end pressing against his vulnerable throat. Clearly, he had underestimated the speed and the reflexes of the human Anla’shok.

“Yes, Rastenn,” the human said with eerie calm. “Why don’t you tell us what the hell you were doing?”

“You should not press the pike so hard against his throat,” Tuvok commented calmly. “He will have difficulties speaking that way.”

“Tough,” Marcus didn’t back off an inch. “He should try anyway; before I start pressing even harder. So Rastenn; last chance to tell the truth before I send you beyond the sea.”

Which, as Tuvok knew from the files about Minbari culture sent to Voyager by Delenn, was the equivalent of death.

“I would like… to see you try…” Rastenn had indeed difficulties to speak with the denn'bokk pressed against his throat.

His hands were free, though, and his reflexes lightning-fast. In a second, he managed to grab the denn'bok aimed at him and to twist it from Marcus’s hands, thanks to his superior strength. The human had not expected such a move; not from a Minbari warrior used to traditional (and rather rigid) fighting techniques, and now he was pinned against the console by his own weapon.

“Better,” Rastenn declared in dark satisfaction; then he shot the Minbari crew a warning look. “Stay where you are or I will kill him on the spot,” he said in Adronato, before switching back to English for Ivanova’s sake, although he aimed his words at the Vulcan. “As to your question, Commander: I sent a distress call on a secret frequency used by warships of my own Clan only.”

“What for?” Ivanova nearly exploded.

“My uncle decided that fighting the Sher’shok Dum on your side would be the needful thing to do,” Rastenn explained, still holding Marcus at the denn'bok’s end. But he could not disobey Shai Alyt Shakiri’s direct order of non-interference. Not openly. However, if a group of Star Rider warships on patrol received a distress call from the Clan leader’s heir – that would be me – they would be entitled, no, obliged to answer that call,” he closed the denn'bok and handed it back to the human.

“Satisfied?”

“How many ships are we talking about?” Ivanova asked.

“Unfortunately, only a standard patrol unit of six Sharlin-class cruisers and their fighters,” Rastenn answered. “We had to keep up appearances; and we still have to perform our duties as part of the border patrol. The Moon Shields are sending ships as well, but those might not arrive in time.”

“Still, six heavy cruisers mean a lot of trained Warriors,” Marcus said, forcing his anger back under
control. “You could have said something, you know.”

Rastenn raised a hairless eyebrow. “And would Commander Ivanova have listened?”

The question was clearly rhetoric, so Marcus didn’t even bother to answer. Instead, he returned to his station to check their situation again. There wasn’t much change. The mammoth fleet of Shadow ships was still closing in.

“A little longer and we’ll have power to engines,” he said, daring to hope again, at least a little bit. “We...” at this moment an alarm went off and his hope died at once. “Uh-oh!”

Everyone turned to the tactical display that showed one of the big battlecrabs, which had suddenly changed course, heading directly for the White Star.

“One of them has picked us up, moving to intercept,” Marcus stated… rather unnecessarily, truth be told.

Ivanova’s face froze into a mask of grim determination.

“Okay, this is it,” she said. “Stand by to...”

“Wait!” Marcus interrupted, turning to Tuvok. “Commander, you’ve come to see if your telepathic abilities are of any use against the Shadow vessels, right?”

“That is correct,” the Vulcan replied.

“Well...” no time like the present,” Marcus suggested. “It isn’t so as if we had any other choices.”

“I don’t understand,” Ivanova frowned. “I thought Vulcans were touch-telepaths; you can hardly touch one of those ships.”

“Most of us can indeed only establish telepathic contact through touch,” Tuvok agreed. “In fact, we have been trained to do so; to keep out the thoughts of others. However, a small minority – mostly those from the desert clans of the Forge – have still inherited the psionic powers of our ancestors.”

“And you never use it?” Rastenn found that hard to understand. Why would someone – anyone – give up a weapon that could not be detected... or taken away by the enemy and against which there was practically no protection?

“It is a dangerous gift we spend our entire lives to learn how to control,” Tuvok replied simply. “Sometimes we fail, and the results are... unfortunate. There were times in which we nearly exterminated our entire species due to our uncontrollable psionic powers.”

“I hate to interrupt the history lesson,” Marcus cut in, “but that Shadow ship is about to come into weapons range; and then we’ll be history. So, if you can do anything, Commander, I suggest that you do it now.”

“I shall try my best,” Tuvok promised and closed his eyes.

He could not tell for certain whether he would be able to hold their attacker back. The Shadows were an unknown factor and they might well be much stronger than him. But he came from a bloodline the members of which had been able to move monolithic blocks of stone with their mind or kill people with a mere thought. The raw power to do so had been suppressed and held under tight control since the Reformation, of course, and opening the floodgates, to borrow a human expression, could be dangerous... for him as well as for the others around him. The backlash could, in the
extreme case, destroy the entire ship.

But that was a risk he had to take; otherwise they would be dead within minutes. So he concentrated and began to slowly, carefully release the powers roiling inside him, under the tight control he had been keeping them since his early childhood. There had been a reason why he had spent most of his youth in a monastery, among the Kolinahr adepts, learning their iron discipline.

He could feel the power rising within him like a hot tide; like the magma in an erupting volcano. He could not have held it back now, not even if he tried. Not any longer. All he could do was to focus the mental firestorm and aim its destructive force at the Shadow vessel.

Focus – aim – release. He was in control (barely), riding the tide of the dark fire, bundling its tendrils into one thick, destructive beam, lashing out at the enemy that wanted to destroy them, just because it could.

“Kroykah!” he hissed through gritted teeth and humans and Minbari watched in shocked surprise as the huge Shadow battlecrab suddenly exploded into a million tiny, glowing bits like some gigantic firecracker.

In the next moment Tuvok hit the floor of the command deck, his entire strength spent. The firestorm inside him was extinguished and darkness engulfed him.
Chakotay watched in awe the tactical centre of the Ingata coming to life all around him, Kes and Neroon. It was as if they stood outside, in the very depth of space, with the starts and the ships of the fleet surrounding them. As if all he had to do would be to reach out and touch them; he had to force his hands to remain on his sides.

The smile on Kes’ face revealed that she caught that stray thought from him and found it amusing. It didn’t matter. The sight was unique and breath-taking.

“And the other ships can really hear us from here?” he asked Neroon.

The Minbari nodded. “Theoretically, yes. But in this case the Dogato is the command ship all other vessels are synchronized to take orders from there.”

He was interrupted when the communications system came alive with the rough, familiar voice of Sheridan.

“This is Captain John Sheridan to attack fleet. We’ve received the signal. Prepare to open jump points in five… four… three… two… one… and jump!”

Following his command, multiple jump points opened at the exact same time and the wave of Alliance ships poured into space near the damaged White Star.

The sight of the huge Shadow fleet was discouraging at first sight – to put it mildly – and Chakotay began to wonder if they truly had a rat’s chance against those ominous-looking black behemoths.

Surprisingly enough, though, there was a considerable amount of glowing debris between them and the White Star – tiny little pieces of debris, like fireflies in space.

“One of the Shadow vessels has been destroyed,” Siarann reported in English, for their guests’ sake, after a quick analysis. “I can identify the residues… that is odd. It seems to have been… incinerated somehow.”

“Save the data for a thorough later analysis and take over weapons control,” Neroon instructed her, now in full battle mode.

“Have your telepaths start jamming their capital ships,” Sheridan’s voice came through the comm system again. “Fighters, take point! They've put escort ships in front, as buffers between our telepaths and their big ships! Take them out any way you can and clear the way! Sunhawks and other medium-class ships, provide escort for our big guns! Everyone else, break and attack!”
“He’s good,” Chakotay commented, and Neroon nodded reluctantly.

“He is. He was the only one who fought us with success in the war,” he said; then he looked at Kes. “Do you feel up to it, little one?”

Kes glanced up at the ‘umbrella’ and fixed on the huge Shadow battlecrab closest to them. “We’ll see,” she replied in a low, determined voice, her eyebrows nearly touching each other in fierce concentration.

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With the help of several med techs working in unison Lillian Hobbs managed to peel the tattered clothes off Franklin, who was fading into semi-consciousness, stop the bleeding, disinfect the ugly knife wound and stabilize the patient… for the time being anyway. Garibaldi, who was left behind due to Sheridan’s last-minute decision (much to his dismay) was watching the process through the glass parturition of the emergency area.

“Do we know what happened?” he asked his second-in-command.

Zack shrugged. “Apparently, there was an attempted mugging. Our intrepid doctor wanted to play hero and ended up with a knife between his ribs for his pains. It’s a miracle that he managed to drag himself into a busier area where he got help. It was a close call, or so I’m told by the two guards who picked him up.”

“He’s stubborn like a mule,” Garibaldi sighed. “I guess he really screwed up this time. It started with the goddamn stims; I told him it would end badly – hey, I know first-hand what it means to be an addict – but did he listen? Of course not, cause that would have made things too easy!”

“We’re all entitled to one spectacular screw-up in our life,” Zack commented philosophically. “Do you think he’s found what he was looking for? Himself, I mean?”

“I’ll tell you if I get the chance to ask him,” Garibaldi made an unhappy grimace; then he knocked on the glass. “Doc, what does it look like? Will he pull through?”

“I certainly hope so,” Lillian came closer for a moment, so that she wouldn’t have to raise her voice. “We’ve stabilized him and cleaned the wound; I’m going to sew it up now, and if we can prevent an infection, he’ll recover, given enough time.”

“How much time is enough?” Garibaldi asked.

The doctor shrugged. “I can’t tell you just yet. On the one hand, it doesn’t seem like he’d had much to eat lately, and malnourishment can slow down the healing. The fact that he’s lost a lot of blood doesn’t help, either. On the other hand, he is, as you’ve put it yourself, stubborn like a mule, and it’s possible that he’ll heal pretty fast, out of sheer pig-headedness. If you’ll excuse me, I have a wound to sew up now.”

With that, she turned away and accepted the help of the nurse who held out a surgical scrub to her.

Zack stared at her retreating back thoughtfully. “What now?” he asked.

“Now comes the worst part,” Garibaldi replied with a sigh. “We wait.”

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“Engines online!” Marcus shouted, while Rastenn crouched down next to the collapsed Vulcan, searching for a pulse.
He found none.

“About time,” Ivanova released a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. “Ready weapons. We’re going in.”

Marcus translated the order for the Minbari crew and the White Star entered the battle, which was soon developing into a desperate furball on all sides. The Shadow ships descended upon the Alliance fleet like a swarm of monstrous vampire bats, and their incredible firepower, combined with their horrible telepathic shrieks was enough to destroy the morale of just about everyone.

Everyone who wasn’t a Minbari, that is.

The crew of the White Star remained completely unaffected, focused on their duty, doing their jobs with the characteristic single-mindedness of their race, following the ‘death before dishonour’ principle to the bitter end.

Only that they found nothing bitter in such an end.

Marcus couldn’t help but admire them; or he would have, had he not more urgent issues to deal with. Having rejoined the battle, the White Star soon took another big hit; one that rattled their teeth through every deck between them and the impact point.

“Damage report!” Ivanova yelled.

Marcus gave his console a quick glance. “Targeting system hit,” he reported unhappily.

“Go manual!” Ivanova, too, remained unfazed; it was one of her greatest strength that she could remain cool and collected in the middle of a fight – the more desperate it got, the calmer she became. “Change course and aim at the smaller targets; they are the more urgent danger at the moment,” she gave the unconscious Vulcan a cursory glance. “Is he alive?”

“Barely,” Rastenn rose from his crouching position. “He won’t be any help for the rest of the battle.”

“There goes our only advantage,” Ivanova sighed. “Typical. Well, people, we’re on our own. Let’s see what this ship is capable of without outside help.”

As the White Star was changing course radically, Rastenn watched in helpless anger beyond them one of the Minbari cruisers getting carved up by the Shadow slicer beams.

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Aboard the Ingata Neroon and Chakotay were watching the same scene in concern.

“As it has been described in The Book of Valen,” Neroon commented grimly. “No other race delights in leaving such carnage in their wake as the Sher'shok Dum.”

“I wonder why the telepaths haven’t blocked the Shadow ship in time,” Chakotay said, frowning.

They had not taken any damage so far, despite the fact that the Ingata had plunged directly into the middle of the battle.

“Perhaps they did not have enough telepaths on board,” Neroon replied. “Or they were not strong enough. Not like ours.”

They both looked at the small, fragile form of Kes, standing in the middle of the cavernous tactical centre like a lost child – or rather like a butterfly trapped in light – and yet holding back their
attackers with her incredible mental strength alone.

Not that the weapons of the *Ingata* wouldn’t do their part. They did, thanks to the highly skilled and well-trained weapons officers. But the one blocking the huge battlecrabs was the small, fairy-like girl in their midst, as hard as it was to imagine.

In the meantime the battle was roaring around them. The alliance fleet had managed to counter a Shadow flanking maneuver, but they couldn’t prevent one of the Drazi flotillas being surrounded. Fortunately, Sheridan spotted the problem in time.

“Minbari cruiser *Infili*, help the Drazi!” he ordered.

The ship in question obediently changed course; but Neroon shook his head.

“It won’t be enough,” he said. “Siarann, do we have the chance to get there in time?”

His second-in-command checked her readings. “No, *Alyt*. There are four large ships and countless small fighters between us and them. Even if we could get through them, we…” she broke off. “Wait a minute! I am picking up an energy spike. A jump point is opening directly next to the Drazi flotilla.”

Which was, in theory, good news. Shadow ships didn’t use jump points: they simply phased into reality when they came out of hyperspace. Therefore they could hope that help was arriving.

“Those are our ships,” Siarann reported in badly-concealed relief as six *Sharlin*-class cruisers and their fighters came through the opening jump point, ready to enter the battle.

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The contingent of *Voyager* volunteers had agreed from the beginning that Ayala would be the one to call the shots for them, even though some of the Starfleet officers, like Walter Baxter, technically outranked him. But even Baxter admitted that Ayala was the one with the most experiences where tight dogfights were concerned. Not to mention Tom Paris who had even served with him under Chakotay’s command, if only for a short while and thus knew well enough what the big, burly Maquis was capable of.

Therefore it was up to Ayala to organize the *Voyager* volunteers into a small but effective task force and to give them orders via a clever little comm device Harry and B’Elanna had cooked up between them. A short-range device that worked independently from both *Voyager*’s main computer and the system used by Sheridan’s forces.

So far they had done well enough. The little EarthForce fighters were fast and easily maneuverable, and the Maquis were used to fly such small craft. Granted, Paris and Kim not so much, but they were quick studies; and besides, Paris was probably the best pilot 24th century Earth could offer.

The battle, though, was worse than even Ayala had ever seen. The carnage on both sides was building up at an alarming speed, and the wreckage was becoming a hazard in its own right. The small fighters on both sides had to dodge the glowing remains of exploded ships that were hurling uncontrollably across space, driven by their own momentum – until they collided with another chunk of debris. Or, in worse case, with a ship that was still more or less intact.

“This is not good,” Ayala muttered. “People, remember, that these fighters have no shields of their own. If you’re confronted with larger pieces of debris, shoot them to atoms. Don’t risk collision, it… oh damn!”

He trailed off as one of the fighters did indeed collide with a large chunk of glowing metal, originally
part of a Shadow ship, and exploded into a deadly flower of destructive energy.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Carlson,” the terse voice of Nozawa replied. “His engine has been hit previously; he couldn’t get out of the way in time.”

“I guess we won’t have to bother with the funeral,” Trumari commented bitterly.

“Nor will we with yours if you don’t pay attention,” Ayala said. “There are four bandits on your tail, in case you haven’t noticed. Flip around and blow them off the sky!”

“Done,” Trumari indeed flipped around his craft, ready to take all four Shadow fighters at once, hopeless though the undertaking seemed.

Fortunately, he was not alone.

“Take the two on your left,” Baxter said, rushing up from below them. “I’ll take care of the other two.”

“Thanks,” Trumari opened fire, while doing some fairly spectacular flying to escape the energy beams of the Shadow vessels; he was almost as good as Paris.

“My pleasure,” Baxter recklessly hurled his fire against the two other Shadow ships and whooped in triumph when they went up in spectacular fireballs.

“Baxter, get out of there!” B’Elanna suddenly yelled. “Get out of there at once, you idiot!”

After a moment of confusion Ayala understood what she meant. A Shadow battlecrab had come up behind Baxter’s fighter unnoticed and was reaching weapons range in that very moment. Baxter reacted as fast as he could, but the warning already came too late. He managed to evade the first slicing beam of the battlecrab, but the second one razed his craft – and himself within – cleanly through the middle.

“Dammit!” B’Elanna cursed. “Where’s a telepath when you need one?”

“Not close enough, apparently,” Ayala replied. “All right, people, retreat and regroup outside of weapons range. This one is too big for us. Focus on the small fighters. We’ll collect our dead later… if we can.”

Standing in the tactical centre of the Ingata Chakotay watched the unfolding battle on the umbrella-shaped display in concern. The Alliance fleet was still taking a terrific pounding, and the outcome still seemed far from certain.

“Ship against ship won’t work to our advantage,” he said. “We should try setting entire squadrons of White Stars operating in concert against individual Shadow cruisers. That way we might whittle down the enemy; but it will cost us dearly.”

“Still, it might work,” Neroon contacted Sheridan and forwarded the suggestion, which was promptly relayed to the White Stars and put into motion.

“You were right,” Neroon said after a minute or so. “It is working.”

“Yeah, and it still costs us dearly,” Chakotay replied grimly, watching as a Vree saucer fired its main
weapon, a veritable firestorm of pulses, against a squadron of Shadow fighters.

“That,” he said, “looks surprisingly like a 20th century Vulcan pulse cannon… only a great deal more efficient.”

One of the fighters, hit by the Vree weapon, was blown into the path of a White Star and they collided. The fighter blew up immediately, but the White Star was crippled, too, as the result of the collision, lying dead in space, at least temporarily.

“They need help,” Neroon said. “Change course and ready weapons!”

His crew carried out his orders without hesitation and they rushed to the aid of the damaged frigate. All around them the fighting was getting more and more desperate, with the numbers of casualties increasing.

Chakotay turned to Kes, worried that the fragile Ocampa girl might not be able to keep up the intense levels of mental energy needed to block the Shadow ships. What he saw nearly took his breath away. Kes looked as always: small, sweet and fragile like the Delta Quadrant version of the Flower Fairy – sans the butterfly wings – with her pointy ears, large eyes and wisps of blonde hair. But her entire form was outlined by a pale golden glow; as if it were the visible manifestation of the mental energy she was extruding.

“This is not good,” Chakotay murmured. “She is losing control; and trust me, when that happens, we won’t want to be anywhere near her.”

“Has it happened before?” Neroon asked, without turning his eyes away from the battle.

“Once,” Chakotay replied. “Fortunately, Tuvok managed to steer her back to herself. We don’t have Tuvok here now, though.”

“It cannot be helped,” Neroon said. “We need her to block the Sher’shok Dum for us. Our only telepath is not strong enough to do so alone.”

“Yeah, but who blocks her for us when she loses the grip on her mental powers?” Chakotay asked seriously. “She burned up the hydroponics gardens in seconds last time, and she wasn’t half as strong as she is now.”

“That is a risk we have to take,” Neroon answered fatalistically. “She is our only chance. If it goes wrong… well, we shan’t be in a worse place than we would be against the Sher’shok Dum unprotected.”

To that Chakotay had no answer; and the battle raged on.

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The White Star under Ivanova’s command was in a desperate state. While not quite dead in space – at least not yet – it had seriously limited maneuverability and dodging both the debris and the enemy ships required extraordinary skills from the navigator.

Skills that the young Minbari at the navigation controls not necessarily possessed. At least not on the required level; not that it would be her fault. One simply could not expect to catch up with decades of Warrior training in a mere year or two. Determination alone was not enough if one lacked the necessary practice.

To her credit, the young woman tried her best to keep them alive; and her best was fairly good. Just not good enough.
“Commander,” Rastenn said quietly, “let me take over her controls. I have been trained to fly ships—
all sizes of them—since early childhood. She is good, but she does not have my reflexes.”

“Perhaps,” Ivanova allowed. “I can trust her, though.”

“Which will help us very little when we are dead,” Rastenn said dryly. “You can trust me in one
point: that I wish to survive, which in turn would mean your survival as well. We both have a much
better chance if I am at the controls.”

Ivanova glanced at Marcus doubtfully. The Ranger shrugged.

“You can’t argue with Warrior training,” he said. “And I for my part would love to stay alive.”

“All right,” Ivanova gave in reluctantly. “I guess it can’t get any worse. Let’s give him the benefit of
the doubt.”

The young navigator vacated her station with ill-concealed relief. She had been trained well, but she
was no Warrior; and it was part of the Minbari mindset to expect Warriors to be better in such
situations than the members of the other two Castes. Usually, they were, too; it was the very thing
they had been bred and raised to do.

Rastenn accepted the chair with a polite nod and closed his eyes for a moment, allowing the battle
meld to emerge— that particular mindset that enabled a Warrior to become one with his weapon, be it
a denn’bok or an entire warship. When in the next moment his eyes opened again, he was the ship;
and his hands, extensions of the highly sophisticated board systems, moved on their own with
economic precision.

The two humans watched him warily.

“He looks… different,” Ivanova commented with a suspicious frown.

Marcus nodded. “It’s called the battle meld; absolute concentration on the task at hand. You could
shoot off his leg and he wouldn’t even notice. Not until the battle is over.”

“Is this what you were taught among the Rangers?” Ivanova asked.

Marcus laughed. “Of course not! Ranger training is intense, that is true, but Warriors start learning
these things in childhood already. By the time they enter service, they’ve got some twenty years of
training under their belts.”

Ivanova shuddered. “That’s… disturbing.”

