

# Babylon Paradox

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If you have any comments or like the work I have done, feel free to E-mail me on my E-mail address in my profile page or write a review, go crazy, I do not mind.

Please note that some aspects of this story will be out of mind and not follow the normal steps of a story, also some parts of this story might be hard to swallow. But please continue with it.

## Acknowledgements

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The Beta reading has been in stages.

- **Stage one** is the basic checks for: spelling, punctuation and basic story structure. *Caitlin M Finley* and *Specter06* are the beta readers for this.
- **Stage Two** is in more depth: story structure, ideas, alternative phrases and things that did not make sense. The Beta readers for this are, *Dana Beehr* and *Jennie FitzGerald*

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# Chapter 1

(Jeffrey Sinclair)

The massive Minbari war ships glided through space like huge predators, picking off all the Star Furies and any human warships. Space was full of them. It was an unfair battle, one the humans had no hope of winning.

Sinclair knew that each Minbari warship was as monstrous as the one in front of him, but from the distance, they only looked like small flies with stabbing beams of light. He needed to make a strike against the Minbari weapons and take them out. *At least I could help more humans escape Earth.*

He set his target and rushed forward at full speed. He ducked and swerved debris that travelled at near-realistic speed in all directions. But before he had the chance to strike a blow, his primary systems were hit, sending him hurtling into space. Tremendous G-forces pulled at his hands and space spun beyond his view screen as he tried to stabilise his craft.

Bad news came to Sinclair as one after another, like a succession of death sentences as his Star Fury informed him about his system failures. In one last heroic action, he ordered his Star Fury for ramming speed.

The enormous Minbari warship filled his window. He could not look away. It was massive, surrounded by dead Earth vessels and bodies. *This will be the last thing I will see.*

The Minbari vessel engaged its tractor beam and broke off Sinclair's train of thought. He wanted to strike a blow; now he would be a prisoner forced to watch the destruction of his home world. *What do they want? Are they going to torture me? Like hell they will, I will fight to the last breath.*

As the Minbari shuttle bay opened, a green plasma burst shot past him, destroying the tractor beam and sending his tiny ship hurtling past the War Cruiser into the void of space. He frantically wrestled about, *got to get control...! Got to get control...!*

With his ship under control and his life support online, he managed to breathe again, but he felt sick dread in his stomach as he watched the Minbari War Cruisers press on...toward Earth. And he was helpless to stop them.

Ship after ship fell to the Minbari advance. Hulls breached, spilling all the inhabitants into space. Bodies twitched and struggled before they turned into fragile ice statues.

Nukes blasted several of the Minbari vessels into atoms all over Earth space before a blinding light engulfed the area, but in the end, it failed to stop the advance. The Minbari carried on, as if they could smell victory. It was a holy war and nothing would, stand in the way of their victory against the humans.

Sinclair stared out of his view screen, *Humanity is doomed!*

More silent nukes went off, filling space with a blinding light. All Sinclair could hear was the pounding of his heart, the frantic breathing and incomprehensible cries for help over the Star Fury's radio system.

The light dimmed and his heart sank deeper. There was no way the Minbari stood a chance against the field of nukes that formed the primary defence line. The Minbari hovered next to the remaining Earth Defence Fleet as if teasing the remaining forces. Forces that already teetered on the edge of despair.

"What do you bastards want? Why don't you leave us alone?" he shouted, as if his voice could force the Minbari away.

But as he looked on, they opened fire. Stabbing beams of yellow light tore open the remaining Earth vessels —short bursts finishing of anything that moved, like moths being incinerated in a blast furnace.

He looked on; he could do nothing. Could only watch, as Earth stood like an injured prey surrounded by hungry predators.

The blue waters and gorgeous landmasses stood open. The white fluffy clouds hovered over the cities as Sinclair looked into the magnified viewer. Then a storm of yellow beams pulverised the atmosphere, destroying the white clouds, superheating the oceans and disintegrating the cities all over the globe.

Sinclair watched as the attack went on for what seemed like hours, his heart hammered as he flinched deeper into his chair. Earth was being slaughtered... including his family.