“It is what it is,” Marcus replied philosophically. “And right now it’s the only thing that might save
our lives… if we are very lucky.”

They fell silent and kept watching Rastenn work in utmost synchron with the ship while the White
Star kept dodging enemy fire and huge chunks of debris.

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“IT seems the battle has turned decisively,” Chakotay said, turning slowly to get the complete picture.
“Can you see the pattern? The arrival of your ships was the turning point.”

“Your tactical suggestion was helpful, too,” Neroon replied, watching in satisfaction as the alliance
ships pursued the remnants of the Shadow fleet, picking more of them off. Running in panic, the
surviving Shadows shimmered out of space, leaving only their dead behind.
“Glad I was able to help,” Chakotay couldn’t turn away from the sight the sight of dead alliance ships scattered in all directions, floating among the surviving ships. “Seeing the cost of our victory, though, somehow I’m not in the mood to celebrate.”

Neroon nodded in grim agreement.

“Unfortunately, this was just the beginning,” he said. “We have won one battle; the war is far from being over. On the contrary, it is just about to break out in earnest, and our chances are not good.”

“This time we had the advantage of knowing where they were going to attack,” Chakotay agreed. “Next time we won’t be so lucky. Such an ancient and powerful race won’t make the same mistake again.”

“True,” Neroon said. “Although in Sheridan’s place I would be worried about Babylon 5, first and foremost. The Sher’shok Dum have doubtlessly learned who was the one who managed to bring all the League words together and organized them into a fighting force. They shan’t forget it – or forgive. And when they come to deal with Babylon 5 once and forever, your people will be in danger, too.”

“I know,” Chakotay sighed. “Captain Janeway will be most unhappy with us.”

“Why?” Neroon asked. “None of this is your fault. The Sher’shok Dum would have come, with or without your presence.”

“That won’t keep the captain from blaming us who have actively participated in the battle,” Chakotay replied. “She will be particularly furious that Kes came with us.”

They both turned to the Ocampa girl who was still standing in the middle of the room, although she no longer appeared to glow.

“Are you all right, Kes?” Chakotay asked, concerned.

She nodded with the serene smile of somebody who was above and beyond the small concern of ordinary people.

“I am fine,” she replied kindly. “Tired, but fine. Don’t worry about me, Commander. I’m not the little girl you all tend to see in me. And I’m not answerable to Captain Janeway; not any longer. I was given the chance to become what I was always meant to be; the chance no-one of my people has got for five hundred years. And I chose to take my life in my own hands.”

“The captain won’t like it,” Chakotay warned, “and neither will Tuvok. You know how protective he is about you.”

“Captain Janeway won’t be able to stop me, even if she wanted,” she returned, now with a hint of steel in her voice. “And Tuvok will understand, eventually, that…”

She trailed off, the calm and serene smile falling away from her face as she became terribly upset all of a sudden.

“Tuvok!” she gasped. “I can’t feel Tuvok anymore!”
Part 21

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Shadow Dancing”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications. The medical babble about Tuvok’s condition is taken from the episode “Flashback”, with the necessary modifications.

Before anyone starts yelling at me about the impossibility of what Seven is doing in this chapter, I’d like to remind everyone that this is an AU; therefore I’m taking the liberty to make imaginary technology work in different ways, so that it would serve the plot.

PART 21 – 15 December 2260

Her regeneration cycle finished for the day, Seven of Nine stepped down from the dais of her regeneration chamber with the elegance of a ballet dancer; something she wouldn’t have been able to do while still a fully equipped Borg drone. Her shipmates would probably say that regaining some of her humanity was definitely an advantage; at least where aesthetics were considered.

For her part, she disagreed. Aesthetics were irrelevant – unless they represented the perfection of cosmic laws – and losing a great deal of her implants had made her a lot less efficient. But they were irrevocably gone now, and there was nothing left than do what the Borg did best: adapt to the new situation.

So far she had adapted well enough. Captain Janeway was pleased with her development towards individuality, and her shipmates had become used to her. Most of them had accepted her as a member of the crew. Some of them, like Lieutenant Torres, still clearly disliked her, and Commander Chakotay still very obviously didn’t trust her. But even the commander considered her an individual now… albeit an untrustworthy one.

No-one of them could even imagine how lonely, how… crippled she was, without hearing the others in her mind. How could they? They had never experienced the unity, the limitless knowledge of the Collective’s shared consciousness. Not even telepaths could ever come close.

But that could not be helped. What was gone was gone, and she had to make the best of her current situation.

She shut down the regeneration chamber to save power till she would need it again and was about to leave the cargo bay when she felt the presence of another.

“Who is there?” she demanded. “Declare yourself!”

“Always so suspicious; always so hostile,” the familiar, light tenor vice chided, and a bald man in a long black coat emerged from the shadows, holding a metal staff.

She rolled her eyes. “Galen. How did you get aboard unnoticed?”

“Trade secret,” the technomage replied lightly. “Magic; or technology too advanced for your
instruments to discover. Take your pick.”

“I am not interested in your games,” Seven told him. “Why are you here again? What do you want?”

“That is a loaded question you should never ask; at least not while the Shadows are still around,” Galen warned her. “And under no circumstances should you answer it if one of their agents asks. As for my presence here: I have brought news and I want to show you something.”

Seven raised an eyebrow. “News about what?”

She seriously doubted that he could tell her anything of interest, but his news might be of importance for Captain Janeway, so she was willing to listen… for the time being anyway.

“About the battle in Sector 83,” Galen replied. “You might be interested in the fact that it has been won; although at high costs; and it was just the beginning of the war.”

“Then your news is ambivalent at best,” Seven stated. “And what is it you want to show me?”

Galen appeared to hesitate for a moment.

“Something that might make you fell less alone,” he finally said.

“Impossible,” she returned impassively. “There are no other Borg in this reality. If there were, I would feel them; even if I could no longer hear their voices in my head. I am alone.”

“No other Borg, no,” the technomage allowed. “But there are about a hundred people who could greatly benefit from your existence; and you from theirs.”

She gave him a suspicious look. “People like you?”

“No,” he replied grimly. “They’ve been a lot less fortunate than I; and not of their own fault.”

“I see,” she said after a moment, in which she analysed the data already at her disposal, trying to put together a possible picture; and failing. The data were woefully insufficient. “And where are these unfortunate people now?”

“In one of the unused MedLabs,” he said. “Captain Sheridan and his war council don’t want anyone else to know about their presence.”

“Yet you obviously do,” she pointed out.

He shrugged. “I have my ways. Well, are you coming or not? Our chances to get in and out unnoticed are lessening with each wasted minute.”

Seven hesitated for a moment. She had no reason to trust this mysterious person who could get in and out of places without authorisation; but her curiosity was piqued now, and she really wanted to see what he intended to show her.

“Very well,” she said coolly. “Show the way.”

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In the meantime the surviving ships of the Alliance fleet had arrived back at Babylon 5, and a lot of shuttles were heading from the ships to the station. In the shuttle bay Doctor Maya Hernandez was coordinating things, issuing rapid-fire orders regarding the wounded being rushed off the shuttles. Her short figure seemed like a rock in the storm, holding together the organized chaos around her.
“She’s astonishingly competent,” Janeway, who had come to see how her crew had done, commented.

“She used to be a battlefield trauma surgeon during both the Dilgar and the Minbari war,” Garibaldi, arriving just in time to hear the comment, replied. “For her, this is an old hat. Hey, Doc,” he then called out. “There are more shuttles coming in behind you! Take care!

Hernandez didn’t waste her time with answering. She stepped to the side and gave directions to Lennier, who went off with the current batch of wounded as Sheridan emerged from one of the newly arrived shuttles.

“I heard about Franklin,” he said to Garibaldi, while nodding a greeting to Janeway. “How is he?”

“Serious but stable,” Garibaldi replied. “He lost a lot of blood. Doctor Hobbs said it’s practically a miracle he could walk that far! The knife cut pretty deep into the muscle tissue on the way in.” They jumped out of the way of another litter being carried through. “So how’d it go out there?”

Sheridan sighed. “We did okay. Not great, but okay! We turned back their attack but we lost a lot of ships.”

“For every one of their ships we killed, two of ours were destroyed,” Delenn added, joining them. Her eyes were haunted.

“And that in a battle where we had the moment of surprise on our side,” Chakotay, having just come in with Neroon and Kes, commented grimly.

Janeway didn’t even hear his comment, though. She was staring at the young Ocampa in shock.

“Kes? You were with them? I wasn’t told that you’ve left Voyager!”

“No-one knew, not even Commander Chakotay,” Kes replied. “It was my decision and mine alone. But where is Tuvok? Something must have happened to him; all of a sudden I couldn’t feel him anymore.”

“I’m afraid he’s in a bad shape,” Marcus replied, helping one of the med techs to carry the litter with the unresponsive Vulcan on it.

“What happened?” Janeway demanded.

“I really don’t know,” Marcus confessed. “I was a bit busy at the time. All I know is that we were targeted by one of the big Shadow ships, with our engines and weapons systems down; and in the next moment the battlecrag exploded, just like that… and he was lying on the floor like this.”

“He probable over-extended himself, trying to block the Shadow ship,” Delenn suggested. “Such things are known to have happened.”

Janeway shook her head. “That’s impossible. Vulcans are touch-telepaths.”

“They are now,” Chakotay reminded her. “Once they used to be much more than that. Perhaps some of them still are. He comes from one of the ancient Forge Clans, doesn’t he? Who can tell what latent abilities still may exist among them?”

‘Whatever they must be, he is clearly not accustomed to using them,” Neroon said. “He will need a very strong mind-healer to recover; if he will recover at all.”
“No!” Kes protested. “He must recover! I’ll do everything…”

“No, little one,” Neroon interrupted gently. “He needs a healer; one who is trained to treat the wounded mind. This is not a matter of power; it is a matter of knowledge,” he turned to Delenn. “The Temple of Valeria does have such healers, or so I am told.”

“They sometimes do; I cannot tell whether they have one now,” Delenn replied thoughtfully. “I shall contact the Mother Superior of the Temple and make inquiries about what can be done.”

“Thank you,” Janeway said in relief. “Until then, I think he’ll best be kept in Sickbay, under the Doctor’s supervision.”

“Agreed,” Chakotay said. “Kes, perhaps you can go with him and see to his physical comfort? That’s all we can currently do.”

Kes nodded mutely, and Janeway had them both beamed directly into Sickbay.

“How did our volunteers fare?” she then turned to Chakotay.

Her XO sighed. “We’ve lost Carlson, Baxter and Jackson. The others are unhurt and accounted for, coming in with their respective squadrons.”

Janeway shook her head in dismay. “Three of our people are dead, Tuvok is in a coma he might never wake up from, and you are still mostly out of commission because of the last time our crew volunteered… do you still believe that getting involved in the affairs of an alternate reality is such a good idea, Commander?”

“I don’t know, Captain,” Chakotay answered slowly. “I do know, though, that I couldn’t just sit indifferently on the sidelines and watch my fellow human beings, no matter what universe they’ve come from, fight against overwhelming odds. Speaking of which,” he turned to Sheridan, “Paris and Dalby offered to help out with the wounded. They’re both trained field medics, with a great deal of experience under their belts. At least Dalby is. And Paris has learned a lot from the Doctor, I’m told.”

“We gladly accept any help we can get,” Sheridan said gratefully. “But you might want to see that Doctor of yours yourself, Commander. You don’t look too well.”

“I’m unhurt; just exhausted,” Chakotay replied. “It’s nothing a little sleep wouldn’t cure… well, a lot of sleep, actually. With your permission, Captain…”

Janeway nodded. “Go. You can hand in your report when you’ve rested.”

Chakotay let himself beamed aboard Voyager, and the Babylon 5 leaders exchanged looks of deep concern. Every one of them knew that the battle they had just won at such high costs was only the beginning.

“All right, so here's the big question,” Garibaldi said. “Now that we've shown them we can hurt them, how long till they come knocking at our front door?”

“That's what worries me,” Sheridan confessed. “Unless the Vorlons enter the melee, our chances are limited at best.”

“I won’t trust the Vorlons to move as much as a finger to help us; assuming they have fingers, of course,” Garibaldi said pessimistically. “This new Kosh is more hindrance than he is help, and we have no way to contact the others… assuming that those would be interested in helping us at all. Which is, frankly, not very likely.”
“But if we are on our own, we would need every single ship we have,” Delenn reminded them. “Even if we leave our homeworlds unprotected.”

“If the Shadows get the upper hand, the border patrols won’t stand a chance anyway,” Sheridan agreed.

“I shall present the proof that the Ancient Enemy has returned to the Caste leaders,” Neroon promised. “Shai Alyt Shakiri is a stubborn man, but he is no fool. If I can persuade the other Clan leaders, he will give in… for the time being, at least.”

“And if you cannot?” Delenn asked quietly.

Neroon shrugged. “The Star Riders and the Moon Shields will send their ships in any case; and I hope I can win the Fire Wings for the case. We shall take what we can get and do our best. The rest is in Valen’s hands.”

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The secured storage area of the MedLabs was a long, narrow room that lacked any illumination, save for the control lamps of the various instruments. Fortunately, Seven’s cranial implant enabled her to see under conditions no human being would be able to. Therefore she could make out the long coffin-like boxes that seamed the walls of the room.

The boxes were made of some dark metal and had a glass window embedded in their upper part. A shield-like black badge with a golden \( \Psi \) letter was affixed to the glass.

“The Psi Corps emblem!” She recognized it easily, having assimilated every bit if information offered to Voyager. “What is in these boxes?”

“Weapons of war, provided for the Shadows by certain Earth circles,” Galen replied grimly. “At least that is what Captain Sheridan was told when he intercepted the cargo.”

Seven shook her head. “Unlikely. These are clearly some kind of cryogenic chambers. Weapons would not need such an environment.”

“Why don’t you take a look for yourself?” the techno-mage suggested.

Seven raised an implanted eyebrow. “Perhaps I will,” she said, already stepping up to the nearest box and peered through the glass.

As expected, there was a human being inside: a young woman. She looked as if she was in great pain, her mouth opened to a soundless cry of terror. There were electrodes attached to various points around her skull.

Seven frowned and went over to the next box… and the next one… and the next one. There were about one hundred of them, each containing a human body in cryogenic sleep; and from the look on their faces, they didn’t go into those sleeper tubes voluntarily. The only ID on the bodies was a bracelet, showing the Psi Corps logo, a sequence of numbers and a barcode strip.

There appeared to be cyberweb implants in their skulls on either side of the cerebral cortex. There were small metallic interfaces on either side of their heads, just above the temple. The sight was… disturbingly familiar, Seven found.

“Are these the Borg of this reality?” she asked.

It seemed unlikely, but one could never know.
“In a sense they are,” Galen answered, the shadow of remembered pain flickering across his face. “I assume you know that the Shadow ships use living beings as their central operating system? That makes them so incredible fast and versatile; that they are steered directly by the brain waves of their pilots.”

Seven nodded. “And that is the reason why telepaths can block the Shadow ships: they block the pilot and render the ships non-manoeuvrable.”

“That is correct,” he said. “However, should they manage to integrate a strong telepath into their ships, say a P-11 or P-12, which is the highest possible for humans, the only advantage Sheridan’s forces currently have over them would be gone.”

“Is that what those people are?” Seven asked. “Strong telepaths, implanted to be plugged into Shadow ships?”

Galen nodded. “And the worst part is: they have been sold by their own people. By the very organization made to protect them: the Psi Corps. They refused to join the Corps – or to take drugs that would suppress their telepathic abilities – so the Corps got rid of them and won a strong ally… all in one fell sweep, if you want to use such a dramatic expression.”

“I do not,” Seven replied dryly. “Do you have any data concerning the implanting process?”

“No,” he said. “All I know that the technology involved is well beyond even our knowledge. There is certainly nothing the doctors of Babylon 5 could do for these people. But you can try to connect to one of them and learn more.”

“Unlikely,” she said. “I am not a telepath.”

“But they are; and you might be able to gain access via the technology,” Galen pointed out.

Seven considered her options. Accessing completely unknown technology could be dangerous, even for her robust and highly adaptable Borg implants, and she did not want to end – or endanger – her own existence just yet.

On the other hand, these people were the closest thing to her own kind she could hope to find in this reality. The similarities were startling. Could she truly afford to let the opportunity slip through her fingers?

“I can give it a try,” she finally decided, extending her access tubes and penetrating the very first cryogenic unit to connect to the woman’s cranial implant.

The images came so suddenly and with such ferocity that she nearly reeled from the mental impact. She saw the woman lying on an examination table, moving fitfully and whimpering. Three grey humanoid creatures, their faces looking like outsized skulls, stood over her, performing some sort of surgery on her head. A large drill spun, coming ever closer to her forehead. An image of a Shadow battlecrab was rotating as it grew large in her mind’s eye. Seven could see a human form embedded in the vessel.

The images were so overwhelming – especially for somebody unused to connecting with strong telepaths – that she was in danger of losing herself in them. Fortunately, Galen realized the danger and unceremoniously yanked her away from the cryo-chamber, breaking the connection.

The transition was rough and so abrupt that she needed a moment to find her bearings again. A quick self-diagnostic showed no damage; she would run it again when back in her regeneration chamber, just to be certain. For now, though, she appeared to be fully functional.
"Are you all right?" Galen asked in concern. "Have you learned anything of importance?"

"I am undamaged," she replied. "All I saw was moments of an invasive process; nothing that would help us understanding it. I do not think the woman had any understanding, either. She was traumatised and in crippling pain."

"The Shadows are not known for their considerate nature," Galen commented dryly.

"Were those grey creatures that operated on her the Shadows?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. The Shadows rarely interact with those they consider mere instruments. They have many servant races that do the dirty work for them. Not even we know all of those, and we are probably the ones with the most extensive knowledge regarding the Shadows."

"But you don’t know how to remove the implants, either."

It wasn’t really a question, but Galen answered nonetheless.

"Not without killing the implanted person in the process, I’m afraid," he confessed.

"Why have you brought me here then, if there is no way to help them?" she demanded.

Galen sighed. "We cannot turn things back and make them the human beings they once were, that is true," he said. "But we can give them a new purpose – and a lynchpin to hold them together as a unit."

"Me?" Seven asked in surprise. "But we don’t even know if the technology is compatible. And I am – was – a simple drone. Without a vinculum, forming a collective is just not possible."

"This won’t be a collective as you know it," he answered. "These people were modified to merge with a ship, not with each other. They can’t do that without proper guidance. But if we found a ship for them, and the right person to guide them, they can find a way to lead a useful life; and to help defeating the Shadows. Think about it: one hundred of the strongest human telepaths, synchronising their powers, would be the ultimate doomsday weapon against the Shadows."

"Perhaps," she allowed. "But you don’t have a ship, and even if you had one, do you think Captain Sheridan would allow you to take these people from here?"

"I do not intend to ask his permission," Galen returned coolly. "As for a ship, I have my eyes on one, figuratively speaking, that might arrive just in time. But I’ll need you for this to work. And you need a new purpose in your life, too. It is a win-win situation."

"I have my doubts about that," Seven said. "I have to consider my options carefully."

"Do so," Galen said. "If my calculations are right, you will have about a month to make your decision; perhaps a little longer. But I will need an answer from you in about five weeks; assuming the Shadows don’t start their final offensive in the meantime."

"And what if I reject your offer?"

"Then I shall do this without you; although chances that I would manage it on my own are slim."

"You would try it nonetheless?"

Galen nodded. "I must. Millions of lives depend on it. But we do have a little time to consider things yet. Now, let’s get you back to Voyager unnoticed before your shipmates realise you were gone."
As it turned out, there was no need for Seven to worry about her absence being noticed. The crew of *Voyager* (including her captain) was too preoccupied with their grief to miss her. The Doctor – the only one not hampered by human emotions – had his hands full with Tuvok, who was still unresponsive and did not react to any attempts to wake him up.

When Janeway finally got to Sickbay, the sight greeting her was disconcerting… to put it mildly. Chakotay was lying on one of the biobeds, the diagnostic arc raised over him, checking if he had not over-extended himself. Going to battle, even if he had not taken part in the actual fighting, had been a risky move in his still weakened condition, and the Doctor insisted on a thorough examination.

The Doctor himself, accompanied by Kes, stood over Tuvok, who was lying on another biobed, unconscious. Janeway was no medical specialist, but she knew enough about the medical scanner at the head of the bed to read that Tuvok was in great distress; his physical condition either severely depressed or overly stimulated. All the indicators seemed to be way up or way down.

“How is he?” she asked.

“Alive,” Chakotay said laconically from under the diagnostic arc.

The Doctor glowered at having the XO put his two cents in where a medical answer was required, Kes just looked sad and anxious, but that was no surprise. Tuvok had been her mentor and the father figure for her ever since she had come on board. Losing him would hit her very hard.

“Thank you for your expert opinion, Commander,” the Doctor said sarcastically; then he turned back to Janeway. “Mr. Tuvok’s condition is stable, considering the agitation he has experienced. I don’t know the nature of this agitation, of course, but Kes has shared some of her experiences about these Shadow creatures, and what she’s told me isn’t promising. I assume that Mr. Tuvok had to break with a lifetime of conditioning to bring up the mental strength to block the creatures; and for a Vulcan, losing control – even if it happens voluntarily – is a serious trauma. It goes against everything they try to accomplish; everything they are.”

“Are you telling me he was suffering a panic attack?” Janeway asked incredulously.

The mere idea was unimaginable. As a rule, Vulcans were as reliable as antigravs and almost as indestructible.

The Doctor, however, nodded grimly.

“This was far more than just a panic attack, though,” he elaborated. “You can see the graphic of his brain on that monitor to your left. It is a representation of axons and neurons that are firing with general uniformity; except in this one area. The section under his hippocampus is firing very erratically. Clearly, something is quite wrong here.”