Confusion filled him. *Why do they have to attack Earth? The military is already gone. The planet is defenceless. Why didn't they start with the outer colonies like the briefings said?*

The towering cities turned into black stains on the surface and the sky began to bleed... He wanted to cry out, but that would only draw attention to his small ship. He was safe for the moment, far out in space and he could only listen to the shocked COM chatter.

The Minbari continued and converged around Earth like angry hornets around their victim. Swarming, stinging, killing...

Mother Earth soon became bruised and battered. The landscape was unrecognisable now as the sky began to fill with smoke and ash. The Minbari beams continued to rain down on anything that was on the surface.

Unable to look away from the view screen, Sinclair watched, as the Earth died and its atmosphere became dead, black and unable to support life. Then, unexpectedly, the air caught fire.

A hurricane of fire swept around the globe, incinerating everything as the atmosphere exploded with excessive force.

Sinclair jerked back at the unexpected result from the constant bombardment. The smaller Minbari vessels tried to escape, leaving the war cruisers to be vaporized. Despite it all, Sinclair felt a grim smile cross his face. *Guess the Minbari didn't expect that result..*

The entire side of the Earth burst like a blister. Red lava exploded out the side as the core erupted like a second sun. All the matter spread outwards as if a million nukes had gone off inside the planet. The frightened Minbari War Cruisers backed away trying to escape the hurtling rocks of lava and superheated jets of water spewing into the coldness of space.

Mother Earth was acting out her revenge on the scurrying Minbari. Like a final farewell to humanity, she struck out. Huge chunks of rock propelled through space, as if Earth herself targeted each of their warships. Collisions on a colossal scale tore open the Minbari Vessels, killing everyone and causing secondary explosions. Lava streams splashed over the hulls, like paint splattered on a painter's board, melting and simmering the sides of the Minbari vessels. Huge decompressions tore open the ships' hulls before they halted, dead in space.

Sinclair almost cheered in victory until he realized that his homeworld was completely destroyed. *What will I do now?*

What was left of the Minbari fleet limped off, like a group of children that had just burned down a house. Sinclair hovered in his Star Fury with no idea of what to do next. He waited before sending a distress signal, in case any Minbari were still lurking.

At last a battered and scarred Earth vessel came to retrieve his Star Fury. They brought him on board and his life was saved. Only a pitiful handful of humans had survived. After Earth was gone, the Minbari carried on their relentless attacks on defenceless colonies.

More sinister events filled his mind. More humans are killed and massacred; there is nothing he can do. Suddenly, he is faced-to-face with a Minbari warrior. His face is tainted with the colour of red human blood and the planet is caked in red. The Minbari's dagger hangs from his hands.

Suddenly the Minbari springs forward, raising the dagger. He hammers the blade into Sinclair's chest, driving the blade home.

As if a nail had been shoved in his back, Sinclair jolted up in his bed from his nightmare. His scars stung in remembered agony. Sweat soaked into the bed sheets and he could feel his shirt wet.

The ventilation hummed in the background as he drank in the details of his room.

*Another nightmare? Always a nightmare! Every night!*

The twisting shadows on the wall created by the light from hyperspace slowly turned into the Minbari War ships, the red atmosphere turned into the blood spatter that engulfed his Star Fury with all the soldiers who fought in the war. "What a disaster! The damn Minbari, I will kill every last one!" He barked as he blinked away the visions.

He stood up and lumbered over to his bathroom. But he paused when he approached a huge water painting of his Hyperspace city.

"What an achievement we made during the ten years. Our world may be gone, but we live on. Our cities are the key!"

He picked up a glass of unfinished scotch and drank a toast to the picture representation of his city, which gave him and everybody else a home. The taste was flat, but his meaning was true and sincere. It was something he did every morning, a ritual for good luck.

He carried on into the bathroom. The sudden activation of the light made him flinch. When his eyes adjusted, he scarcely recognized the man in the mirror, who had endured so much pain and suffering.

His stubble showed on his face. He needed to shave it off before his shift began. It would be another day of making sure the city ran at maximum performance. The huge city relied on him. The human race depended on each city commander.