“And you have no idea what it is,” Janeway said.

It was more a statement than a question, but the Doctor bristled in indignation at once.

“If you can be just a little more patient, I’ll go to the medical lab and analyze these data,” he said. “Perhaps then I can offer you a hypothesis.”

He looked at her expectantly, then actually sighed with a sense of inadequacy and headed to the next-door med lab.

Janeway looked down at Tuvok. He was unconscious, yes, but there was trouble on his face. Small
muscles were tensed, and there was that glaze of perspiration that showed a Vulcan was under severe stress. As a rule, Vulcans could run for hours and be brutally tortured without popping a drop of sweat – yet Tuvok was drenched.

“It must have been one hell of an encounter,” she murmured.

Kes nodded. “It is not easy to encounter such malevolence; especially for somebody used to have his shields firmly in place.

“Yet you encountered the same,” Janeway said, “and you’re still here, unharmed. How is that possible?”

“The only thing I can imagine is that my previous contact with the Vorlon ship has somehow prepared me for it,” Kes replied thoughtfully after some thinking. “The Vorlons have fought these Shadow creatures for uncounted millennia; they probably know them better than anyone else. And their ships are alive – in a sense – and what their masters know, they know, too.”

“All that knowledge, and it still can’t help Tuvok, though,” Chakotay commented, sitting up as the diagnostic arc finally finished the scan and retreated.

“No,” Kes admitted. “The Vorlons don’t seem to be concerned with the maladies of the younger races. Let’s hope that Ambassador Delenn can find a competent mind-healer; otherwise Tuvok’s chances are slim.”

“Those Shadows,” Janeway hesitated for a moment whether she should ask, but then her curiosity won out. “Was the contact with them like that with Species 8472?”

“Similar… but magnitudes worse,” Kes replied simply. “They are old, very old; at least as old as the Vorlons; and they are strong.”

“Are they telepathic?” Chakotay asked.

“In a manner, yes,” Kes frowned, searching for words to express herself more clearly. “I had the impression, however, that they can only enter a willing – or unprepared – mind. They don’t seem to be able to break through telepathic shielding.”

“A rather curious weakness for such a powerful species,” Chakotay commented.

Kes nodded. “Yes, it is. But I can be wrong, of course. It is possible that they only can’t enter my mind because I’m an Ocampa. Or the Vorlon ship has reinforced my shields in a manner we can’t even imagine. We simply don’t know enough about he major players of this reality.”

“Let’s hope the Minbari healers do,” Janeway sighed. “Well, I’m needed on the Bridge. Commander, once you’ve sufficiently rested we’ll have to discuss funeral arrangements for our fallen people. I wouldn’t like to shoot them into space; this is not our space, and we still might return home one day. They’d want to rest at home, I assume.”

“There’s always cremation,” Chakotay offered. “We can take the ashes home with us that way.”

“As I said, we need to discuss the details later,” Janeway said. “I’d also like you to make the eulogies.”

“Me?” Chakotay echoed in surprise. “Why me? You were their captain; it is traditionally the captain’s privilege.”
“But it was you who took them into battle; a battle they didn’t return from alive,” Janeway replied bluntly. “It is only fair that you offer them the final farewell, too. They were your responsibility, after all.”

“Bitch,” Chakotay commented softly in his native language, staring at her retreating back.

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Somewhere is hyperspace a Shadow cruiser was heading towards Babylon 5.
Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Shadow Dancing”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications. The medical babble about Tuvok’s condition is taken from the episode “Flashback”, with the necessary modifications.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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PART 22 – 17 December 2260

On the next day activity in the MedLabs was still frantic. Aside from Paris and Dalby, healers and nurses from the Minbari ships had also volunteered to help out with the wounded; especially with the non-human ones. Only the room where Dr. Franklin was lying was quiet.

“How is he?” Maya Hernandez asked, peeking through the observation window.

“He has to wake up yet,” Lillian glanced at the black-clad figure at Franklin’s bedside. “Mr. Garibaldi has been sitting there for some time, waiting for him to stir.”

“He seems to be stirring now, actually,” Hernandez said. “Do you want to check on him or shall I do it?”

“Could you do it for me?” Lillian asked. “I’m not sure I could withstand the urge to throttle him, and that would be highly unprofessional.”

“But understandable,” Hernandez laughed. “All right, I’ll do it. I’m dying to know what his first words to Garibaldi would be anyway.”

“Better you than me,” Lillian returned, grinning, and went on to the next patient.

“Well, it’s about time you woke up,” Garibaldi was saying when Hernandez entered the room. “We were taking bets on when you’d come around! I want you to know, I’ve lost thirty credits already. “

“I guess you are just too much of an optimist, Chief,” Hernandez teased, joining Garibaldi at the bedside and working a handheld scanner. “So how do you feel, Stephen?”

“Like I was stabbed in the back and left to die!” Franklin snapped. “How the hell should I feel?”

"Odd, though,” Hernandez commented to Garibaldi. “I thought he was stabbed in the front.”

“Well, he’s back to normal,” Garibaldi offered. “As grouchy as ever!”

“Don’t remind me,” Hernandez replied with a long-suffering expression. “Why, do you think, did I ask for reassignment?”

“Stop talking about me as if I weren’t here!” Franklin snarled.

“It’s your fault; talking to you would be hopeless as always,” Hernandez switched off the scanner.
and pocketed it. “Everything is as it can be expected. He’s all yours, Chief; good luck!”

She left the room to upload the data to the medical computer. On her way out, she risked one last look through the observation window and caught Franklin watching all the activity in the lab with regret.

“It rankles, muchacho, doesn’t it?” she murmured softly. “It rankles no longer being a part of it.”

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At the same time Ambassador Delenn was talking to the Sisters of Valeria through a secured channel. Or, more precisely, to Sal’sataia Zhalenn(1), the superior of the Temple: a tall, willowy priestess with a friendly smile, who also happened to be her mother… not that any outsiders would know about that.

At the rare occasions when she was willing to speak about her family at all, Delenn usually mentioned that she had not seen her mother since early childhood. Which, though not exactly a lie, wasn’t the entire truth, either.

They had not seen each other as mother and daughter ever since Zhalenn entered the Temple; that much was true. They never exchanged any private messages, either. But they had met in person exactly once, in their respective official functions, right after the end of the Earth-Minbari war: Zhalenn as the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Valeria and Delenn as a young, ambitious member of the Grey Council, Dukhat’s heir.

It had been a short and unpleasant meeting, in an attempt to reinstate peace between the Religious Caste and the Warrior Caste by arranging a marriage between a Temple novice and a respected Warrior clan leader. An attempt that Zhalenn had strongly opposed to, and that had ultimately failed, bringing all parties involved nothing but sorrow and only serving to alienate Zhalenn from her daughter even more.(2)

Nonetheless, the Sister of Valeria never refused their help those in need, and Sal’sataia Zhalenn listened to Delenn’s explanation carefully.

“I cannot judge what an alien we have never met before can endure, of course,” she said, “but this I know: the Sher’shok Dum leave a telepathic residue behind them; one that can drive a telepath into insanity or death. Presumably that is what happened to the Narn telepaths a thousand years ago, when the Ancient Enemy used their world as a base. Which is why there are no more mind-walkers among them, as they called their telepaths. Those - and their families - were wiped out a thousand years ago. The gene that controls telepathy has never been strong enough in any of the survivors to breed another one.”

“And there is no healing for those affected by this residue?” Delenn asked.

Sal’sataia Zhalenn shook her head in regret. “I fear there is not. If this person you mentioned has truly suffered a telepathic attack, he cannot be saved. If, however, he has merely over-extended himself, he will need help – preferably from another strong telepath – to face the traumatic experience and to rebuild his shields.”

“Yes, Zhalenn replied. “Even if we would allow any outsiders in the Temple, we currently have no strong mind-healers among us. It has been a dying art for centuries; to my knowledge none of the few Minbari still has would be strong enough to perform such a task.”
“Could more of them together do it?”

“I am sorry, Delenn; it does not work that way. This is a delicate and deeply personal process. The patient would block the invasion of multiple minds instinctively and flee to an even deeper coma – or to imminent death.”

“Is there nothing we can do to help, then?” Delenn insisted, still not willing to give up without a fight.

The priestess who had once given her life shook her head again.

“Nothing that we can, to my regret,” she emphasized. “But perhaps the Earth people can help. They have some very strong telepaths among them… even if they serve the other side.”

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“Impossible!” Ivanova protested when Delenn shared the bad news with Babylon 5’s leading staff. “The only ones strong enough would be the Psi Cops; and you can’t possibly consider turning to them for help!”

“Not just any Psi Cop, no,” Sheridan agreed. “But what about Bester? He offered to work with us, in exchange for help for his lover and the other frozen telepaths down in the MedLabs. And you’d be hard-pressed to find a stronger and more thoroughly trained telepath than him.”

“You can’t be serious!” Garibaldi stared at the intrepid CO of Babylon 5 as if the captain had suddenly sprouted a second head. “We can’t let that… that slimy worm lose on the station! We wouldn’t be able to put him on sleepers this time, since we would need him at his best; and then he’d know everything about us within the first hour!”

“Perhaps; but we don’t really have anything to hide; not anymore,” Sheridan pointed out. “Our only goal is, currently at least, to stop the Shadows… if we can. And he did offer his help.”

“Yeah, but would he be able to help?” Marcus asked. “He isn’t a healer – or is he?”

Everyone looked questioningly at Lyta who had been incited to this meeting as their only resident telepath.

“No, he is not,” she replied thoughtfully. “But he is known to have volunteered to do deathbed scans, more than once. It isn’t the same, granted, but his previous experiences with dying people might help. At the very least, he might be able to help the Ocampa girl focus her powers and call the commander back from wherever Vulcans flee when they are overwhelmed.”

“It still seems a bloody great risk to me,” Marcus said.

Lyta nodded. “Tinkering with the mind of a strong telepath – especially that of an unknown species, which Vulcans basically are for us – is always a risk. We have no idea how Vulcan telepathy works, but we all had glimpses of what Mr. Tuvok is capable of.”

“To say the least,” Ivanova commented softly. “I never thought anyone would be able to destroy a Shadow battlecrab with his mind alone.”

“In the middle of the battle we didn’t truly realize what was happening,” Marcus added. “It took me a day or so for the shock to really settle in.”

The others nodded in agreement. To witness such mental powers, even if working on their behalf, was truly frightening.
“Still, I believe we should point out the possibility to Captain Janeway,” Sheridan said. “It should be her decision whether to give it a try or not. As I understand, Commander Tuvok is an old friend of his; almost family.”

“But can we contact Bester without alerting the entire PsiCorps if she says yes?” Ivanova asked doubtfully.

“He left me a contact number,” Sheridan replied. “The channel is supposed to be safe.”

“Supposed to be?” Garibaldi echoed.

Sheridan shrugged. “There are no guarantees, Michael; you know that. But this is a risk we have to take, should Captain Janeway agree. We owe Commander Tuvok that much,” he looked at Ivanova and Marcus. “Without him, some of us wouldn’t be having this discussion.”

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“Doctor, do you believe this is something we should try?” Janeway asked two hours later.

She, Sheridan and Lyta were sitting in Voyager’s medlab with the EMH, while Kes was watching over Tuvok in the ICU.

“At the moment this seems to be the only method that promises any results,” the Doctor replied, “as I think we may be dealing with a repressed memory.”

The two captains and Lyta exchanged blank looks. The Doctor turned the monitor with Tuvok’s brain scan on the screen so that they could see it.

“The memory engrams in the dorsal region of the hippocampus are being disrupted,” he explained. “It is causing physical damage to the surrounding tissue. In Vulcan medicine, this is known as the t’lokan schism. It means that the subject is inhibiting a traumatic memory, which is beginning to resurface.

“And that’s causing brain damage?” Sheridan asked, trying to understand.

It just sounded so unbelievable. Mental instability he could imagine, but actual physical injury to the brain?

“Strange, I know,” the Doctor agreed. “In human subjects, repressed memories are nothing more than psychological traumas which can be dealt with, with standard therapeutic techniques…”

“But not so in Vulcans?” Lyta asked quietly, glancing through the observation window at the enigmatic stranger that had been such a great help for her and who could need help so desperately right now.

The Doctor shook his head. “No. in Vulcans, there is a physical reaction to the battle between the conscious and the unconscious. In extreme cases, the mind of the patient can literally lobotomise itself.”

The idea shocked everyone.

“Lobotomise itself?” Janeway echoed in horror.

“Like the animal in the trap, chewing off its own leg to get free,” Sheridan offered.

“The terrorized mind commits suicide to avoid the terror,” Lyta added softly. She was perhaps the
only one who could imagine what it could be like. Her experiences on the Vorlon homeworld had
brought her near to that point more than once. “Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Vulcans strive
so hard for control over their minds. A mind that strong is like a fire-breathing dragon on the loose.
Control is essential, or it would self-immolate.”

The Doctor nodded. “That is an apt comparison, yes.”

“But if the condition is a known one, there has to be a treatment as well,” Janeway said with
renewed hope.

“There is no medical treatment for this condition,” the Doctor told her flatly. “Vulcan psycho-
cognitive research suggests that the patient initiate a mind-meld with a family member, and the two of
them attempt to bring the repressed memory into the conscious mind.”

“Pull the dragon forward out of the cave,” Sheridan offered. “Then kill it. Or tame it.”

“Nothing so dramatic,” the Doctor replied dryly. “Normally, this will result in what they call
reintegration. The memory is restored to its proper place in the conscious mind.”

“I’m the closest thing Tuvok has to a family member on this ship,” Janeway said slowly. “I’ll do it.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Captain,” the Doctor said. “Mr. Tuvok is in no condition to
initiate a mind-meld on his own; and you’re not a telepath.”

“Kes, then,” Janeway suggested. “She and Tuvok have melded frequently during the last two years.
It was part of her regular training. His mind would be receptive for hers.”

“Normally, I would agree,” the Doctor said. “However, Kes is currently undergoing profound
changes I can’t even begin to understand; and neither can she, I am afraid. Her mental powers are
growing exponentially. She can barely hold onto her control. I won’t allow anyone to connect to her
mind; the least somebody who has already suffered severe mental damage.”

Janeway looked at Lyta. “What about you? You’ve melded with Tuvok during your recovery, too,
and I know he considers you a friend. He won’t reject you.”

“And I’d be all too happy to give it a try,” Lyta answered regretfully, “but I cannot risk allowing the
Vorlon ambassador access to him.”

“Can he control you telepathically?” Sheridan asked in concern.

If the answer was yes, then Lyta presented a security risk for him – for the entire station.

Lyta shook her head. “No; but he can merge with me any time he wants, and I wouldn’t be able to
keep him out. I’ve been… modified for the very purpose of being able to carry a Vorlon within me;
and I wouldn’t subject Tuvok to this Vorlon.”

“Then we have no choice,” Sheridan said unhappily. “We must contact Bester; that is, if Captain
Janeway agrees, of course,” he added with a polite nod.

Janeway frowned. “It would help me to make a decision if I knew who this Bester character is,” she
said.

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“So, what do you think?” Janeway asked Kes, Chakotay and the Doctor half an hour later. “Should
we risk allowing a clearly untrustworthy person access to our ship… and to Tuvok?”
She would have preferred to make that decision between herself and the EMH, but it was practically impossible to keep this secret from Kes. And, despite their differences, Chakotay was still her executive officer and needed to be informed about everything that might endanger *Voyager,* especially with Tuvok out of the picture. She might not like Chakotay’s attitude of lately, but the man had a sharp tactical mind that she, who was basically a scientist, could not match.

As expected, Kes became very upset by the mere idea of rejecting Captain Sheridan’s offer. It was understandable, considering her bond with Tuvok, but also dangerous. It clouded her judgement and thus weakened her control over her exponentially growing mental powers.

“We *must!*” She insisted. “If this is the only way to help Tuvok, we have to chance it!”

“And endanger the entire ship and the crew, not to mention Babylon 5 and a quarter million people living on it, just to try saving one person?” Chakotay asked, playing devil’s advocate. “I’m pretty sure Tuvok would oppose. Isn’t that what Vulcans always say? That the good of the many outweighs the good of the few… or that of a single person?”

“I think we’re approaching this from the wrong angle,” the Doctor interfered hurriedly. “I understand your worries concerning ship’s security, Captain, Commander, but from the medical point of view the more important question is: can we be sure that this… this individual will be able to help Mr. Tuvok?”

“True,” Janeway agreed. “So, what do you think? Can we be sure?”

“No,” the Doctor said bluntly. “This has never been done before. As a rule, Vulcans would never allow any outsiders to tamper with the mind of someone suffering from the *t'lokan* schism. But if we don’t risk it, Mr. Tuvok might never wake up from his come; or if he does, he’ll wake up mentally debilitated.”

“Do you suggest, then, that we give the treatment a try, despite the risks involved, assuming this Mr. Bester is willing to help?” Chakotay asked.

The Doctor shrugged. “In Mr. Tuvok’s current state we can’t do anything that would make his condition worse,” he said. “If Kes can work with this human telepath, they *might* be able to help him. There are no guarantees; but there’s nothing to lose, either. My only concern is that Mr. Tuvok could react badly to a stranger poking around in his private memories.”

“Oh, don’t worry about *that,* Doctor,” Kes said, with a hint of steel in her otherwise so gentle voice. “I’ll see to it that he doesn’t do anything like that.”

“In that case I’m for giving it a try; assuming that the security question can be solved,” the Doctor said.

Janeway nodded. “Good. “I’ll contact Captain Sheridan and ask him to give this Bester person a call.

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At the same time Lady Timov was coming to a decision.

“I have done what I could for Londo,” she declared to Vir and Lyndisty in her guest quarters in Green Sector. “I cannot help him any more; not while he insists on following his current path. And life on this station does not agree with me. It is time to return home,”

“What I heard from home, life on Centauri Prime isn’t very agreeable at the moment, either,” Vir murmured.
“That is true,” Lady Timov said, “But I am not returning to Centauri Prime. My father used to have an estate on the planet Davo; I have already sent our wards there, to keep them safe. I intend to follow them; and to take Lyndisty with me.”

“Davo?” Vir repeated in surprise.

Lady Timov gave him the hint of a smile. “Ironic, isn’t it? But that would be the last place anyone would look for us. It is a rural world of absolutely no importance – and my father’s servants have always been loyal to a fault.”

“But would Lady Drusella agree?” Vir asked.

Lady Timov shrugged. “I am not planning to ask her. Lord Tavastani and I have come to an agreement about you and Lyndisty needing to marry, and he gave me free hand in the matter, regardless of the wishes of his wife.”

“Are you absolutely certain that this is a good idea, Lady Timov?” Vir asked doubtfully. “You are aware of my predicament concerning children…”

“I am also aware of the Lady Morella’s prophecy concerning both Londo and you,” Lady Timov interrupted. “If it comes true, which – knowing her unique gift of foresight – I don’t doubt for a moment, you will need a wife; one fitting your future position. It needs to be done, and it will be done. I shall see to it that Lyndisty is taught everything she will need to fill her future role, and the two of you will marry, once the war is over.”

“I understand,” Vir said slowly. “The question is, of course, which war are we talking about? Because I can see various possibilities, and no-one of them looks very promising.”

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“Well,” Sheridan said after reading Janeway’s message,” it seems that Captain Janeway has come to a decision. They want the help of Bester – if he’s willing and able to help.”

“I still don’t like it!” Garibaldi declared, and Ivanova nodded in agreement.

“Neither do I, but ultimately, it’s not our decision,” Sheridan replied. “And, if nothing else, we’ll see if Bester really meant when he said our fight will be his fight from now on – without creating a situation in which he could turn against us.”

“He could seriously harm Commander Tuvok, though,” Ivanova said in concern.

Marcus gave her a disbelieving look. “Susan, that man destroyed a Shadow warship with his mind alone! What do you think Bester could possibly do to harm him?”

“Yes, but he’s vulnerable right now!” Ivanova pointed out. “And Bester won’t hesitate to sift through his mind and pick out any information he wants.”

“He might try; but he won’t be able to do so, not with Kes present and watching,” Lyta said. “That girl stood up to a Vorlon and lived to tell the tale; I’ve never heard of anyone who’d have done the same. But Captain, I don’t think it would be a good idea to let Bester close to the Vorlon ship; or to Voyager. The less he learns about our dimensionally displaced guests the better.”

Ivanova and Garibaldi nodded in unison; and, after a moment, so did Sheridan.

“We’ll have to move the commander to the MedLabs right before Bester’s arrival,” he said. “With their transporter device they can do that without anyone noticing.”
“But the MedLabs are already overcrowded and medical personnel can barely keep up with their workload as it is,” Ivanova reminded him.

Sheridan nodded. “I know. But it will take time for Bester to reach Babylon 5; assuming that he will come at all. Franklin is slowly getting better. He’ll be able to take up his job again by that time, or so Doctor Hernandez hopes.”

“Are you planning to offer him his position back?” Garibaldi asked.

“If he wants to take it, yes,” Sheridan answered. “Everyone deserves a second chance; and besides, he’s the best xenobiologist we’ve ever had. We need him.”

“That might not bode well with the other doctors,” Ivanova warned. “They had to do his job as well as their own during his absence. They might be offended by being swept aside for his sake.”

Sheridan shrugged. “They’ll get around, given enough time. But this war has just begun. We will need the best doctor when it gets to the next sage; and, like it or not, Franklin is the best one we have.”

"Not to mention that he's been part of our inner circle since Jeff's times," Ivanova added. "That should count for something, too."

"It does," Sheridan agreed. "And if the others are unhappy with it, well, that is their problem."