But deep down in his heart he swore that he would have his revenge on the Minbari. *Revenge I will have. One day.*

## Chapter 2

(Michael Garibaldi)

**B**eing the second in command of this massive construction facility offered him many perks of the job and he often indulged his old drinking habit -with a little bit of caution.

Sitting in a colourful local establishment, called the "Bolt Hole" by the inhabitants, Garibaldi inspected the latest edition of the *Crystal For Order* magazine. He often purchased it the moment it became available.

A glass of beer in one hand and the magazine spread out on the table, he eagerly inspected the new releases of Daffy Duck, Roger Rabbit and any other children's cartoons he found interesting.

Only a limited number of video crystals still existed, thanks to the efforts of the evacuation crews who saw fit to download as much as they could before the Earth was destroyed. They came at a price, of course. However, cost was no object for Garibaldi; his salary as second in command of the facility was more than adequate for such extras.

With a contented smile, he drew out a highlighter from his pocket and highlighted the newest material in the magazine. Paper copies of periodicals were a rarity, of course, and almost more expensive than the items available for order within them. However, Garibaldi preferred the look and feel of a real magazine that he could hold in his hands, and again, when it came to his beloved video crystals, he was prepared to pay extra to get what he wanted.

He then heaved a long and disappointed sigh at the black blob that sat on his plate.

He had complained to the chef about the food in the past, but was told to, "Don't like it? Well, then, swim back to Earth and get yourself something else! Take a sweater – space can get chilly." He decided to accept the dull food and keep his mouth shut. After all, pissing off the chef would not be a good idea. *Still looks like a pile of dog muck, though.*

He brushed the so-called 'food' aside with a brisk wave of his hand. Tilting the chair back on two legs, he grabbed the magazine from the table and began to inspect it in detail for interesting movies and series. With his choice firmly in his mind, he flipped the page and carried on making mental notes.

His concentration was broken when he noticed Zack Allen marching toward him. Zack's navy blue pants were covered with pockets and looked like they'd seen better days. Garibaldi dropped the chair back down to all four legs as Zack came to a stop on the other side of the table. "So, Zack, you wanted to see me?"

His question dispensed with all pleasantries and Zack could not say anything except for what was on his mind. He pulled up a chair and sat down, head held low. "I have to get out of this place!"

Garibaldi closed his magazine and placed it down on the table, forgetting about his food directly under the magazine. He leaned back in his chair and said, "You're chief of security Zack, you can't just get up and leave!"

Zack fidgeted with his eye patch. He knew Zack was about to start his "leaving" speech again. He had done this many times in the past and never took the initiative to actually do it. Garibaldi was getting pretty sick of listening to the same speech again. But Zack was his friend and a jerk at times. *Who knows, maybe this time he'll say something different.*

"I feel enclosed here. Batastar Asteroid Complex is not for me. I never wanted to come to this place anyway. Okay, I know we're building the Hyperspace Cities..." He held up his hands, as if highlighting his next words. "'Humanity's last best hope for survival,' but I have problems and they can't be solved chasing peasants through the passageways."

Garibaldi straightened himself up in his chair, took a gulp of beer and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "What happened to that Narn female? Any success? It's been two months."

"The results came back negative. I even checked when she was sleeping..." Zack paused for a moment, looking disappointed. "I even thought the Narns would be acceptable."

Garibaldi had never imagined himself as a counsellor, but he felt like he was becoming one. As Garibaldi sat listening to Zack pour out his problems to him, he felt his mind drifting back to his magazine, planning his next order. He didn't notice the topic of Zack's complaints slowly changing, until it had already entered dangerous territory.

It was a topic that was widely discussed around the facility and he needed to keep a close eye on it. He had his own plans in motion and didn't want anyone to spoil them. But Zack was so angry he was starting to raise his voice.

"Not only that, but that bastard Elvis has been snooping around. I've been getting lots of complaints about him, especially from the female workforce." Zack leaned on the table. "If you ask me, we should kill the lowlife. Then *you* could be in command."