Chapter End Notes

1) According to Hightower’s Minbari dictionary, zhalen means “alone”. I made a noun out of it, so the name of the Sal’sataia (literally: “Mistress”, also the Mother Superior) has the approximate meaning “the lonely one”.
2) See my story "Prophecy and Change".
3) The planet Davo was the home of Adira Tyree, Londo’s last great love. Her death drove Londo back to Morden, believing (mistakenly) that Lord Refa had been the one who ordered Adira to be poisoned.
Part 23

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Shadow Dancing”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications. The medical babble about Tuvok’s condition is taken from the episode “Flashback”, with the necessary modifications.

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PART 23 – 18 December 2260

One day later Sheridan called Delenn, Ivanova and Neroon to his office to discuss the current situation with them. Out of courtesy he had extended the invitation to Janeway as well, but she sent Chakotay in her stead; a solution that everyone welcomed.

Including Chakotay, who preferred to keep a close eye on possible future events.

“I've been giving a lot of thought to Garibaldi's question,” Sheridan began thoughtfully. “We have done all we can to keep a low profile. But the enemy has just taken a big loss…”

“And they've got to know we're responsible,” Ivanova added grimly. “Now it's only a matter of time before they come after us.”

Neroon nodded in agreement. “The only questions are how and when.”

“Perhaps they're reluctant to try,” Delenn offered. “Draal has made the Great Machine on the planet below available to our defence. I suspect his weapons could stop even a Shadow vessel.”

“Perhaps; but can they stop an entire Shadow attack fleet?” Neroon asked. “The Book of Valen states that the Sher’shok Dum had ships huge enough to destroy entire planets; and they did not hesitate to use them during the last great war. Would the Great Machine, whatever it might be, have a chance against those?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Delenn admitted. “Draal was never forthcoming about such details.”

“Are we talking about the guardian of the powerful alien device that may or may not be able to help Voyager getting back to our own universe?” Chakotay asked with deceptive mildness. “Because we were told that he needed to rest and recover after some great effort; which was supposedly the reason why we could not contact him and ask him for help.”

“And it was true at the time of your arrival,” Ivanova replied. “I spoke to his… assistant myself and was denied direct contact with him. However, I wasn't told either that he’d have recovered in the meantime,” she added, with an accusing glance in Delenn’s direction.

“It is a recent development,” the Minbari ambassador answered. “It was less than a day ago that Draal contacted me and offered his assistance. I am sorry, Commander, but right now the Great Machine is urgently needed to protect Babylon 5.”

“I understand that,” Chakotay said. “And I’m sure Captain Janeway will understand it, too. However, we would both prefer to be told the truth – the whole truth – where such important factors
are concerned. Otherwise, there is no point.”

“Minbari do not lie, Commander,” Neroon reminded him in mock offence.

Chakotay rolled his eyes. “Yeah, they say the same thing about Vulcans; and yet the guys manage to work around that statement – and around the truth – and lead you on a merry journey within their so-called defined parameters, without you being the wiser.”

“Well,” Ivanova said, “I can promise you as one executive officer to another that I’ll give you every detail I’m aware of; not that that would be much at the moment. And what I do know doesn’t make sense. I mean, the Shadows could have hit us at any time during the last year. We’re a sitting duck!”

“So what are you saying?” Sheridan asked. “They’re deliberately leaving us alone?”

Ivanova shrugged. “Well, it's possible. I mean, they haven't exactly been shy about hitting anybody else around here.”

“And if that is true,” Neroon said slowly, “the obvious question is: why?”

“Could it not be the same tactic they used by leaving Sector 83 alone?” Chakotay asked. “To create a zone of false safety and when people flee here, hit them unexpected and twice as hard?”

“It is possible, of course,” Sheridan allowed. “But for some reason I can’t explain I have the feeling that there’s more.”

“How so?” Ivanova asked.

Sheridan closed his eyes and rubbed his temple as if having a sudden headache. “I’m not sure. Ever since Kosh died – I mean the original one, the first Vorlon ambassador to Babylon 5,” he added for Chakotay’s sake, “I’ve been remembering a dream.”

“How about Kosh?”

“Yes and no. Last year, when I was hurt, he got inside my head. He spoke to me, sent me these… images. One of them was you, saying, ‘Do you know who I am?’ A week later, you tell me you're a latent telepath!”

“Actually, it was a good three or four months later,” Ivanova corrected. “At the time when Thalia…” she broke off, visibly fighting for control.

“That may be,” Sheridan admitted. “My memory is a bit fuzzy when I think back at those days. But I do remember you saying that you sometimes don't know who you are.”

“Is it possible that Kosh knew?” Delenn asked.

“I don’t see how, but the image fits,” Ivanova shrugged. “Do you remember anything else, Captain?”

“No, just fragments,” Sheridan searched his memory. “Oh, at one point, I was wearing the uniform of a Psi Cop.”

“Well, we're working with Bester now, and that was unexpected,” Ivanova pointed out. “Anything else?”

“Something really odd, “Sheridan laughed humourlessly. “He sent me an image of Garibaldi, saying: The man in-between is searching for you.!”
“He could have meant Sinclair,” Ivanova suggested.

“Maybe,” Sheridan said reluctantly, “but I don't think so. Somehow it doesn't feel right.”

“It could have been a warning, too,” Neroon offered.

“Warning of what?” Sheridan asked in surprise.

“Well,” Neroon said thoughtfully, “Rastenn told me about this Shadow agent: the human named Morden who showed up on the station time and again, asking people what they wanted. Could he be the one after you?”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Sheridan said. “After all, he was the one – or rather the Shadows accompanying him – who killed the original Kosh.”

“He hasn’t been seen on the station for a while, though,” Neroon said.

“That doesn’t mean the captain couldn’t be found and captured outside the station,” Chakotay said.

“You do regularly go out on fight practice with the Starfury squadrons, don’t you?”

Sheridan shook his head. “I really don’t think they’d risk showing up near Babylon 5, just to snatch me.”

“There are other ways to lure you away from the station,” Neroon said. “If I were you, I would be very careful, Captain. Just in case it was a warning indeed.”

“Well, if that’s what it is, then the man in-between knows who you are, now that we’ve kicked them hard and where it hurts,” Ivanova said.

“Assuming it means anything!” Sheridan ran his hand through his hair in frustration. “Signs, portents, dreams! Next we’ll be reading tea leaves and chicken entrails.”

“Hopefully not,” Chakotay said way too seriously to actually mean it. “I’d rather suggest a spirit walk, if you’re inclined to use spiritual means to see a possible future.”

“Thanks but no, thanks,” Sheridan replied dryly. “I already do know that we’re vulnerable now. I’ll have squadrons on flyby at all times from now on. We should expect something to be coming our way sooner or later; and the way our luck works, it will probably be sooner.”

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“Do you think we should keep Voyager on yellow alert, just in case?” Janeway asked, after Chakotay had summarised for her the meeting with Sheridan.

Chakotay nodded. “It would seem prudent; especially with Tuvok out of the equation. And that’s another thing I wanted to discuss with you, Captain: we need to replace Tuvok as tactical officer while he’s incapacitated.”

“Agreed. We can’t know how long it will take for this dubious Mr. Bester to show up; assuming he is ready or able to help Tuvok. Do you have a suggestion?”

“Lieutenant Rollins,” Chakotay said without hesitation.

Janeway gave him a surprised look. “I thought you’d suggest Lieutenant Ayala.”

Chakotay shook his head. “Greg is the right man for internal security; or tight dogfights. But Lieutenant Rollins has the proper Starfleet training for battle situations and knows the ship’s systems
better.”

“I thought you didn’t like Rollins,” Janeway confessed. “You’re always fair and civil with him, but I had the feeling that you didn’t like him.”

“I don’t,” Chakotay admitted. “His attitude sets my teeth to the edge. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t appreciate his abilities. We might disagree about a number of things, Captain, but it doesn’t mean I’m his enemy… or yours. I hoped you’d have realised that by now. Apparently, I was wrong.”

“No, that’s not true!” Janeway protested. “I don’t see you as an enemy. It’s just so that I sometimes can’t understand why do you things the way you do… and those occasions seem to be multiplying lately.”

“You mean why I act in disregard for Starfleet regulations?” Chakotay clarified.

Janeway nodded. “I can understand why the other Maquis act like that. They never went to the Academy… well, with the exception of B’Elanna, and she flew out before graduating. But you… you taught at the Academy! You were on the best way to get your own command, and that wouldn’t have been just some insignificant patrol ship! You were selected as the captain of an Excelsior class vessel, did you know that?”

Chakotay smiled; a little sadly. “Yes, Admiral Shanthi told me when I handed in my resignation. She thought it would make me change my mind.”

“Obviously, it didn’t.”

“No. My people needed me. There was no-one left to protect them after my father’s death by the hand of the Cardassians. None of my brothers were born to lead, not even the ones older than me. And as soon as I returned home, I was faced with the fact that in some cases Starfleet regulations just don’t work, no matter how noble and idealistic they might be.”

“And you think this is one of those cases,” Janeway said, clearly not convinced.

Chakotay nodded. “I do. And I hope that you, too, accept that truth soon, Captain. Otherwise we don’t have a rat’s chance to survive in this reality.” He stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m expected in Sickbay. The Doctor has already sent me four messages, each one more impatient than the previous one – he says I’m late for my regular check-up.”

“Go. We can’t afford another senior officer going down right now. But I’ll need the new duty roster as soon as you can finish it.”

“It will be on your desk by 18:00, Captain. Together with the plans for the farewell ceremony of our fallen heroes.”

*Lillian Hobbs was more than a little surprised – well shocked would have been a more fitting word for it – to find Franklin sitting at his desk in the head doctor’s office; an office that had been de facto hers in the recent weeks.

Franklin was still wearing his civilian clothes but behaved as if he had taken over the MedLabs already. Which, considering that he was still listed as a patient, barely out of critical care himself, annoyed the living daylight out of Lillian.

“I thought he wouldn’t be up and about for a while yet,” she said to Maya Hernandez who had just
arrived to join the staff meeting – a meeting Lillian was supposed to hold.

The older doctor shrugged. “He is not. Won't be for a few days, either. His legs are still a little wobbly and he can only stand for a few minutes.”

“What is he doing down here then?” Lillian asked. She had entrusted Franklin’s case to Maya, as she had felt she was still too angry with him to be objective.

“He doesn’t need to stand to talk advice and generally make a pain in the ass of himself,” Hernandez returned dryly.

For a moment they stood outside the office, listening to Franklin who, despite sitting in a wheelchair, sounded very much like his old self.

“All right, we're still short on Minbari blood, type R-negative,” he was saying. “Nadia, I want you to check with Ambassador Delenn see if you can organize more blood donors. Synthetics aren't cutting it.”

“Yes, Doctor,” the female med tech thusly addressed hurried of to carry out his orders, giving Lillian an apologetic look on her way out.

“Now, the rest of you, we've got trauma cases overloading MedLabs Two and Five,” Franklin continued, aiming his words at Doctors Croyokin, Gonzalez and Harrison. “Get down there; see if you can move non-critical patients into other quarters on a temporary basis. Take over the Rotunda and the sanctuary if you have to. Now go on.”

Croyokin and Harrison did as they were told. Anne Gonzalez, however, seemed less than willing to accept the return of the old regime without being debriefed.

“Do you have the authorization for taking such measures?” she asked. “We were not informed that you’d take over again.”

Franklin looked for a moment as if he’d been slapped; then he pulled himself together with some effort. “Look, I know it's unofficial, but I thought you guys could use all the help you can get.”

“That we could,” Gonzalez admitted. “We’re every bit as understaffed and overworked as we were when you up and left on your self-searching quest.”

Franklin frowned. “What is your problem? I only want to help!”

“And we appreciate the sentiment,” Gonzalez replied. “Or we would, if you wouldn’t start helping us by undermining the authority of the one who’s been doing your job next to her own since you left. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I’m expected in MedLab Two, where I’ve been assigned by my official superior.”

She turned around and left the office with a still mildly shocked Franklin behind.

“Is it still unofficial?” Lillian asked quietly. “Because it doesn’t look like that, does it?”

“Not for long, even if it is,” Hernandez pulled a face. “Captain Sheridan came down to see him and offered him his job back, should he still want it.”

“And? What did he say?”

There could be little doubt, but Lillian wanted to hear it.
“What do you think he said?” Hernandez asked back, her voice heavy with sarcasm. “He couldn’t take the offer fast enough. He said he could do better now that he can define himself by what he is, instead of what he’s not.”

“So, what is he, according to himself?” Lillian asked; the whole thing sounded convoluted to her.

“Alive,” Hernandez replied dryly. “Everything else is negotiable, apparently.”

“Well, it is,” Lillian said. “He’s negotiated himself back into his old position with minimal effort.”

“And he knows it, too,” Hernandez added, watching Franklin wheel himself across the room to give one of the female med techs a thorough dressing down.

“Now, where on Earth did you learn to hold a cauterizer like that?” he demanded. “Let me show you how to do this!”

“Just like in old times,” Lillian commented. “Maternity leave suddenly seems very appealing.”

“When do you intend to stop working?” Hernandez asked.

“I’m not sure,” Lillian said. “I mean, I’m not even showing yet, and I’m one hundred per cent healthy. It’s not my style to abandon my work and my colleagues like somebody we won’t name right now.”

“You’re absolutely sure then that you want to have the baby?” Hernandez never really doubted it, not even at the times when Lillian had, but this was the first time Lillian would make an actual statement.

Lillian nodded. “There were moments of doubt, I admit, but in the end… he might be all I’ll have left from Chakotay, should they find a way home. Or should something happen to Chakotay, as it almost happened not so long ago. It might be selfish, but I want to keep at least his much.”

“You’ve checked the gender, then?”

“I have. It’s a boy; a healthy little boy. The holographic doctor of Voyager showed me a much better image than our own equipment could. Imagine that: they can even extrapolate the looks of the baby! He’ll have brown eyes; but that’s not surprising as we’re both brown-eyed.”

“Have you told Chakotay?” Hernandez asked.

“Not yet,” Lillian admitted sheepishly.

“Lillian, you must!”

“I know, I know, and I will! It’s just… the time never seemed right. First he spent days at death’s door, and then unconscious in that horrible reg gel; then he up and left to go to battle with Neroon, of all people!”

“Muchacha,” Hernandez said patiently. “There’s no such thing as the right time. You must tell him now, while you still have the time; or you might spend the rest of your life mourning over lost chances.”

“I know,” Lillian sighed, “and I will, I promise. Now, let’s get back to work before our new-old boss gives us, too, a tongue-lashing.”

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Sergeant Zack Allan liked night shift at Customs. Granted, even in the early morning there were ships coming and going to and from Babylon 5, but as the station went by Earth standard schedule, early mornings were still a great deal quieter than, say during daytime.

As it was his wont, he stayed in the background, leaving it to the guards – one human and one Narn – to check the identicards of incoming travellers. He liked to watch the flow of visitors unobtrusively, making mental notes for Garibaldi about anything that seemed unusual.

Tonight it appeared to be the usual crowd. Worker Caste Minbari on some business trip; Narn refugees on their way to join G’Kar’s followers; numerous Drazi, Brakiri and Gaim; the inevitable Pak’ma’ra, whom everybody else gave a wide berth for olfactory reasons (to use a polite term for the fact that they generally smelled really bad), Centauri businesspeople (or spies, the two of which often meant the same), and even a few humans, mostly from the outlaying colonies.

Visitors from Earth had become increasingly rare lately. At least those who would come openly and with good intentions.

The small flow of late arrivals had almost passed Customs by now. The last one, a pretty human woman with shoulder-length dark blonde hair, stepped to the human guard and handed him her identicard. The guard scanned the card, then nodded and passed the traveller through.

When the black-clad woman was out of earshot, through, the guard called Zack to his terminal.

“Sergeant, I think we might have a problem,” he said.

“Was the identicard fake?” Zack asked. “Why did you pass her through, then?”

“The identicard is genuine; at least the scanner couldn’t find anything wrong with it,” the guard replied slowly.

“So what is the problem?”

“The problem is if it is indeed genuine,” the guard turned the viewscreen with the enlarged image of the identicard so that Zack could see it. “See this?”

Zack glanced at the viewscreen and became dizzy with concern at once. Holy shit, but the guard was right! If this identicard was genuine, then they had a serious problem indeed.

Or, at least, Sheridan had.

“Commander Ivanova must learn about this,” he decided. “I’ll give her a call; you’ll try to track this woman down. We need to know where she’s going.”

“I’d say the logical choice would be the captain’s quarters,” the guard muttered.


It wasn’t exactly common knowledge, but as Garibaldi’s second-in-command he stood close enough to the command staff to know that the captain and Ambassador Delenn were engaging in some kind of obscure Minbari ritual right now. A courting ritual, obviously; and the newcomer dropping right into the middle of it could lead to a disaster of epic proportions.

Zack didn’t feel up to face a situation like that on his own. He needed backup to deal with the possible fall-out; even if it meant to wake up Ivanova, which wasn’t entirely without risk, either. But that was still the lesser evil.
Activating his comm patch, he called Ivanova’s quarters.

“Commander, just thought you oughta know, we just had somebody come on board,” he said without preamble.

“Zack, this is a space station,” she replied wearily. “We get fifty ships a day. There’s always somebody coming on board!”

“Yeah, but this is major!” Zack tried to find the right words without giving away too much on an open channel. “It concerns the captain; and it ain’t good!”

There was a pause on the other end of the connection. Then Ivanova asked, sounding widely awake again.

“Well, who is it?”

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In Voyager’s Sickbay Kes was sitting at the cryogenic tube in which the Doctor had decided to put Tuvok for the time being. The Vulcan’s condition had been worsening dramatically; and this seemed the only way to stop his deterioration until the arrival of the human telepath who might or might not be able to help him.

There was no true reason for Kes to sit with him. He was clinically dead, so that his tortured mind would stop destroying itself, at least for now. Perhaps Kes could touch him, even so; perhaps not. But trying to do so might have woken him up, and that would have been dangerous in his current state.

So no, sitting with him had no real purpose. But it helped Kes to regain her own inner balance. Even in this state, Tuvok served as her anchor, as her rock in the storm. She needed him to keep her firmly rooted in this corporeal life, until her metamorphosis was completed and she could break free from her restricting physical form.

Part of her regretted that soon she would have to leave behind everyone she had come to know and love. But only a very small part. The greater part of her was looking forward to the final change; to the great journey no Ocampa had been able to set off to, ever since the Caretaker’s arrival.

Infinity was unfolding before her mind’s eye, like a gleaming path that led to the borders of the known universe…and beyond.
Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Z’Ha’Dum”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications.

PART 24 – 19 December 2260

Alyt Neroon left the Ingata at the earliest possible time considered acceptable in Minbari terms to pay somebody an official visit. He needed to speak with Delenn before she would be swamped with station business, as the matter – while official – was also of deeply personal nature.

Rastenn and Nidell had finally come to an agreement and decided to begin courting. The offset of courting required a simple ritual, performed by a priestess. And the only priestess on Babylon 5 at the moment was Delenn.

Quite frankly, Neroon would have preferred somebody else – anybody else. Just because he had made his peace with Delenn, even allied himself with her - albeit temporarily - to fight a common enemy, that did not mean he would like her to be involved with the life of his family. But Warrior Caste courting was a lengthy process, and Rastenn and Nidell wanted to start as soon as possible, to find out if they were truly suited for each other.

They needed a priestess for that. It was that simple. Even if that priestess was Delenn. Her office was what counted, not her person.

Turning into the diplomatic section, Neroon was understandably surprised by nearly colliding with a terribly upset Delenn, who looked like somebody who had just suffered the shock of her life. She also looked like somebody who had spent the whole night awake.

“Delenn,” he said, holding her still by both shoulders. “What happened?”

“John’s wife is back,” she replied, as if it would explain everything.

“You mean Sheridan?” Neroon asked with a frown. He did not know much about Starkiller’s personal life and, frankly, he did not care, but he knew at least that the man was widowed. “I thought his wife was dead!”

She nodded frantically. “So did we; Kosh and I. We did not know for certain, of course, but we assumed. She was part of the expedition the humans sent to Z’ha’dum five years ago; the expedition that ultimately woke up the Sher’shok Dum. None of them save Mr. Morden have ever returned. Those who would not serve the Shadows were killed; that we knew without question. We assumed she would not serve. Perhaps we were wrong. We simply couldn’t know.”

“And yet you would start the nights of watching with Sheridan, despite the chance of the man’s wife still being alive,” Neroon said slowly. He tried not to show how scandalized he was by that. “Are you certain that your… transformation left your honour undamaged, Delenn? For this is not something a Minbari – especially a priestess – would do.”
Delenn cringed as if he had slapped her; which, in a manner, he had.

“We thought she was killed!” she insisted.

“But you had no proof,” Neroon said. It was not a question; he knew the answer already.

“No,” she admitted.

Neroon shook his head in dismay. “Then it would have been your duty to tell him.”

“But then he would have gone to Z’ha’dum to look for her!” Delenn cried. “We could not allow
that!”

“You and Kosh,” Neroon shook his head again. “You could not allow that. Who gave the two of you
the right to make such a decision about his life? Was he ever anything but a puppet for you?
Somebody to use as a tool for your own purposes?”

“How can you say that?” Delenn protested. “I do love him! And he cares for me very much; he said
so himself.”

“Oh, but will he still care for you, should he learn that his wife’s fate was not the only issue about
which you kept the truth from him?” Neroon asked slowly. “Will he still care for you, should he
learn the truth about how our war against Earth really started?”

Delenn’s eyes widened in shock. “Are you going to…”

“No,” Neroon interrupted. “It is not my tale to tell. You, however, would do better telling him the
truth; even if his ‘wife’ turns out to be just a facsimile, fabricated by the Sher’shok Dum. You cannot
hope to build a life on the basis of such a dark secret. Although whether he will be able to trust you
again, after you and Kosh have misled him, is questionable at best.”