His sly tone was a clear indication that Zack was ready to execute his little threat. But that would be a huge mistake and Garibaldi shook his head. He couldn't believe what he was hearing from his friend. Even if Zack was a jerk and had more sexual partners than any man alive, Garibaldi did not expect him to act so rashly.

He poured himself another glass and replied softly "Zack, I want you to get all ideas about killing him out of your mind. I know Elvis needs sorting out, but I'm working on it. You just handle the security."

Zack leaned back and snorted. "At least consider my request to move to one of the Hyperspace Cities. It's the primary city called Casabianca."

Garibaldi drummed his fingers on the table. He needed to get to the heart of the matter. Zack was one of his best officers and he could not afford for him to leave. "Are you sure the doctors told you everything? You know doctors, say one thing now, then something different the next day."

Zack shrugged and waved his hands over the table. "I don't know. I've been to all the doctors on this facility and they all say the same thing, I have less than one percent chance. I'm stuck. My life has no meaning now!"

Feeling pressed for time, Garibaldi stood up, straightening his uniform and preparing to place his magazine in the machine. His shift was due to start in a few minutes and the last thing he wanted was to be late for his appointment. Zack was a man that was hindered with a terrible problem. Garibaldi could not comprehend what he must be feeling, *Might as well give him what he wants. Hell, he'll probably never go anyway.*

"Fine, I will pass your request to the Casabianca authorities once we can locate a Vanguard to pass the message on. Until then, you know your duties."

With his magazine under his arm, he shoved the chair under his table and walked over to the Vid-Orderer, with Zack following.

As he studied the machine, Garibaldi gestured toward Zack. "What made you choose a Narn?"

Zack's face flushed. "The doctors told me I should try other species. So far, all the humans I have had sex with failed. They said there could be a chance if I mated with another species."

This was new to him. Throughout his friendship with Zack, he'd never expected him to be so blunt and desperate. But his dilemma had driven him to this and Garibaldi could sense that he enjoyed it. But at the end of the day his friend was stopped cold by a simple problem.

Garibaldi dumped his magazine into the Vid-Orderer humming in the background and faced Zack. "Sorry to hear it. Perhaps something out there will give you a break..."

Zack looked doubtful, but Garibaldi couldn't believe what he said next. "Yeah. I bet, I already kicked the Narn out and it's time for me to do some hunting. What other species do you think I should go after next? I always wanted to try Minbari."

Garibaldi was troubled. "I would not go down that route -" His expression fell. "-Everybody hates the Minbari especially after what they did over ten years ago..."

But before he had the chance to recite the war and the countless lives the Minbari had killed, the Vid-Orderer suddenly caught Garibaldi's attention as it read out loud the new unselected category that was accidentally marked when he placed the magazine over the black food.

"*You have selected: Adult entertainment Inter-species Selections. Selected items are: Narns For Life, Drakh on a High Rod, Who's Your Little Pak'ma'ra...*" The list carried on like a supermarket attendant asking for the price of a sensitive item over the intercom. Garibaldi began pressing buttons frantically, trying to stifle the machine.

"Audio off!" He wanted to shout the command, but he didn't want to draw any more attention. "Audio off!"

But the machine carried on with strange and obscure titles. Finally, with a yank from his hand he pulled out the power lead, leaving the stunned bystanders in an awkward silence.

Red-faced, he quickly brushed everyone away. Zack interjected with a grin, "I didn't know you were into that stuff. I have a whole collection of Inter-species material, all in High definition, 3D rendered, closed caption..."

With a jolt, Garibaldi dragged Zack out of the embarrassing situation and away from the crowd of onlookers.

## Chapter 3

(John Sheridan)

**O**ne after another, human battles had always led to disaster. The only victories were those of suicides or booby-trapped nukes. Nothing anyone could celebrate over.

*Until today.*

As he stood in the command centre of his personal warship, the *Agamemnon*, John looked into the view screen that displayed Action 7, a small world that orbited a dwarf star. It wasn't much to look at, but the Minbari were heading straight for the planet.

He was well aware that this particular War cruiser was deliberately hunting human colonies and it had already destroyed six settlements. This time, he was dispatched with five cruisers to rescue the colonists.