“I know,” Delenn admitted, near to despair; then she pushed her personal problems into the
background and was all business again. “Was there a reason for you to seek me out this morning?”

“There was; but I do not think it would be necessary, after all,” Neroon replied.

He would not have somebody with such falseness in her heart to officiate at the onset of Rastenn and
Nidell’s courting. The two would have to wait a little longer.

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In the solitude of his little ship Galen allowed the globe of glowing energy to fade into non-existence.
The scenario he had just witnessed promised nothing good. It seemed that the Shadows were raising
the bets. Like Kosh and Delenn, he had not known before that Anna Sheridan had got away from
Z’ha’dum alive.

Alive but not unchanged. Of that he was certain.

He mentally chastised himself for not keeping a closer eye on Z’ha’dum after the loss of the Icarus
expedition. Granted, getting too close to the Shadow homeworld was dangerous; especially for a
technomage. But neglecting to keep an eye on the planet resulted on the lack of proper information;
and that could prove dangerous, too.

Just like right now. He didn’t know about Anna Sheridan, and her sudden appearance on Babylon 5
meant an unknown factor; a factor that could ruin his carefully laid plans.
He had no doubt that the Shadows had brought this particular new player into the game to lure Sheridan to them. Kosh had warned the man from going to Z’ha’dum; to do so nonetheless, he needed some exceptionally strong motivation. And besides, sowing mistrust between him and Delenn could break the entire Alliance apart. The Shadows would kill two birds with the same proverbial stone.

The question was, of course, what Sheridan will do now. Will he fall into the trap of wishful thinking, believing despite common sense that a miracle had happened and he got his lost wife back? Will he want her back at all, or had he already fallen for Delenn too hard to care? Will he still be able to trust Delenn after the shock of today?

And what will happen to Delenn if Sheridan breaks up with her? Despite her transformation, in the heart of her hearts she was still a Minbari, and she had clearly imprinted on Sheridan, strange though it may seem in the eyes of her people. Should it come out that she had initiated a courtship with a man whose wife might still have been alive – was, in fact, still alive –, it would undermine her authority on Minbar forever. Even if Neroon remained silent – and Galen assumed that he would –, too many people knew about it already. And Minbari were a lot less tolerant towards such things than humans.

Although, Galen thought grimly, it was doubtful that Sheridan would be in a very forgiving mood right now. And should he choose to follow his still-wife to Z’ha’dum, for whatever reason, it could lead to complete disaster. He was the key player in the upcoming fight against the Shadows. His loss would be simply unacceptable.

It seemed that contingency plans would be necessary.

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At the end of the simulated night Kes reluctantly left Tuvok’s cryo-tube. Captain Janeway ordered her to rest, but she was too nervous for that. She found she needed less and less sleep as her transformation slowly proceeded. So, to obey the captain’s orders, she left Sickbay – but not for her quarters. She needed to find the source of the indeterminate heavy feeling that had been bothering her for hours by now.

As before, she followed her instincts, and her instincts led her away from Voyager. She left the ship without being spotted; by now, making any crewman forget that they had seen her was child’s play. She crossed the docking bay, ignoring the Vorlon ship’s mental greeting, and headed for Babylon 5’s MedLabs with the unerring sense of a sleepwalker.

She was only startled out of her trance-like condition when she encountered Dr. Hobbs.

“Kes, is everything all right?” Lillian asked in concern. “Is Chakotay…”

Kes gave her a gentle smile. “The commander I fine. I just thought you might need a helping hand here.”

“We could use all the help we get,” Lillian admitted. “But I’m no longer the one to make those decisions. Doctor Franklin is back and has taken over again.”

“You are not happy about that,” Kes stated.

“No, I’m not,” Lillian confessed. “After having done two jobs for weeks – and done well enough, if I say so myself – now that he’s back I’m demoted to a simple assistant doctor again, without as much as a thank-you. I wish I could still file for a transfer; I’d do it in this very moment. But with our connections to Earth cut, I don’t really have a way out of here.”
“Perhaps you do,” Kes said. “**Voyager** could use a real doctor; one that could treat patients outside Sickbay, even if they needed some time to catch up with twenty-fourth century medical technology.”

Lillian shook her head. “I don’t think Captain Janeway would welcome any of us on her ship. She made her opinion about interfering with our reality crystal clear. Several times.”

“She might reconsider when facing the threat of losing her first officer,” Kes pointed out. “You really should tell Commander Chakotay about your state of *elogium*, Doctor. That might help your case a great deal… if it is your wish to join our crew.”

“The thought never occurred to me,” Lillian said. “I never thought it would be a possibility at all.”

“I believe it would be worth a try,” Kes replied. “After all, neither Ensign Kim nor Naomi Wildman came from our own reality. Granted, the parallel reality they hail from only existed for a very short time, but still…”

“That sounds like an intriguing story!”

“And I would love to tell you, eventually. But first I need to learn what is going on here.”

Lillian frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Something has come to Babylon 5,” Kes explained. “Something… or someone. Somebody who causes Captain Sheridan great anguish. Somebody who isn’t exactly who they seem to be. Somebody dangerous… and threatening. I could feel their presence, the threat they represent, all the way to *Voyager*. So, who is it?”

“Anna Sheridan,” Lillian said simply, because it would come out eventually; and besides, Kes wasn’t a gossip. “The captain’s wife.”

“But I thought she was dead?” Kes said in surprise.

Lillian shrugged. “Apparently not as dead as everyone thought her to be; if it’s really her. Doctor Franklin is trying to figure out that right now. Care to take a look? Perhaps you can find something that our instruments cannot.

“I don’t think I would be welcome,” Kes said slowly.

Lillian raised an eyebrow. “And *I think* you can make yourself overlooked if you put your mind to it. Come!”

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If Vir hoped that after the Lady Timov’s departure things would return to normal – well, to what counted normal for Londo anyway – he was disappointed. Ever since the diplomatic pouch arrived in the previous morning, Londo had gone from one bar to the other, drinking steadily; and it didn’t look like he’d stop any time, soon.

Quite frankly, Vir was fed up to his eye-teeth. He had done his best to help Londo – even going as far as calling Lady Timov and persuading her to come to Babylon 5 – but nothing helped. The fact that his health was now permanently damaged due to Londo’s private little war of vengeance against Lord Refa and was causing his permanent problems only added insult to injury.

Still, it was *his* job to take care of Londo and, despite everything, Vir was a dutiful person. So he hunted down his boss in one of the countless bars of the Zocalo – *again* – and demanded an explanation.
He got one; and not one he would have expected. Apparently, Londo had been offered a position in the Royal Court as an advisor to Emperor Cartagia in matters of planetary security. A very important position.

Vir didn’t understand why Londo would be so upset about that. He told so and nearly got his head bitten off for his effort.

“Because it should have come to me twenty years ago, when I could’ve appreciated it!” Londo all but exploded into his face. “And because it wasn't given to me because I earned it. They are, I think, afraid of me. Through our friend Mr. Morden, I have gained influence and money and power. They suspect my hand in Lord Refa’s demise; and they think I will move against Cartagia. Especially now that Timov has secured Lord Tavastani’s support for me!”

“Then why would they reward you?” Vir still wasn’t getting it.

Londo shot him a baleful look. “It's not a reward, it's a leash! I will have to divide my time between here and the Homeworld! They're reeling me in. They will watch me very carefully; Minister Virini will see into that. And if I do anything suspicious, they will find me in the morning with my throat slit ear to ear. I don’t even have my cousin Adilo to support me anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Londo,” Vir murmured.

After all, it had been his uncle who had Adilo Mollari poisoned, so that he could get his son back. A plan Lady Timov had managed to prevent, but that wouldn’t make Adilo alive again.

Londo waved dismissively. “Nonsense. You weren’t the one who put your cousin into Adilo’s foster care. I was, in a moment of sentimental weakness. Now I have to live with the consequences; which should tell you all you need to know about the value of weakness.

He finished his drink, grim-faced.

A stranger – a human, clad entirely in black - stepped up to their table and placed a fresh drink in front of Londo. Londo, thinking it was the bartender, pushed some coins in his direction.

“Keep the change.”

“No charge, Ambassador,” the strangely nondescript man said, making Londo really look at him for the first time. It wasn’t a particularly friendly look.

“And who are you, hmm?” he demanded.

“A friend,” the man replied, although Vir would have been hard-pressed to imagine him as a friend of anyone… or anything. “I was sent by our mutual… associates. I have a message. You must leave the station at once.”

Although his voice was flat, almost emotionless, the word associates made Vir shiver. It clearly marked the man as a Shadow servant; no-one but Mr. Morden ever used it in the same context.

Londo realized it, too, but tried to get more information… or perhaps it was just belligerence from his part.

“And why must I leave? I am very comfortable where I am,” he declared mulishly.

The man, however, showed no readiness to share anything else.
“I have told you all I can,” he said. “If you won't go, I can't be responsible. But if you value your life, you will leave. Quickly.”

And with that, the stranger walked away, melding into the crowd.

Vir looked at Londo. “Friend of Mr. Morden's?”

“Very likely,” Londo made a face as if something had left a very bad taste in his mouth. “I do not like the sound of this, Vir. No, I do not like the sound of this at all!”

He picked up the glass the Shadow agent had put in front of him and emptied it with one swig.

For a change, Vir found himself in complete agreement with his boss. Nothing good had ever come from Mr. Morden and his associates. But he also knew that it would be useless to try persuading Londo that they ought to warn the others. So it was up to him to act, and to act quickly.

But to whom could he possibly turn? Captain Sheridan would demand explanations, and he could not give Londo’s dark secrets away. For the same reason, he couldn’t turn to the Voyager people, either. Lennier was out of question, too; what he knew, Delenn would learn immediately. Who would accept a serious warning at face value, without asking question he could not answer?

A memory from right before Delenn’s inauguration suddenly resurfaces. Rastenn had sent him a similar warning once. Perhaps he would be willing to listen as well. And perhaps if Alyt Neroon was warned, he could do something to fight off the potential danger.

With renewed hope that he actually might do something, Vir excused himself and left for Londo’s quarters, where he could use a secure channel to contact Rastenn.

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Kes watched through the observation window the pretty, strawberry blonde woman sitting on an examination table, all smiles, as one of the med techs was giving her a once-over. Nearby, in the CMO’s office, Dr. Franklin was handing to Captain Sheridan his preliminary report. He was still moving gingerly, which was only natural, since he had not yet had time to recover from his wound, but he was clearly back in charge of the MedLabs.

The air was heavy with emotions, mostly coming from a visibly troubled Captain Sheridan. But there was also bitter resentment from Dr. Hobbs’s side and helpless confusion from Dr. Franklin’s.

Nothing from the patient, though.

“Have you found anything?” Kes asked quietly.

Lillian shrugged. "She's human all right. Doctor Franklin checked her dental and medical records against what the captain gave us. It's a one hundred percent match, right down to her DNA sequence! Every piece of equipment we've got here says the person sitting there is Anna Sheridan."

“Is there nothing suspicious?” Kes insisted.

Lillian shook her head. “There's some epidermal scarring just above the nape of her neck, but it probably has been caused when the Icarus was destroyed.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Kes said slowly. “Have you found anything beneath it?”

Lillian frowned. “You mean beneath the scar?”
“The example of Seven of Nine has taught us that epidermal scarring often means cranial implants,” Kes explained.

“That would make sense,” Lillian allowed. “But we didn’t find any implants. Just the scars. Doctor Franklin decided that it never hurts to run a few more tests, though, which is why the patient is still in there.”

“That,” Kes said grimly, “is probably a good idea.”

Lillian gave her a searching look. “What do you feel from her?”

“That,” Kes replied after a moment of hesitation. “I feel nothing from her. As if she were but an empty shell, all hollowed out from the inside. She might biologically be human and a one hundred per cent match to Anna Sheridan, but something of her is missing. Something crucial that once was the core of the person she used to be.”

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In his personal quarters on board the *Ingata Alyt* Neroon was staring at the comm screen with a frown.

“And he told you nothing else?”

“I had the impression that he did not know much else, either,” Rastenn, down on Babylon 5, replied. “He seemed surprised and badly scared at the same time. Clearly, neither he nor Ambassador Mollari had counted on another agent of the *Sher’shok Dum* showing up on the station; and the warning sounds grave enough.”

“I am surprised that they would warn Mollari in the first place,” Neroon commented thoughtfully.

Rastenn shrugged. “They clearly still consider him an ally; and perhaps he still is one, even if an unreliable one.”

“Backstabbing and betrayal are time-honoured Centauri methods to deal with things,” Neroon said dryly. “Your friend is an anomaly that happens once in a generation. But that is neither here nor there. What are you thoughts on the situation?”

“My thoughts?” Rastenn echoed in surprise.

Neroon nodded. “Of course. You are a trained Warrior; and you are my heir. I expect you to have thoughts about this; otherwise I would find you unfit to lead the Clan after me. So share your thoughts with me.”

“I think that the warning Ambassador Mollari received has something to do with the unexpected reappearance of Captain Sheridan’s wife,” Rastenn began.

“Yes, it does,” Neroon agreed. “In one thing Delenn is certainly right: those who refuse to serve the *Sher’shok Dum* are killed, without exceptions. She is alive; therefore she must be what the humans call a Shadow servant.”

“But not an agent, though?”

“No; otherwise she would have been spotted earlier. No, I believe they held her back for a specific reason.”

“And that would be?” Rastenn asked.
“Can you not guess? She is Sheridan’s wife. A wife he loved very much and mourned her loss for years. Remember the reports about his reaction to this Morden person’s first appearance?”

“They are trying to distract him, then?” Rastenn tried to clarify.

Neroon shook his head. “No, it is more than just that. I believe they are trying to ram a wedge between Sheridan and Delenn; and they have found the best tool for that. Delenn never told him that his wife might be still alive. She and Kosh – the first Kosh – feared he would run off to Z’hau’dum in a hopeless attempt to save her.”

“Would he have?”

“Perhaps. I cannot tell. But by keeping that possibility hidden, Delenn has lost his trust; perhaps forever. Sheridan might have had… feelings for her – humans do not bond for life as we do – but he was certainly much more devoted to his wife.”

“Devoted enough to switch sides and follow her to Z’ha’dum?” Rastenn asked worriedly.

“Again, I cannot tell,” Neroon admitted. “Humans are unpredictable, especially when they believe they have been betrayed by someone close to them. And if he goes, we have no chance in this war. For better or worse, he is the lynchpin that holds the Alliance together.”

“And if he refuses to go with her?” Rastenn asked.

“Then, I believe, Ambassador Mollari’s warning becomes very urgent,” Neroon said grimly. “I believe the Sher’shok Dum have contingency plans for that case; and those would not look well for us.”

“In other words, Babylon 5 will suffer an all-out Shadow attack,” Rastenn finished. “Should we warn the others?”

“What others?” Neroon asked. “I can certainly put the Minbari ships on high alert, but what chance would we stand against a large Shadow fleet?”

“I meant Voyager,” Rastenn said. “They might have helped us in earlier skirmishes, but in the end, this is not their war. They should be able to leave this trap and bring themselves to safety, if that is what they want.”

“There is no safety as long as the Sher’shok Dum are on the warpath, and you know that,” Neroon, replied tiredly. “But I shall give Commander Chakotay a call and warn him; and perhaps Commander Ivanova as well. What they do with such a warning is up to them.”

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When Lillian went off-duty, Franklin was still studying the cranial scans of Anna Sheridan in his office. She waited for a while, in case he wanted to consult her – after all, she knew about everything that had happened in his absence – but he kept ignoring her… whether because he was too focused on the screen or because he wasn’t willing to admit that he couldn’t find anything, she couldn’t tell.

In either case, she was sick and tired of being treated as if she was part of the furniture… after having done his work under extremely stressful circumstances, for weeks.

Perhaps the little alien girl was right. Perhaps it was time for her to move on. But would it truly lead anywhere if she tried to ask for a job aboard Voyager? Would Captain Janeway, in her paranoid concern about changing history in either universe – or both – even consider her request? Would the fact that Lillian was expecting Chakotay’s child count for her at all?
Would it count for Chakotay?

Did, she, Lillian, truly want to get involved with somebody from a different universe deeply enough to go with him, should they find a way home? Granted, she had no family left on Earth… or anywhere else. Such friends she had once had, had long drifted away and fell out of touch. And on Babylon 5 she didn’t truly have any perspective, either personally, or professionally. There wasn’t really anything to hold her here.

On the other hand, going with Chakotay and his ship would be a huge leap of faith; magnitudes huger than anything she had ever done in her life. Admittedly, she had thought about it from time to time, ever since discovering her pregnancy. It was just so… so huge, so unlikely, so beyond imagination, hopping into a different reality.

If that would be even possible.

But even if Voyager were stuck in this reality, they couldn’t remain at Babylon forever. Eventually, they would leave. And when they did, she would never see Chakotay again. Space was huge and largely unknown.

She didn’t want to lose him.

In the end, all she could do was to ask. She owed to tell Chakotay about their baby anyway; so she would kill two birds with the same stone.

“No time like the present,” she muttered, stepping into the duty doctor’s office. She activated the BabCom system and switched to the channel secured for the visitors exclusively.

“Voyager, this is Doctor Lillian Hobbs from Babylon 5’s MedLabs. I’d like to speak to Captain Janeway, please. No, there’s no emergency. It’s a personal matter.”
Chapter Notes

Some of the cryptic Galen comments are from the various "Crusade" episodes, with slight modifications.

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PART 25 – 19 December 2260

Kathryn Janeway admitted – only to herself, of course; showing uncertainty in front of the crew would have been unwise – that she had come to hate surprises, ever since their arrival in this alternate reality. Whenever something unexpected had happened, it had been for the worse: from Kes’ encounter with the enigmatic Vorlon ambassador through Chakotay’s near-fatal injury to the death of their crewmen who had volunteered to fight in the battle of Sector 83 and Tuvok’s current condition.

One had to forgive her, then, that she became incredibly nervous when Harry Kim – at the moment in charge of the Bridge – informed her that Babylon 5’s Dr. Lillian Hobbs wanted to speak with her… in a personal matter. Like just about everyone aboard Voyager (plus a great many people on Babylon 5, too), she was aware of the fact that the lovely Dr. Hobbs was romantically involved with her first officer; and, unlike most, she had the feeling that the involvement was a serious one.

Therefore her first thought was that these two had come to an agreement – and that Chakotay was about to leave Voyager, but asked his lover to break the news to his captain gently, woman to woman.

That would have been a disaster. They have already lost three people; plus, if Chakotay left, at least some of the ex-Maquis would follow. Granted, Chakotay had stated – repeatedly – that he wanted to go home. But even if he didn’t want to stay in his reality forever, would he not change his mind for the woman he had fallen for so fast and so hard? As much as she didn’t like to admit, she needed her XO. Chakotay connected with people – including the lower decks – much easier and could solve conflicts without confrontation… well, most of the time anyway.

The doorbell chimed and Dr. Hobbs entered, following the invitation.

“Thank you for seeing me at such a short notice, Captain,” she said by way of a greeting. She seemed extremely nervous and Janeway felt a tight knot starting to form in her stomach.

“It isn’t so as if I had anything urgent to do,” she replied. “Please, sit. Can I offer you anything? Coffee? Tea?”

“No, thank you,” Dr. Hobbs carefully lowered herself onto the edge of the visitors’ chair. “I’m sorry to disturb your daily routine, Captain, but I have a… well, I don’t even know what to call it, honestly. I wouldn’t even think of asking you something like this, but your med tech, Miss Kes, encouraged me to do so…”

Kes? That was certainly unexpected; but again, the Ocampa girl had done a lot of unexpected things lately. Like sneaking aboard a Minbari warship, behind the backs of everyone… well, not everyone, obviously, at least the Minbari captain ought to have known about it, but still…
“Is this about Chakotay?” Janeway suddenly asked.

The look Dr. Hobbs gave her was startled and relieved at the same time.

“Well, sort of; but mostly, it is about me,” the doctor swallowed, searching for the right words; then she gave up and cut to the core with plain bluntness. “I’d like to join the crew of Voyager, if you could use another doctor. One that would function outside your Sickbay… or your holodecks.”

For a moment Janeway was speechless with shock. After having agonized about the possibility of some of her crew wanting to stay behind in this reality, the last thing she would expect was one of the locals wishing to go with them. Even if said local was involved with her executive officer.

Using the moment, Dr. Hobbs leaned forward in her seat.

“Captain, I’m aware of the fact that you’re afraid of contaminating the timeline… our timeline. But I have no family left; my parents died when I was fairly young and my maternal grandparents, who raised me, have passed over years ago, too. I have no siblings, no cousins; none that would have survived the last war, and what friends I once had, have long since drifted away from me. No-one would miss me.”

“And what if you were meant to make some great breakthrough in medicine?” Janeway asked, getting over her first shock. “Or to save the life of somebody who’d prove vital for the timeline of this reality?”

“What breakthrough?” Dr. Hobbs asked bitterly. “I haven’t done anything of importance since my arrival on Babylon 5; and now that Doctor Franklin is back, I wouldn’t even be able to work independently anymore. I was hoping to get permanently assigned to one of the MedLabs, but it never happened; and I’m sick and tired of being Doctor Franklin’s sidekick.”

“You could ask for reassignment,” Janeway pointed out.

“If I worked anywhere else but Babylon 5,” Dr. Hobbs replied. “Since we severed ties with the Earth Alliance, I wouldn’t be accepted back on Earth; or on any of the Earth colonies. Besides, I wouldn’t be able to work much longer.”

Janeway frowned. “Why not?”

Dr. Hobbs sighed. “This is not the way I planned to make it public, but… I am pregnant, Captain. It was not planned, and I know it really complicates things, but I will have this baby, no matter what.” She paused. “You see, Captain, we have already contaminated the timeline, Chakotay and I; and I’m trying to make the best of it.”

Janeway needed a moment to overcome her second shock in as many minutes.

“Does Chakotay know?” she finally asked.

Dr. Hobbs shook her head. “Not yet. I… I didn’t want him to give up his life out of parental responsibility. He would do that, you know. But he’s needed at home; he wants to go home… and I won’t stand in his way.”

“So, instead you’re planning to give up your life, just to stay with him?” Janeway asked a little doubtfully.

She would never do something like that.
“I don’t have much of a life, save for a thankless job with no hope for promotion,” Dr. Hobbs replied with a shrug. “And yes, I’d like my child to grow up knowing his father. Is that a crime?”

“No,” Janeway said slowly. “But…”

“And think about it how much I could learn here,” Dr. Hobbs interrupted, excitement finally overcoming her gloomy mood. “I could become a much better doctor than I am now.”

“I’m told you’re an excellent doctor already,” Janeway said. “And as a rule we don’t share our technology with societies that are on a lower technical level. That could lead to complications.”

“But only if I planned to go back, which I don’t,” Dr. Hobbs argued. “And you would benefit from the presence of a, let’s say, more mobile doctor.”

“That is certainly true,” Janeway allowed. “But I can’t decide this alone. I need to consult my staff officers.”

Dr. Hobbs nodded. “Of course. And I need to inform Chakotay about the fact that he’s going to be a father. I don’t want him to learn it from second-hand.”

“Understandable,” Janeway said; then she suddenly broke into a wide grin. “You said him. Does that mean it will be a boy then?”

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Ulkesh Naranek, Babylon 5’s resident Vorlon – and the eyes and ears of his brethren among the younger races – was surprised. That was something that had rarely happened to any member of his ancient race during the recent millennia.

As a rule, Vorlons were capable of foretelling the ways their… charges would react – and the possible outcome of said reactions. In fact, they counted on those reactions and consequences in their never-ending, circular struggle with their Adversaries. Free will was a mere myth, after all; an illusion that both sides used to move their pawns across the galactic chessboard according to their goals and purposes.

It had been working like that for thousands upon thousands of years; for much longer than the younger races – even the Minbari – would remember. Now, however, one of those pawns had developed and independence the Vorlons had not calculated with. Compared with the other younger races humans were still a rather primitive one; and belligerent at that. But they had potential, and their progress was more dynamic than anything the Vorlons had seen before. In the time-span of a mere two millennia, they had developed from using primitive hand weapons – like swords and bows – to a space-faring race (even though the Centauri had been of some assistance with that). Compared with them, all other races appeared to be stagnating.

And now one of them had managed to unite many of the younger races and dealt the Adversaries a blow that shocked even the Vorlons. For the young ones had managed to do so without their guidance. Granted, it had been a minor skirmish in the context of the eternal struggle between Order and Chaos, but they had won it entirely on their own.

That was a worrying aspect. The younger races weren’t supposed to act – and succeed! – on their own. They were supposed to follow the path shown them by the Vorlons; to prove that Order was stronger than Chaos. As the Minbari had done every time the eternal war had reached a new cycle.

Unlike the Minbari, though, humans were an unpredictable race. They could be violent like the Narn, easily corrupted like the Centauri, could hold grudges longer than any Drazi and be more...
prejudiced and self-important than the Markab… and yet they were capable of astonishing acts of compassion and self-sacrifice, too.

The problem with humans was that one could never foretell how they would react in any given situation. They were relatively new players in a very old game; still full of energy and enthusiasm. And they were annoyingly independent, acting as they saw fit, instead of waiting for proper guidance.

The fate of Kosh – the original one – proved how dangerous it was to become affiliated with humans. In his efforts to guide the one named Sheridan – the one foreseen to lead this cycle’s struggle on the side of Order, as Sinclair/Valen had led the previous one – Kosh had been manoeuvred into premature action and paid with his life for it.

He had broken the one ancient rule honoured by both sides from the beginning: never to enter the battle themselves. They were supposed to guide, to teach, to influence – not to go to battle in behalf of their pawns. A mere human shouldn’t have been capable of blackmailing a Vorlon into such condemnable action – and yet Sheridan had managed to do so.

And now Kosh was dead. The first of them to truly die for an immeasurably long time. All he had known, all he had been was lost, forever, leaving an empty space in the Vorlon continuum – an empty space that could never be filled again.

Ulkesh had long suspected that the humans – or rather this particular human – were hiding something from him… from them all. He had felt this faint, barely noticeable taint ever since coming aboard of Babylon 5. It was different from what he usually could feel from the agents of the Adversaries: more subtle, yes somehow similar. It was a constant presence, neither growing nor lessening, but it was there.

Could it have done something with Sheridan’s recent, unexpected victory in battle? If yes, then Ulkesh needed to find out what it was. However, drawing attention would be a mistake, and he was hard to overlook in his bulky environmental suit. A more… subtle approach was required. It was time for his useless vessel to do something to justify her miserable existence.

Galén had kept close watch on the new Vorlon ambassador ever since Ulkesh’s violent encounter with Voyager’s sprite-like little alien med tech. No-one else could have done so, but his instruments were based – originally – on Shadow technology, and thus they were on par with that of the Vorlons, only on a much smaller scale.

At least his surveillance couldn’t be detected, not even by Vorlons; and it alerted him whenever said Vorlon was about to leave his quarters – or had a visitor.

Therefore the alarm went off dutifully as soon as Lyta Alexander entered said quarters, and Galén watched with growing concern as the Vorlon left his environmental suit and ‘merged with his vessel’, as the entering of a modified humanoid body by a purely energy creature was commonly called (among technomages anyway).

Based on Lyta’s expression, the process couldn’t be very pleasant; or the Vorlon was being deliberately cruel. Galen wouldn’t put it beyond this Vorlon.

In any case, by using his vessel to carry him across the station unseen, Ulkesh was clearly planning something he did not want the rest of the world know of; and that made Galen nervous. Vorlons could feel the echoes of Shadow influence if they put their mind to it, and they were usually eager to wipe it out. That fact meant danger for both Galen and the frozen telepaths in the MedLabs.
So far, the frequent presence of Mr. Morden and the other occasional visit from other Shadow agents had successfully shielded them. But now that Mr. Morden had left, together with the two Shadows constantly accompanying him, the Vorlon would be able to home on to the subtler signals of dormant Shadow technology.

For some reason Galen still failed to understand, both Vorlons had ignored the actual Shadow agents; perhaps because they were a know quality. But he was certain that Ulkesh would show no mercy for the frozen telepaths – assuming that he, or any other Vorlon, was capable of mercy, which he very much doubted.

The telepaths in their cryogenic coffins would be defenceless against the Vorlon. Galen needed to do something – and the only thing he actually could do on his own was to draw the Vorlon’s attention away from them… onto himself.

It was a risky move, at best. Most Vorlons considered technomages to be Shadow creatures, and should it come to an open confrontation, Galen couldn’t be certain that he would be able to hold his own against Ulkesh. Even weakened by being carried outside a human vessel and cut off the advanced technology of his environmental suit, the Vorlon was a formidable adversary.

But he had to keep the telepaths safe. They were more important for the outcome of this war than his survival. He had left detailed instructions for Seven of Nine in case of this untimely demise. The rest would depend on the Borg.

Decision made, Galen cast an invisibility spell around himself, switched on his personal shield and left his ship, heading for the MedLabs as quickly as he could.

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The senior officers of Voyager – sans Tuvok, of course – were more than a little shocked by Janeway’s announcement… to put it mildly.

By both announcements.

Not that they wouldn’t like Lillian or wouldn’t wish Chakotay some well-deserved happiness; on the contrary. But this was perhaps the first time any of them realized that getting involved with this alternate reality, in which way ever, couldn’t happen without consequences.

They always knew that – in theory. But facing one of those consequences sitting across the table in person was something entirely different.

To everyone’s surprise, the EMH – participating in the staff meeting via life fed from Sickbay – was the first one to offer an opinion.

“Well, for my part I’d welcome a properly trained colleague to join my staff,” he declared, glaring in Tom Paris’s general direction. “It would be reassuring to send an actual doctor to the site of any accident that may happen on board in the future.”

“Yeah, but she’s a century behind us where medical science is concerned,” Tom pointed out, just to rile him up.

The EMH dismissed his mock protest out of hand.

“Details. She can learn to work with our technology; and she can bring her knowledge up to our level. Kes has managed it; even you have managed it,” he added a little maliciously. “It wouldn’t be hard for somebody with actual medical background and ample experience.”
“The question isn’t whether she’s skilled enough or not,” said Lieutenant Rollins, representing Security in Tuvok’s absence. “We all know she’d be more than capable of catching up. She’s probably seen more action on Babylon 5 than the rest of us Fleeters counted together. The questions is: could we afford to take someone from a different reality with us? In the end, everything comes down to that point.”

“You took me with you,” Harry Kim reminded him quietly. “And Naomi.”

“That’s not the same,” Rollins argued. “You’ve always been one of us!”

“No, I haven’t,” Harry replied seriously. “Granted, the discrepancy was very small and existed only for a short time, but let’s face it: your Harry Kim is dead, and so is Sam Wildman’s – your Sam Wildman’s – baby. The fact that I share the same past life and past experiences as your Harry Kim doesn’t make me the same person; not entirely. I’ll always carry with me the memory of my shipmates dying all around me; something that your Harry Kim was spared by dying first. And that makes us profoundly different.”

Janeway looked at the young ensign stricken; and so did just about everyone else present.

“I never knew you felt that way, Harry,” Janeway finally said.

Harry shrugged. “There was no reason to burden you with it, ma’am. It was my decision to cross over and to save Naomi. I never regretted it. I’m just telling you now because I think Doctor Hobbs is in a similar situation… and she deserves the same choice.”

“You do have a point,” Janeway admitted; then she looked at her executive officer askance. “You are suspiciously quiet, Commander.”

“I am an interested party,” Chakotay replied. “It wouldn’t be fair trying to influence the others.”

“I’d still like to hear your thoughts on the situation,” Janeway insisted.

Chakotay shrugged. “Very well. I won’t repeat the Doctor and Harry’s arguments, although I wholeheartedly agree with them. I just want to add one thing: we cannot know how long Kes is gonna stay with us. Her transformation is nearing the point where she’ll evolve to an existence far beyond our comprehension; and she’ll be forced to leave, or else she’d endanger the entire ship and everyone aboard. You can’t contain that much power in one little ship without breaking that ship into atoms. And once she’s gone, Sickbay will be even more understaffed as it already is.”

“You are very rational about this, Commander,” Rollins said with a nasty little smile. “No threats to leave Voyager when she isn’t allowed to stay?”

“I don’t need to threaten with that,” Chakotay replied calmly. “That is a fact. She is carrying my child. Wherever she goes, I go.”

“What about the people counting on you at home?” Janeway asked. “You always said you felt responsible for them.”

“I still do,” Chakotay replied. "This isn’t an easy decision for me. But I’m every bit as responsible for my son, and he’ll need me more. The others back home will find somebody else to lead them. Perhaps they already have; we’ve been gone long enough for them to let go. But I’m the only father my son will ever have; and he’s the future. I won’t give up that future for the past.”

“Which is why I didn’t tell you about the baby earlier,” Lillian scowled. “I don’t need you to sacrifice everything for my sake.”
Chakotay smiled. “I don’t see this as a sacrifice, my heart. I see it as a chance; one that I never had back home.”

“It seems we’ve reached an impasse,” Janeway said. “Perhaps we should have a vote about the situation.”

“Yeah, let’s do it,” B’Elanna spoke for the first time. “But consider this, Captain: if Chakotay has no other choice than to stay here, I’ll stay, too. And I’m sure I won’t be the only one.”

Chakotay stared at her disapprovingly. “You shouldn’t consider something like this for me, Torres.”

“I don’t,” she replied with a shrug. “I’m considering this for myself; and so are the others. This might not be the ideal place to live, but still a hundred times better than being lost in the Delta Quadrant, with only the faintest hope of getting home… eventually.”

“You’re insane,” Lieutenant Rollins shook his head in exasperation. “This place is in the middle of a war the locals will most likely lose.”

B’Elanna shrugged again. “So what? The Delta Quadrant had the Kazon, the Vidiians, the Borg, Species 8472 and a dozen more, all of whom were all too keen to kill us. Was that any better?”

“You can’t be serious!” Rollins stared at her in disbelief. “Do you realize that you’d never see your own kind again?”

“Oh, I see a fair amount of humans here, thank you very much,” B’Elanna returned coldly. “Which is, if you care to remember what my father was. And if I never see a Klingon again, I’ll die a happy woman.”

“Don’t get ahead of ourselves here,” Chakotay interfered calmly. “The captain wanted a vote, so let’s have a vote. I won’t vote, obviously; so the decision is all yours.”

“Well, I vote for Doctor Hobbs to stay,” Paris said, grinning. “Fewer shifts in Sickbay for me are always a win.”

“For me, too,” the EMH countered acerbically. “As the acting chief medical officer of this ship, I officially vote for Doctor Hobbs to stay, too.”

“My vote is a yes as well,” Harry said. “She deserves the same chance I was given; and she would be an asset to the crew.”

“And I want Chakotay to have his family and perhaps go home, too, so my vote is also a yes,” B’Elanna added.

In the end, the only negative vote came from Rollins as Janeway, too, refrained from voting. Which meant the overwhelming majority for Lillian to stay and the chance to keep her ex-Maquis crewmembers for Janeway; a fact that was the source of great, albeit well-concealed relief for her.

“Well, that tears it,” she said. “Congratulations, Doctor Hobbs; and welcome aboard Voyager. Now that we’ve come to a decision, let’s speak about practical things. Do you want to have your own quarters on board or are you going to move in with Chakotay?”

“We’ve discussed the possibility, but we both think it would be better to have my own place, at least for the beginning,” Lillian replied. “I’ll have to get used to a great many things anyway, and as my pregnancy progresses, I’ll need more peace and quiet than I normally do. We’ll consider moving together once the baby is born. Until then I’d prefer to be on my own… if you have the living space
to spare, that is.”

“More than we would like,” Janeway said, the memory of all their lost crewmates still haunting her. “In fact, the quarters of the chief medical officer have been unoccupied ever since Doctor Fitzgerald died when we got lost, two and a half years ago. Since it has a replica of the medical database downloaded to the local terminal, it would perhaps be the ideal place for you. You’d be able to study there in your spare time, according to the Doctor’s curriculum…” she looked at the viewscreen, and the EMH nodded.

“I’ll compare our medical database with that of Babylon 5 and set up the necessary lessons,” he promised. “I’ve already done something similar for Kes; it won’t be a problem.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Janeway rose. “All right, people, let’s return to our daily work. Commander, I assume you’ll want to help Doctor Hobbs transferring her belongings from Babylon 5…”

“Actually, Captain, I’d like to ask Ensign Wildman to do that,” Chakotay replied. “There’s something I need to discuss with you and Lieutenant Rollins. In private.”

Both the captain and the acting chief of security stared at him in surprise.

“Is it urgent?” Janeway asked.

Chakotay nodded. “According to Alyt Neroon, I’m afraid it is,” he replied grimly.

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Galen managed to intercept Lyta – and the Vorlon she was carrying inside her – well before they would reach the MedLabs, which was a good thing.

Well… calling it a good thing was perhaps overly optimistic. A practical thing, in any case. From this close, the technology embedded in his own body would shield the faint emanations of dormant Shadowtech implanted into those poor frozen telepaths and therefore keep them hidden from the Vorlon.

What would happen to him during such an encounter was another matter entirely, of course.

He planted himself in the fork of corridors where one corridor would lead in the direction of the MedLabs, the other one to the internal transport system and a third one deeper into the station, assuming one wanted to actually walk. Then he dropped the invisibility spell and there, half-concealed in the shadows, he waited.

He didn’t have to wait for too long. Only minutes later, the nearest elevator cabin arrived with the usual ping and released Lyta Alexander, who headed directly for the corridor leading to the MedLabs.

It was interesting to watch her approach. She walked slowly, like a predator searching for the scent of its prey. The Vorlon – or, at least the separated part of him currently housing inside her – was clearly trying to track the signs of Shadow influence, but was by no means certain about its true source.

Galen deliberately stirred. Only enough to catch the hunter’s attention. Lyta’s head snapped around to his direction.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

There was a faint buzzing undertone in her voice, revealing that it was the Vorlon speaking through
“That is an interesting question, isn’t it?” Galen replied, not leaving his shadowy corner. When hiding in a humanoid vessel, the Vorlon could only see through the vessel’s eye, which was an advantage the technomage didn’t want to give up. “Are we what we are or what we carry inside of us? You of all people should appreciate the irony of it.”

She gave him an unfriendly look, although it wasn’t really her look; at least he didn’t think it was.

“You are avoiding a direct answer,” she said. “You have something to hide, then.”

“It’s men’s natural condition, I’m afraid,” he replied airily. “We all have something to hide, including you. Especially you, right now. And what you are hiding is infinitely more dangerous than my little secrets.”

“You are tainted,” her voice had lost all human quality; it sounded like a swarm of angry bees. “You wear the taint of the Others. What are you doing here?”

“I’m just here,” he gave the standard answer, as always when asked that particular question. “We always have to be somewhere. This place seemed to be as good as any.”

“You are lying,” the buzzing of angry bees got stronger, and Galen briefly wondered if the Vorlon could hit him with a lethal bundle of energy, even through the physical body of his vessel. “There is a purpose for your presence here, at this time.”

“Purpose?” he pretended to consider the meaning of that word. “Oh, but that would imply a directed universe. We both know there’s no planning, no design to our lives; that neither you, nor the Others care whether we live or die, as long as we do it in your service.”

“That is your purpose,” she said with that alien voice. “To serve Order and prosper; or to serve Chaos and perish. It is your choice.”

“Oh, but it really isn’t, is it?” he returned bitterly. “You should pay the Zen garden a visit to understand how your actions – and those of the Others – leave us without a real choice.”

“Irrelevant,” the buzzing of angry bees got even angrier. “You have your purpose; that should be enough. Serve it or perish.”

She took a deliberate step forward, leaving but a narrow margin for Galen to escape. Quite frankly, he wasn’t even sure that he still could. But this was his only chance, and he had to act quickly.

“I think this is where I get off – metaphorically, metaphysically and literally,” he said brightly. “But do visit the Zen garden; contemplate the stones long enough, and with enough luck, you might come to the same conclusions I have. Good-bye!”

With as much speed as he could manage, he bolted and slipped through between her and the bulkhead, running down the corridor that led deeper into the station, as if he’d be heading for the Garden. He knew a place along that route where he could hide and re-cast the masking spell before she would catch up with him.

Once that was done, she wouldn’t be able to detect him for the next two hours. And by the time the spell wore off, he’d be back aboard his ship, safe and sound.

Or so he hoped.
Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Z’ha’Dum”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications. The device, of course, is from “The Quality of Mercy”, originally.

PART 26 – 20 December 2260

Kes offered to accompany Dr. Hobbs and Sam Wildman to Babylon 5; allegedly to help them pack together Lillian’s belongings. Her true motivation, however, was to learn more about Anna Sheridan – or rather the creature that once had been Anna Sheridan but clearly no longer was.

Thus it served her purpose very well that Lillian left the packing to Sam (not that there would have been much to pack) and went to Captain Sheridan’s office to hand in her resignation.

“I’d like to tag along,” she said. “I hope to learn more about the captain’s wife… and why she’s returned right now.”

“If the captain catches you poking around in his head, he’s not going to react well,” Lillian warned.

“Then I’ll have to be careful, so that he won’t catch me,” Kes replied with a serene smile.

Lillian shrugged. “It’s your funeral. Don’t say I haven’t warned you.”

“Duly noted,” Kes smiled again, and then they headed for Sheridan’s office.

They arrived just in time to catch the end of a conversation between Sheridan and Garibaldi… well, Kes did, with a bit of telepathic help, as they were talking very, very quietly.

“Michael, when I first came here, I wasn’t sure about you,” Sheridan was saying. “You weren’t sure about me. Since then, I have come to trust you, to rely on you. Now, I need you to take care of this for me. No questions, no speculations, hunches, or educated guesses. All right?”

According to Garibaldi’s inner turmoil, it – whatever it was – was as far from ‘all right’ as humanly possible. But after a moment, he nodded reluctantly.

“Good!” Sheridan said in obvious relief. “And when I see you next, if everything is set… we’ll talk about the weather.”

“Yes, sir,” Garibaldi replied unhappily and left. He didn’t even spot the two women waiting to enter, which clearly showed how upset he was. His situation awareness worked much better as a rule.

Lillian exchanged a worried look with Kes.

“What was that about, did you get a hint?” the doctor asked.

Kes shook her head. “No. But I felt a great urgency from Captain Sheridan… and determination. We
should hurry up.”

“No time like the present,” Lillian said philosophically and pushed the buzzer.

“Enter!” it came from inside, and the door opened. Sheridan was holstering his PPG as they entered, and looked at them in surprise. “Doctor Hobbs? Is something wrong with Stephen… I mean Doctor Franklin?”

“No, Captain,” Lillian suppressed the flare of anger with practiced ease. “Of course it had to be all about Franklin, as usual. “This is a personal matter.”

“Can it wait? I’m in a bit of hurry right now.”

“It won’t take long,” Lillian laid the comp-pad she was holding onto his desk. “I’ve just come to hand in my resignation from the MedLabs of Babylon 5.”

That caught his attention, despite being preoccupied. “You’re serious.”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life, Captain.”

“But… why now? You chose to stay with us when we severed ties with Earth. You must have believed it was the right thing to do…” Sheridan trailed off, clearly flabbergasted.

“I have,” Lillian agreed. “I still do. I just don’t think I could work alongside my boss any longer.”

“Franklin?” Sheridan was even more flabbergasted than before. “You are leaving because of Franklin?”

“As I said, Captain, it is a personal matter; and it has been a long way coming. Small things kept piling up, one after another; and then he left without telling us anything, and then he came back the same way and took over again without as much as a thank-you for the rest of us who’d worked in his place from one crisis to the next and the next and the next… I just can’t do this anymore.”

“But where are you planning to go?” Sheridan asked. “You can’t return to Earth; it would be too dangerous.”

“I’m not planning to,” Lillian decided to drop the bombshell and was really looking forward to his reaction. “I’m removing to Voyager. I’ve applied for a job – and got it.”

The reaction was everything she had hoped for – and then some. For a moment Sheridan was absolutely speechless, He opened and closed his mouth several times, unable to speak.

“Is this about Commander Chakotay?” he finally asked.

“No,” Lillian replied coldly. “It is about me, wanting to be treated as the doctor I am, instead of a third-class med tech.”

Sheridan shook his head in bewilderment… and noticed Kes’ presence for the first time. Telepathic camouflage could be a handy tool sometimes.

“Is that why you are here?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m just tagging along,” Kes replied brightly. “It was my idea in the first place, after all.”

Then she suddenly felt it: a tug, familiar yet utterly different. Similar to when the Vorlon ship called out to her; similar to the feeling of the Vorlon ambassador’s presence, but something else
nonetheless. The faint echo of a once great power, weakened yet still there.

And its source was clearly Sheridan.

“Doctor, I think you should go and help Ensign Wildman pack your stuff,” she said, not leaving the human out of her sight for a moment. “It seems the captain and I have something important to discuss.”

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Janeway was greatly concerned by the warning that had found its roundabout way from the Shadow agent through Vir through Rastenn through Neroon through Chakotay to her. Especially its vagueness concerned her.

“What do you have any idea what to expect?” she asked.

Chakotay nodded. “Alyt Neroon believes that the Shadows are planning an all-out attack against Babylon 5, should their puppet fail to lure Captain Sheridan to Z’ha’dum.”

“You mean his wife?” Rollins asked with a frown.

“Or the person who once was his wife,” Chakotay corrected. “The Minbari say that no-one escapes Z’ha’dum; not unchanged, at least. And Lillian says Doctor Franklin found some scarring on the back of her head; at the same place where the Shadowtech implants usually are.”

“But no actual implants?”

“No; either the place of the scarring is coincidence which, frankly, I very much doubt, or the implants have been removed.”

“But we were told those cannot be removed,” Janeway said.

“But not by us; or by the doctors of Babylon 5,” Chakotay answered. “We don’t know what the Shadow Servants who’ve planted them in the first time are capable of, though.”

“True,” Janeway allowed. “So, what are we supposed to do with this piece of information?”

“The warning sounds serious,” Rollins said. “We are no longer safe here. I suggest moving Voyager to the other side of the planet below… just in case.”

“What do you think, Commander?” Janeway expected her first officer to protest, but – to her surprise – Chakotay nodded in agreement.

“That would be prudent. We could still keep contact with the station, even reach it by shuttle in no time if necessary; but for Voyager, it would be safer there.”

“I thought you’d want us to join such a fight,” Rollins said.

Chakotay shook his head. “Voyager is just one ship, as the captain likes to remind us; and not a battle cruiser, either. She’d be destroyed without making a difference, should a big fleet of Shadow warships show up.”

“You saw those ships,” Rollins said. “Are they really that powerful?”

“That and more,” Chakotay replied grimly. “Perhaps a Galaxy-class starship could hold out against them, or a couple of Ambassador-class heavy cruisers, but not Voyager. We still might not escape a fight, but we should, at least, try… unless we have a collective death wish.”
“Agreed,” Janeway paused for a moment. “Does Captain Sheridan know?”

“I don’t know,” Chakotay shrugged. “He’s a bit… preoccupied at the moment. But Alyt Neroon forwarded the warning to Ivanova, and I’m sure she’ll take preventive measures. She’s nothing if not thorough, and it seems that she and Sheridan had already given the defence of Babylon 5 some serious thought.”

“Which means… what exactly?”

“All I know is that the station acquired a number of mines – or bombs, I’m not really sure – from the Gaim, through Citizen G’Kar. Each of these devices can deliver a thermonuclear blast of five or six hundred megatons.”

“And how comes you know about that?” Rollins demanded. “This is hardly common knowledge!”

“It isn’t,” Chakotay agreed, “but Ayala was talking to Mr. Garibaldi, who wanted to be sure Voyager won’t get near the jumpgate at the wrong time.”

“They’re planning to mine the area near the jumpgate!” Rollins realized. “That’s actually a smart idea. But will these devices not show up on a scanner?”

“Only if you know what you're looking for, according to Citizen G’Kar. Otherwise, they're completely undetectable… or so they hope.”

“You doubt it?” Janeway asked.

Chakotay shrugged. “I haven’t had the chance to take a look at them; and neither had Mr. Garibaldi. They have to trust G’Kar that he knows what he’s got them.”

“So, let’s assume the devices work as they’re supposed to,” Rollins said. “This means, as soon as the Shadows come out of hyperspace, they can be blown to pieces.”

“In theory, it could work,” Chakotay nodded. “But based on what I saw in Sector 83, the Shadow ships don’t need a jumpgate. They don’t even need to open their own jump-point, like other big ships. They can simply phase in and out of real space at will.”

“That can lessen the effectiveness of the mines a great deal,” Rollins said glumly. “So, what can we do?”

“Not much,” Chakotay admitted. “We’ll follow your plan… and pray.”

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“You don’t need to worry,” Sheridan said in a strange, multitonal voice that sounded like a dozen or so crystal chimes. “I mean you no harm. In fact, I need to ask you a favour.”

His eyes had changed, too, glowing in a soft golden light. Kes was quite sure it wasn’t really him speaking.

“Who… what are you?” she asked.

“I am Kosh,” the entity answered. “Or rather, I was Kosh. Now I am a mere echo of him.”

Kes knew, of course, who Kosh – the original Kosh – was… had been… whatever. She had learned a great deal from the Vorlon ship: about Vorlons in general and about the two fundamentally different Vorlon ambassadors in particular. And though she’d had a very unpleasant encounter with
the current one, she also knew that Lyta used to trust the former one unconditionally.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Shelter,” the entity answered. “When the Others killed me, I hid part of me in this vessel.”

“You mean Captain Sheridan?”

“Yes. My aide was absent, and he was the only one accepting enough to take me in, even unknowingly. But now that he is going to Z’ha’dum, I cannot stay with him any longer. The Others would discover my presence and kill what little is left of me. That must not happen; not yet. There is something important I have to do here, on Babylon 5, before I go forever – or the station will be destroyed.”

“By the Shadows?” Kes guessed.

“No,” the entity – Kosh? – answered. It didn’t say more, but Kes understood that the danger came from the Vorlons; or, at least, from one particular Vorlon.

“You want me to give you shelter until then?” she clarified. “Why me?”

“This vessel served well while I was merely hiding,” the entity answered. “To fight my own kind I need a vessel that is conscious of my presence. And I need your strength; for I am but an echo of my former self. I cannot do this without you.”

“I understand,” Kes said. “Yes, I will do this for you… and for myself, so that I can finish my transformation – if we survive the fight.”

“You will,” the entity promised. “I won’t; but that is all right. I am mostly gone; the rest of me needs to follow – after this one, last task.”

“I see,” Kes said; and she did, she really did. The Vorlons were nearing the end of a long journey she was just about to begin. “How are we going to do this?”

“Open yourself and let me do the rest,” the entity answered. “I shall be careful. Keep your eyes on me,” it added, as Kes instinctively closed her eyes. “And so it begins…”

The golden glow in Sheridan’s eyes intensified. Ropes of shining energy left his eyes and mouth, slamming into Kes with the force of tightly bundled phaser beams. For a moment she was afraid she would burn up like a piece of parchment; but then the intensity lessened, and she could feel a strange warmth filling her mind.

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Having loaded and holstered his PPG, Sheridan went to a dresser, opened a drawer, and took out a second PPG. As he looked the weapon over, he became aware of the mirror in front of him. There was someone standing behind him – a Vorlon.
“And so it begins…” the apparition said in Kosh’s multitone voice.

Startled, Sheridan spun around… but there was no one there. Turning back to the mirror, he saw no one but himself. He shook off the spooked feeling, and then with a steely look he marched into the front of the room and spoke to the monitor.

“Comm system, I want to record a time-delayed message for Ambassador Delenn.”

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His invisibility spell having worked like a charm – he pulled a face at the bad pun – Galen reached his ship without any mishap. As expected, Lyta (or rather the Vorlon within her) had lost his track in the crowded inner sections of the station, so he could return to Bay 13 on a different, somewhat complicated way.

So far so good. He had managed to lure that Vorlon bloodhound away from the MedLabs. For the time being the frozen telepaths were safe.

He’d have to shield their hiding place better, eventually, for the ship he had his eye on for them still needed some time to return from the Rim. That was a long way, even for an Explorer-class vessel. Right now, however, he had more urgent tasks at his hands, so he could only hope that the Vorlon would be busy searching the station for him in the next couple of days.

He couldn’t be everywhere; and the rest of his brethren didn’t care. Well, save for Alwyn, but Alwyn had to leave for different reasons. Very good reasons, granted, but that didn’t make him more available in a crisis.

He switched on his surveillance device to get a look at the more important players of the game, starting with the Vorlon ship, as always. Firstly because it was the closest; and secondly because he was still surprised that he’d been able to conceal his presence from both the ship and its master; at least until now. That could change any moment. It was never wise to underestimate a Vorlon… or his ship.

To his surprise, he soon spotted Voyager’s powerful little sprite near the huge ship – doing what? Communicating with the ship? At least it had extended a tendril, wrapping it around the girl and hummed to her in a tone almost too low for human ears to hear.

Of course, she wasn’t human, so perhaps her hearing was different, too.

It went on for several minutes. Then the ship released the girl, and for a moment she just stood there, her eyes tightly shut, concentrating.

And then, to his deepest shock, Galen could hear a telepathic voice inside his head.

I know you are here somewhere, it said. I have a message for you. Sheridan is going to Z’ha’dum. If he goes alone, he will perish. He must not perish – not yet. You know what is at stake. You know the way. You will have the means.

The last thing was the image of an odd-looking device; and then the message ended. The girl blinked a few times before shaking herself and heading back to Voyager.

Galen blinked a few times, too. Now, this was interesting.

Clearly, they had a previously unknown player in the game – but who could it be? Not the girl, obviously; she was just the messenger. It could be Lyta, in theory, trying to circumvent the influence of Ulkesh, but that was rather unlikely. Just as unlikely as a Vorlon ship acting without – or against –
the orders of its master.

Even though this ship had already shown an uncharacteristic interest for the girl before.

So, who was it?

And how could they know about Galen’s presence? Somebody must have watched him from afar, without setting off his alarms. It was an unsettling thought.

But the identity of that person was of secondary importance at the moment. Right now, his first concern ought to be Sheridan. Sheridan, who, it seemed, chose to go to Z’ha’dum with the one who had once been his wife – for whatever reason.

Presumably not to enter the service of the Shadows; for in that case he wouldn’t be in danger. So he had to have a plan; most likely a reckless and completely insane one that had about half a per cent chance to succeed and zero chance for him to survive.

But he had to survive; he was vital for the outcome of the war. So he would need help of get off Z’ha’dum; help that Galen might be able to provide. But not alone. Not without assistance.

It seemed to be the perfect time to pay Seven of Nine another visit.

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The quarters designed for Voyager’s chief medical officer were unexpectedly spacious – and utterly barren. The latter wasn’t really surprising, seeing that the late Dr. Fitzgerald had barely lived there for a couple of weeks before Voyager would be violently transferred half across the galaxy, resulting in the deaths of almost the entire senior staff. Including their only doctor. And their only nurse.

Which was the reason why Tom Paris and Kes had been assisting the EMH ever since, Sam Wildman explained, while she and Naomi were helping Lillian to arrange her meagre belongings in her new home.

Not that there would have been much to arrange. Life on Babylon 5 didn’t allow one to surround oneself with unnecessary items of luxury – unless one was the Centauri ambassador, of course. Besides, Lillian always preferred to travel light, taking with her only a few keepsakes from her late grandparents. And those barely filled the small, beautiful chest of drawers she had bought on a flea market in Marseille while still at university… the only thing of real value she had ever possessed.

According to its – mostly sentimental – value, the small piece of furniture found its place of honour in the Starfleet- standard living/working area, together with the elaborately framed mirror (also acquired on a flea market), while the decorative oriental silk and paper lamps found a new home in the bedroom.

And that was basically it.

“I never had so much living space for myself,” Lillian looked around in the living area. “These rooms are huge. What am I supposed to do with so much space? Why would one person need a room larger than a soccer field?”

“These are standard quarters for senior officers on a research ship,” Sam replied with a shrug. “If you want huge, you should see the VIP-rooms of a heavy cruiser. Although I must admit that even my quarters are much larger than the ones you had on Babylon 5.”
“Because you have a child?”

“No; because Voyager is an Intrepid-class vessel, built for long-term space exploration,” Sam explained. “Under normal circumstances the crew would spend long periods of time in uncharted space and there would be a steady number of people with very little rotation. The idea is to give them a stable background – including a comfortable place to live.”

“I can only agree with the idea itself,” Lillian said. “I just feel… well, a little lost here, all on my own.”

“You won’t be alone much longer,” Sam reminded her. “In fact, it would be perhaps a good idea to turn part of your bedroom into a nursery right away, so that when the baby arrives, you would have everything ready for him.”

Lillian realized that it was a good idea indeed.

“I’ll have to go back to the station and buy a lot of things, then,” she said with a frown. “Fortunately, I didn’t have the time to spend much money lately.”

“You can certainly do that,” Sam agreed. “But let us first sort through the stuff I still have in storage from the time when Naomi was born. You’re lucky that I never was into the pink cliché, so your kid can use the baby clothes, even though he’ll be a boy.”

“And the baby bed, Mum,” Naomi insisted. “He’ll need a baby bed, too. I can build it up again; I’m sure Seven would like to help.”

“Somehow I doubt that Seven would be interested in building up baby beds,” Sam replied dryly. “I think you’ll have more luck with Tom or Neelix; but you can give it a try,” she turned back to Lillian. “Should you need something you can’t find on the market, you can replicate it. Since you’re a member of the crew now, you’re entitled to the same amount of replicator rations as the rest of us. And Chakotay will want to contribute as well.”

“I’m capable of providing for myself and my child!” Lillian protested.

Sam nodded. “Of course you are. But it’s his kid, too, and he’d want to provide for him, at least partially. Don’t deny him the joy to do so.”

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Due to who she was – and what she was – Seven of Nine wasn’t easily surprised (unless it came to irrational human behaviour, but that was a different matter entirely). She wasn’t surprised now, when she felt something – or somebody – interfering with her regeneration cycle, either. This wasn’t the first time that she got disturbed and likely wouldn’t be the last one.

As a rule she would prefer letting the circle run to its end and send whoever was disturbing it on their way. But seeing that the person in question was Galen, she changed her mind.

“Technomage Galen,” she said, without leaving her regeneration chamber. “State your intentions.”

“I need your help,” the man said without preamble.

She raised an eyebrow. “You already told me that. You also said I had about a month to decide.”

“This is a different matter,” he said, the urgency in his voice unmistakable. “I need to leave Babylon 5 as soon as possible, in order to save Sheridan, who’s about to embark on a suicidal mission. But before I leave, I need to find a rather… peculiar device that’s apparently required for his rescuing.”
“Apparently?”

“I cannot be sure. I have never seen anything like it. Which is why I need help with searching the Babylon 5 database.”

“I thought you could hack any database at will.”

“I can… if I have the right keywords for the search. Without them, it could take days, and I don’t have days. I have hours, at best. Probably even less.”

“Why do you believe that I might do it faster?”

“Because your technology has already been synchronized with the Babylon 5 systems, and so you can start a search based on the image I will transfer to your terminal from my memory.”

“You know what the device looks like but not what it is used for?” Seven was rarely baffled; this was one of those rare times. “How is that possible?”

“I was given a telepathic warning,” Galen confessed. “That is how I learned about Sheridan’s plan; and I was shown an image. That is all I know; and that I don’t have time to waste.”

“Do you know who sent the warning?” Seven asked.

Galen shook his head. “No. It was something a Vorlon would do, but I seriously doubt that our resident Vorlon would care about Sheridan’s survival; or that he’d send me a warning – especially through that little alien girl of yours. Their first encounter wasn’t exactly friendly.”

“Kes?” Seven said in surprise. “You were given a warning by Kes?”

“Oh, she was just the messenger,” Galen replied. “Which is why I think it might have come from the Vorlon ship; it seems to like her, and Vorlon ships are sentient. Although it’s hard to imagine that one would act behind the back of its master… well, it doesn’t matter. We need to find the device and then we need to leave at once.”

“We?” Seven echoed. “You want me to go with you?”

“Under any other circumstances I would ask you to stay behind and keep an eye on the Vorlon; to distract him enough so that he won’t find the frozen telepaths in my absence,” Galen answered grimly. “But I cannot go to Z’ha’dum alone and come back alive on my own; just as Sheridan cannot. I need your help.”

“Why mine?”

“Because you are the only one who could fly my ship in case I am incapacitated. I can grant you temporary access to the main systems due to your implants. It won’t be easy, the technology is barely compatible, but it can be done.”

“Or we could both die.”

“Unfortunately, yes. There’s no way to tell until we have tried.”

“Why would I want to endanger my existence then?”

“Because Sheridan needs to be saved, in order to beat the Shadows. Without him the Alliance would fall to pieces in no time. And because now you could make a difference between life and death for uncounted millions, human or other.”
Seven considered that for a moment. Quite frankly, she found Galen’s reasoning irrelevant. The people in this reality meant nothing for her, save perhaps for the frozen telepaths that might become her new collective one day, should she choose so.

On the other hand, Galen was the first – and so far only – person she had found something in common with, since being separated from the Collective… and that meant a great deal to her.

“Very well,” she said. “Show me the image.”

With unabashed relief, Galen hurried to the terminal on which she usually worked in the cargo bay and laid his hand on the screen. Small sparks of energy left his fingertips, entering the interface, and a moment later a fairly bizarre image appeared on the screen.

It had a vague likeness to an old medical apparatus used to measure blood pressure several centuries previously, only that it had two cables attached to its central unit. It seemed highly unlikely that it could save the life of anyone, no matter the circumstances. But running a visual search could never do any harm, so Seven started one, for Galen’s sake.

The results were quick and surprising… to put it mildly. Surprising that the bizarre-looking tool existed in the first place; and even more surprising what it could supposedly do.

“Well,” Galen said, after having read the description of what wore the misleadingly innocent name Energy Transfer Device, “it seems we’ll need to break into the MedLabs’ security storage room. Because I doubt that Doctor Franklin would simply hand it over to us.”

“I am certain you can get it without being caught,” Seven replied coolly. “What am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

Galen handed her a small device; no larger than a standard Babylon 5 comm link.

“Wait for me in my ship. This will lead you there and open it for you. Please, don’t touch anything inside. Your implants are not yet compatible with my technology, and any contact might kill you; or damage the ship. I’d like to prevent both. We’ll work on synchronising you with the ship on our way.”

“You have not told me yet where we are going,” Seven reminded him.

“I haven’t, have I?” he said, almost pleased. “Well, you’re entitled to know, I suppose. We’re going to Z’ha’dum.”

“The homeworld of this Shadow species. The enemy’s primary fortress.”

“That is correct.”

“And we are going there, just the two of us, to save a single human who ought to know better than going there alone.”

“Also correct.”

“That is tactically unwise.”

“You get no argument from me.”

“Then why are we going?”

“Because we are the only ones who can do so and hope to return alive; with Sheridan alive as well.
And because he needs to survive.”

“I still don’t see the point,” Seven declared. “But you offered me the chance of a new collective. I believe my human crewmates would say that I owe you. So let us go.”
Part 27

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue is quoted from the episode “Z’ha’Dum”, swapped around between characters with slight modifications. As for Draal, I work with the first version of him, the one played by Louis Turenne in the episode “A Voice in the Wilderness”, simply because I found him more dignified and likeable.

The Arcati is canon – a ship waiting to dock to Babylon 5. It was never mentioned where it came from, so I made it a Centauri vessel because, well, I needed one. *g*

PART 27 – 21 December 2260

Doctor Stephen Franklin was not having a good day… to put it mildly. And that for several different reasons.

Learning that Doctor Hobbs had quit service and moved over to Voyager was bad enough. He was still far from his usual form, due to his still healing injury. He could impossibly shoulder his normal workload without help. Having lost a competent co-worker – and one who could work for two if necessary – might prove fatal in a crisis.

And they could count on a crisis coming up – actually on more than just one – in the near future. After all, the war had just begun in earnest.

“You only learn what you truly had in a person when you lose them,” was Doctor Hernandez’ comment when he complained to her about the situation. Clearly, he could not count on any sympathy from her side.

At least she was still there, helping as best as she could – and her best was very good indeed. Nevertheless, they would feel the loss of Doctor Hobbs dearly.

And now the second bombshell within the hour. Another departure without warning – and this time with potentially disastrous consequences. Things were spiralling downward very quickly; more quickly than he could keep up, especially after having been away from the MedLabs for quite some time due to his walkabout.

He was relieved to see Ivanova stepping out of a transport tube mere metres away. Perhaps he could get some answer from her. Ivanova usually knew everything that was going on aboard Babylon 5 – more than Sheridan, even.

Which reminded him…

“Susan,” he called out to her, “I just checked the logs! The captain's gone!”

“I know, I just found out about it myself,” Ivanova seemed every bit as agitated as he felt. “I'm running it down now. There must be a reason; and if there is, Garibaldi will know. He spoke to the captain last night.”
Franklin shook his head frantically. “Look, you don't understand! I mean, why did he do it? I… I gave him the report, I know he read it!”

*That* made Ivanova stop mid-track. “What report?”

“There's…” Franklin searched for the right words, since they were standing in a public place and couldn’t know who might be listening. “There’s a problem with Anna!”

“Dammit, I hate being right!” Ivanova muttered angrily; then she brought her temper back under control. “All right, come to the captain’s office with me and tell me all about it. After that, we’ll have to consult our closest allies about the new situation.”

“You mean the Minbari? I’m sure Delenn already knows.”

“If she knows she probably isn’t in any shape to lead her troops right now,” Ivanova said dryly. “I'll contact Neroon; I may hate his guts, but he’s our best choice right now. And Captain Janeway. There’s something we don’t know yet… but *they* do. We must put together the details each of us has to see what could be done to protect the station.”

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Seven of Nine had to admit that she was impressed by the technology of Galen’s ship. Having made herself familiar with the average technological level of this reality, she found it surprising that such a small vessel could phase in and out of hyperspace, without needing a jumpgate or opening a jump-point. Clearly, the ship worked on a basis of completely different technology than anything she had seen so far.

“It *is* different,” Galen said. “My brethren have developed our technology through centuries of diligent research; and right now we are heading for the very place the basics of it came from.”

“Z’ha’dum?” Seven said in surprise; not the first surprise since she had met Galen for the first time, and not the most pleasant one. “Your technology comes from Z’ha’dum? It is of Shadow origins?”

“The very basics of it are,” Galen confessed. “The first technomages were created by the Shadows to be used as living weapons; they weren’t even humans but Taratimude – a winged, sentient race as old as the Minbari; they are extinct now. But they realized that they were to become the destructive tools of Chaos, and they rebelled against the Shadows and – led by a mage named Weirden – managed to break free,” he shrugged. “It was a thousand years ago, and we have been walking our own path ever since; until the others decided to go beyond the Rim.”

“What for?”

“The signs of a new, great war were visible for those who knew what to watch out for. The others were afraid that our powers may be used as a weapon by one side or another.”

“Was that a real danger?”

“Perhaps; I cannot tell for sure. We are powerful; but we are not invincible. And there are not many of us left. We may have the power – the technology, if you like – but both sides have the *numbers*. And in the long run, it is the numbers that count.”

Seven thought about that for a moment.

“But if the Shadows created your kind in the first place, are they not technologically more powerful?” she asked.
Galen nodded. “They are. But I am not planning to launch an all-out attack against Z’ha’dum.”

“That is a relief,” Seven commented dryly. “What are you planning then?”

“My technology is of Shadow origins, therefore the planetary defence system won’t identify it as a hostile intruder,” Galen explained. We can slip through the defence grid… and sit out whatever Sheridan is planning. Then we move in and get him out… hopefully.”

Seven gave him a superior eyebrow.

“You plan is full of uncertainty factors,” she judged.

“It is,” Galen admitted. “Fortunately, I am an improviser and work well under pressure. Now, let us start synchronizing your implants with my ship. The way to Z’ha’dum is not short, but we have a lot of work to do while we are travelling.”

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Ivanova would have preferred a meeting aboard Voyager, where she could have been certain that they wouldn’t be spied upon, but with Sheridan gone, she couldn’t afford leaving C&C. So she asked Janeway and Neroon to meet her in Sheridan’s office and bring their executive officers or whomever they wanted to be in the know.

Janeway came in the company of Chakotay indeed, since he was actually better informed than she, while Neroon brought Rastenn, wanting his nephew and heir to know everything that was there to known. Just in case something happened to him; which, counting on a potential Shadow attack, was a distinct possibility.

Ivanova asked Franklin and Garibaldi to joint the meeting, them currently being the rest of the command staff; and Marcus Cole, as Delenn had gone in seclusion. Somebody had to contribute from the side of the Rangers; even if she would have preferred Delenn. Or even Lennier. But beggars couldn’t be choosers, and so she accepted the necessity of enduring Marcus and his questionable humour.

“I have called for this meeting because we have a new situation at our hands,” she began when everyone was seated.

God, she hated presiding over such meetings! That was the captain’s metier, she preferred to act – with a definite emphasis on act – from the background. Especially as Sheridan delegated such ‘pleasures’ to her often enough.

“Apparently, the captain has left for Z’ha’dum with his wife; and also, we might be facing an all-out Shadow attack, soon,” she continued. I assume the two things are connected in some way, but we don’t know how. Not yet. So, any detail any of us might provide could be vital.”

She looked pointedly at Garibaldi, who had been very tight-lipped about his last conversation with Sheridan. However, it was Neroon who spoke first.

“The connection is obvious. The Sher’shok Dum – the Shadows, as you call them – clearly want something from Sheridan. Either they are trying to win him for their case, using his wife to cajole him over; or they want him out of the way because they know that he is the one holding the Alliance together. If he agrees to defect to their side, Babylon 5 will be assimilated by the Shadow forces. If he refuses, the station will be besieged and most likely destroyed.”

“In either case, Sheridan will be lost for our case,” Garibaldi added.
“Wait a minute!” Janeway interrupted. "Could you give us some background first? I don’t understand the role of Mrs. Sheridan in all this.”

Ivanova nodded. “Right. Sorry, I forgot that you’re new to the whole situation. Well the story began about five years ago – I assume you know what Interplanetary Expeditions is?”

Chakotay consulted his PADD containing the most important parts of information from the Babylon 5 database.

“A multi-planetary corporation that funds research and archaeological expeditions to explore ancient ruins and uncharted worlds in the interest of salvaging advanced technology from extinct civilizations,” he read out loud.

“That is the official definition anyway,” Garibaldi added grimly.

“In any case, five years ago Interplanetary Expeditions announced that one of their probes out on the Rim had found the ruins of an ancient civilization,” Ivanova continued. “A certain Doctor Chang was putting together a follow-up expedition, and he wanted Anna Sheridan on his team. She jumped at the chance, of course. For a freelancer like her it was the find of a lifetime! What Chang didn’t tell most of the crew was where he really got the information,” she looked first at Garibaldi, then at Franklin. “Remember Doctor Kirkish?”

They both nodded, understanding dawning. Ivanova turned back to their allies.

"A few years earlier, IPX had found an alien ship buried beneath the surface of Mars,” she explained. “It was unlike anything they’d ever seen before. As soon as it was exposed to daylight, an automatic beacon on board sent out a coded message. IPX assumed that whoever the ship belonged to would be coming in fast to pick it up, so they moved quickly. They analyzed the ship, took pieces of it for study later, and planted a homing device inside. Three days later, another ship turned up and finished digging it out of the ground. When it left, IPX was able to track it through hyperspace to a world out on the Rim.”

“Z’ha’dum,” Neroon said grimly.

“Well, the official EarthForce destination for the planet is Alpha Omega 3, but otherwise you are right,” Ivanova replied. “Of course they didn't have a name for it at the time. And Chang was under strict orders from EarthForce New Technologies Division to keep this top secret. The IPX ship has landed amid a cluster of ancient pillars inscribed with strange rune-like markings. The crew has begun to explore the area when they picked up an energy source. They were told to check it out. And that’s when they found them.”

“The Shadows?” Janeway guessed.

Ivanova nodded. “I’m not entirely sure what happened afterwards. Anna told the captain that there was an accident that killed the crew and destroyed the comm system, so that those of them who survived had no way to tell Earth what happened, but I don’t know if I should believe it.”

“You should not,” Neroon said grimly. “It is a lie, even if she was brainwashed to actually believe it.”

“What is the truth then?” Janeway asked.

“I can only guess, but I believe the Sher’shok Dum have been hibernating since their last defeat,” Neroon replied thoughtfully. “There had to be some kind of automated defence system on or around their planet that reacted to the landing of any alien ship by waking them up; or, at least, a few of
them. Once awakened, the Shadows could not allow the humans to leave. Those who would not serve were killed.”

Ivanova gave him a look full of suspicion. “How comes that you know so much about these things? You’re a Warrior. I thought only the Religious Caste was privy to such information.”

“That is true, at least partially,” Neroon admitted. “But my mother was a priestess before she would leave the temple to marry my father. And though my sister – Rastenn’s mother – and I both found our heart calling us to the Warrior Caste, mother insisted on teaching us everything she thought we might need on our chosen path.”

“Including the legends concerning a mythical war that took place one thousand years ago?” Garibaldi shook his head in bewilderment.

Neroon shrugged.

“You should have realized by now that our people are much deeper rooted in tradition than yours,” he replied. “We consider the past as the foundation the present is built on. Besides, the last great war has also brought us Valen – and fundamental changes in our society. That is not something we would easily forget.”

“We always knew the Sher’shok Dum would return one day,” Rastenn said; then he added with a wry grin. “Some of us just find it hard to believe that it is happening in their lifetime.”

The humans returned his grin – who would have expected a Minbari Warrior with a sense of humour?

Neroon, however, had something else on his mind.

“You seem to have some surprising in-depth information about the fate of the Icarus-expedition, Commander,” he said to Ivanova. “May I ask where it comes from?”

“The captain had the foresight of recording his conversation with Anna,” Ivanova replied. “He left me the records as an encoded, time-delayed message. I’ve just found it an hour ago. I can provide you with a copy if you wish.”

“I would like that, yes,” Neroon said slowly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Ivanova sighed. “So, these are the known facts. The captain left for Z’ha’dum, but I don’t think he’s planning a family reunion. The problem is, we don’t know what he’s planning… unless you do,” she looked at Garibaldi, who shook his head.

“Nope. I don’t know anything, and the captain expressly forbade me to make any educated guesses.”

“But he asked you to do something for him, didn’t he?”

“Yes; and I’m under strict orders not to speak about it to anyone – not even to you. I’m sorry, Susan, I just can’t. And it wouldn’t do you – or anyone else – any good to know it, either.”

Ivanova wasn’t happy about that, but there was nothing she could have done. Orders were orders; and besides, she trusted Sheridan to know what he was doing.

“All right,” she said. “This is the captain’s move, and we are clearly not meant to interfere – even if we could. Which we can’t. So let’s concentrate on the warning we’ve received and the immediate danger threatening the station.”
She turned to Janeway. “Captain, I’m sorry to say this, but I don’t think your ship would be safe,
docked to the station as it is.”

Janeway nodded. “We’ve come to the same conclusion. Which is why we decided to move Voyager
to the other side of Epsilon 3. We know it won’t be much of a hiding place, but at least we won’t
stand out like a sore thumb there – and we can’t really go anywhere else. Our presence has
contaminated your reality already enough.”

“Too bad we don’t have any means to cloak the ship,” Chakotay mused. “But perhaps Seven’s
multiphasic shields will provide us with some protection. She might even be able to improve them a
little more.”

“I’ll speak to her as soon as we’ve moved the ship,” Janeway promised. “What can you do to protect
the station?” she then asked Ivanova.

“Not much,” Ivanova admitted unhappily. “Oh, we will fly more patrols and keep the defensive
weapons ready, but beyond that? We don’t have entire fleets to protect us, unfortunately.”

“You have the remaining White Stars,” Marcus reminded her, speaking for the first time since they
got together. “And the Minbari cruisers Delenn has ordered here; well, the ones not destroyed in
Sector 83.”

“I have good news for you,” Neroon said. “The Moon Shields decided to leave behind their ships –
the ones that were too late for the previous battle – under my command. They will do their part,
defending the station.”

“It still won’t be enough, though,” Ivanova said pessimistically.

“No,” Neroon agreed. “But I shall do whatever I can to delay the inevitable. And even – how do you
humans put it? Oh, yes; even outgunned and outnumbered, I can do a great deal with a dozen
warships full of trained Warriors under my command.”

“I honestly hope so,” Ivanova replied glumly. “Or else we are all doomed.”

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At the same time somewhat agitated Vir Cotto was escorting his boss to the shuttle that was
supposed to take said boss to the Arcati – the regular Centauri transport ship heading home. A plan
that made Vir nervous… well, more nervous than usual.

“Londo, are you sure you want to do this?” he asked, for about the fourteenth time on that day.

“No, Vir, I most definitely don’t want to do this,” Londo answered tiredly. “But when one is
summoned by the Emperor directly, there is no other choice left than to obey. Besides, I was warned
to leave the station if I value my life, wasn’t I?”

“If you take the warning of Mr. Morden’s friend so seriously, then why do you leave me behind?”
Vir asked.

Not that it would surprise him, of course. The machinations that had led to the death of Lord Refa –
and very nearly to his own – had clearly shown how little Londo truly valued him.

“Because…” Londo sighed. “Because Babylon 5, surrounded by a vast Shadow fleet, is still a great
deal safer than the Imperial Court. You would not last a day among all that scheming and
backstabbing. Besides, I need somebody here. Somebody I can trust.”
“You don’t trust anyone, Londo, especially not me,” Vir said resignedly.

Londo rolled his eyes. “Oh, I do trust your integrity; you’re probably the only Centauri who possesses some of that. I just don’t trust you with tasks that require a level of duplicity you’ll never be capable of.”

Vir blinked a few times, unsure how to interpret that. “Well, thank you, but…”

“That was not a compliment!” Londo interrupted.

Of course it wasn’t. After all his failures, after all that had gone wrong, he couldn’t really expect a compliment from Londo, of all people. Vir suppressed a sigh and listened with due attention to the last-minute instructions dumped over his head in Londo’s usual condescending manner, and then watched the back of his boss until Londo boarded the shuttle.

From the protected observation gallery of the docking bay both Londo and the shuttle seemed almost frighteningly small and fragile. For a moment he wondered which one of them was in worse danger; but then he realized that Londo was right. Even threatened by a huge Shadow fleet, Babylon 5 was by magnitudes safer than the Imperial Court.

At least here one could make an educated guess about who the real enemy was.

Once the shuttle had been elevated to the surface and was therefore no longer visible for him, he turned around to return to his duties. Londo left him with a huge pile of paperwork that had to be dealt with. Preferably yesterday. Or the day before.

Heading back towards Green Sector, however, he was intercepted by the Voyager people. More accurately by Tom Paris, Harry Kim and that aggressive female engineer of them, B’Elanna Torres.

“Hello Vir,” as usual, Tom was the one to take initiative. “Glad we’ve managed to catch you in time.”

“In time for what?” Vir asked, a little confused.

“We’ve been looking for you,” Harry said.

Vir blinked in surprise. “You have? Can I help you with something? Londo has good connections to a great number of traders here, not just to the Centauri ones. I’m sure I can get you whatever you need.”

“We don’t need anything,” Tom interrupted. “We just wanted to thank you for the warning before Voyager leaves the station. I doubt anyone else thought of doing so, and you deserve it.”

“You’re leaving?” Vir picked out the really important piece of information at once. “That’s… that’s good. Things can become very dangerous here, very soon. The farther you are from Babylon 5 in the near future, the better for you all.”

“We’re not planning to go very far,” B’Elanna said. “Only…”

Vir raised a hand to stop her. “No, please, don’t tell me! What I don’t know, I can’t give away. We’ve seen how useless I am at keeping secrets when a telepathic scan is involved. You’re my friends; I don’t want to betray you, too.”

“You haven’t betrayed your boss,” Tom pointed out. “He used you to get that piece of information to his enemies. Everybody is useless at keeping secrets when a telepathic scan is involved; save perhaps
the Vulcans. Your boss counted on that. And you’ll have to bear the consequences of his duplicity.”

Vir was actually touched. The human – all these three, actually – seemed genuinely angry on his behalf, and that didn’t happen to him frequently.

“I still don’t want to give away your hiding place involuntarily,” he said. “I’m glad Rastenn – or likely his uncle – saw to it that you’d be warned. This is not your war; you shouldn’t get between the fronts. Speaking of which, how is Commander Tuvok doing?”

“No changes,” Tom replied grimly. “He’s still in cryogenic suspension. I never thought I’d miss him, but I do. That Vulcan level-headedness of his is something we could all use right now.”

“Let’s hope he will recover eventually,” Vir said, and he meant it. He owed the oddly powerful alien his sanity and what was left of his health. “Well, I must go now. I hope we get through the upcoming crisis in one piece and see each other again, but if we shouldn’t… it’s been an honour to know you.”

“The feeling is entirely mutual,” Tom said. “You’re a fine guy, Vir. Take care of yourself.”

Both men shook hands with him – an odd human gesture he still couldn’t get used to, not even after three years on Babylon 5 – and B’Elanna even kissed him on the cheek. Then the three returned to the docking bay to board Voyager, while Vir continued on to Green Sector, to deal with the inevitable paperwork, wondering if he’d see his human friends ever again.

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After their return from the meeting with Ivanova, Janeway and Chakotay immediately started the preparations to leave Babylon 5. Personnel was ordered back from their visits on the station, visitors were asked to leave, and the officers from Alpha Shift – basically the senior staff, with the exception of Tuvok – was called to the Bridge.

“Home, sweet home!” Tom Paris declared, taking his customary place in the pilot’s chair.

“Don’t get too attached to it,” Harry grinned at him from his Ops station. “We’re not going far enough to even get your seat warmed up.”

“It’s still flying,” Tom replied. “God, I’ve missed this!”

He let his fingers glide over his console, and the touch controls came dutifully alive. Then he looked back over his shoulder to the command chair.

“Your orders, Captain?”

Janeway smiled involuntarily. After weeks of lying in dock she, too, felt the knowledge that they’d get spaceborne again… liberating.

“Take us to the other side, of Epsilon 3, Lieutenant,” he ordered. “We’ll stay in geosynchronous orbit just high enough above the planet so that we won’t set off the automated defence system. I assume you’ve got the parameters programmed already.”

Tom nodded. “We got them from Commander Ivanova just in time.”

“Good,” Janeway said. “Harry, have you calculated the position for us from where we can keep radio contact with the station but remain shielded by the planet?”

“Aye, Captain,” Harry rattled down the coordinates for her. “We’ll have to correct our orbit from time to time, but those corrections will be only minimal.”
“We’ve just received from C&C the okay for departure,” Lieutenant Rollins added from Tactical.

“Very well,” Janeway leaned back in the command chair. “Mr. Paris, prepare to leave the dock. Thrusters only.”

“Thrusters only, aye,” Tom moved the ship away from the docking bay with feather-light touches, until they cleared the station entirely. “We’re clear, Captain.”

“Set course for the other side of Epsilon 3,” Janeway ordered. “One quarter impulse. Mr. Rollins, as much as I trust C&C personnel to guide all these ships around us, there are too many smaller objects for my comfort. A collision would be unfortunate; raise shields, just as a precaution.”

Rollins acknowledged the orders and hit the necessary controls.

“We’ve got full shields, Captain,” he reported a moment later.

Janeway nodded and looked at Tom. “Engage.”

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In the unfathomable depths of Epsilon 3, in the heart of the Great Machine, Draal was slowly recovering his strength. The task of moving Babylon 4 a thousand years back to the past had cost him almost everything he – and the Great Machine – had, and both needed time to regain their strength. But now he almost felt ready to take action again. Almost.

He had not been unaware of the things happening during his… absence of course. The Great Machine had recorded the dramatic events, and the Zathras brothers – now only nine of them – had watched everything in real time. He just had not had the chance to discuss the situation with the Zathrases – until now.

Well… discussing it would be too ambitious a word, to be honest. It was mostly so that the various Zathrases aimed long, confusing monologues at him – sometimes two or three of them at he same time – to describe said events from their own unique (and very peculiar) point of view, and he, with the help of the Great Machine, tried to put together the greater picture from the often controversial details.

He humbly admitted that it was sometimes more than a little burdensome. Despite having merged with the Great Machine, he was still Minbari enough to prefer the clear, spiritual way his own people – especially the Religious Caste – tended to think; and he missed the chance of getting answers to the questions he actually asked. But he was a patient soul, and with the help of the Great Machine he managed to filter out the facts from the chaotic mass of information provided by the Zathrases.

Speaking of his own people… Delenn was causing him increasingly more concern lately. Having watched the key events from the past through the Great Machine, he thought he understood now what motivated his former pupil; why would Delenn choose to undergo her transformation and why would she go as far as breaking up the Grey Council, risking to end Valen’s Peace.

He understood, yes; which didn’t mean he agreed with her. Oh, he would support her case as much as he could; and, thanks to the Great Machine, he could do a lot indeed. Not enough to hold back a Shadow fleet unfortunately; the defensive weapons of Epsilon 3 didn’t have a long enough range to protect Babylon 5. They had been built to protect the planet. But he could project a hologram of himself to Babylon 5 to offer counsel and knowledge that might prove crucial.

If only Delenn would answer his attempts to establish contact! But she did not. She had not spoken to anyone since Sheridan’s departure – not even to Lennier. She had been sitting in her quarters, not
eating, not sleeping, just re-watching Sheridan’s farewell message with a stony face.

Draal had watched the message with her several times. He thought he understood the man’s reasons for going to Z’ha’dum – he just doubted that the plan Sheridan seemed to have would truly work. At least not so that the man would get off the Shadow homeworld alive.

Unless…

There were still some factors no-one had considered before. One was the small, arrow-shaped ship heading for Z’ha’dum, with the renegade technomage on board. Draal recognized Galen, of course – or rather the Great Machine did. He knew the ship might slip through the Shadow defence grid; but how the mage intended to find Sheridan in the honeycomb of subterranean corridors and get him out in one piece was beyond his imagination.

The female cyborg from the different reality might play some role in it, but he couldn’t even guess how. She was an unknown factor, even for the Great Machine; and unknown factors always meant unknown risks.

“I cannot foresee the possible outcome of this, Zathras,” he said with a sigh. “And that worries me greatly.”

“Zathras knows,” the shaggy alien currently on duty answered seriously. “You rest. Zathras watches and makes reports. And then you do what you must do.”