The large star system consisted of many planets and asteroids jumbled together. *Space's junkyard*, Sheridan thought cynically.

Sheridan had no interest in engaging the huge Minbari war ship that was spotted on the outer fringe of the solar system. Even with five vessels at his command, they lacked the firepower to combat it. He had the lives of his crew and now the settlers to think about.

He knew the large asteroid field would hinder the Minbari's advance, so he directed his cruisers on the only safe path that was outlined in the database. No jump gates existed in the system and the planet seemed an ideal place for the 5,000 colonists who took refuge there. Until now.

But as Sheridan studied the glowing planet, he contemplated how all of the colonists would fit on his cruisers.

"Five thousand people?" Sheridan turned to his executive officer Anderson, commander of the cruiser *Heracles*. His image appeared on the communication station's view screen, tired and worn.

Anderson replied with a sick dread in his voice. "Yes that is correct. Our cruisers can only hold about five hundred people each. I have no idea how we intend to evacuate everyone."

Sheridan looked on, his jaw set defiantly. "Well, we are not going to leave them down there to die, damn it!" He stared at the other commander, eyes blazing. "We will over-fill our ships, make the colonists stand in the corridors if we have to..."

"Sir, how can we possibly fit all those people? If we overfull our ships, we won't be able to take off."

"But nothing! We are going to rescue every last one Anderson," his voice grew solemn as he leaned on the rail. "We have lost too many people to the damn war already. The Minbari think they have won, but *I* will show them otherwise."

Sheridan raised his head and looked at Anderson's image. He was a brisk man, well in his fifties with a salt and pepper beard. His eyes always saw into anyone's soul and could tell instantly if they were lying. But Sheridan needed to do something and he knew Anderson would follow orders. Somehow they would find a way.

Sheridan was a war hero; he had destroyed one Minbari warship in the Earth/Minbari War and destroyed many more afterwards. His motto — *I don't believe in the idea of an undefeatable enemy. Any ship can be defeated.* — was one of hope and prosperity for many soldiers and new commanders. But it would take more than words to accomplish this mission.

Sheridan clenched his fists as he looked through the panoramic windows at the icy blue planet that failed to rotate around its axis. One side was caked in ice; the other was a tropical paradise. *Such a strange place, but I need to get down there.*

The five ships descended smoothly through the clouds towards the only colony city on the planet. It rested in a plateau with a dense forest covering the surface.

He was not interested in lining up his vessels into a pattern for display; he only wanted to get as many people off the ground as possible. Cheering crowds awaited the massive vessels that blasted out clouds of smoke and wind as they drifted down to the city surface. The huge rotating sections stalled as the ships came to a hard, thunderous stop.

Observing from the control deck, Sheridan tried to regain his balance as the gravity of the planet took over. His body was heavier than he realized and the constant exercise did not make up for the extra muscle power needed to stand.

Sheridan straightened his uniform as he strode through the corridors of the ship. He turned to his first officer as they reached the gangplank leading outside. "Begin preparations to load everybody on board." He glanced out the open landing bay doors to the storm brewing overhead. "I believe that storm will provide us with adequate cover. Launch a solo fighter into orbit to keep an eye out for that Minbari cruiser."

"Yes, sir," his officer replied smartly and hurried off to fulfil his commands as Sheridan started down the gangplank.

On the ground, the local mayor was waiting, surrounded by individuals who appeared to be his most trusted advisors. Sheridan had read the dossier on the plump man waiting nervously for him. He knew the mayor was interested in money and power rather than the well being of his people. His recent neglect of the simple matters had left him with many undesirable questions being asked about the colony's authority.

It was quite apparent that he wanted to use this moment to boost his position.

Unsuccessfully trying to hide his nervousness and fear with a huge smile, the mayor stepped forward. With his potbelly showing through his shirt, he gestured forward. "Commander! I am Allan, the mayor of this fabulous colony... Are these all the ships you brought?"

Sheridan ignored the man at first, instead taking a moment to survey the landscape and the city, enjoying the clean and fresh air. Because his body was used to the processed air on his ship, the sudden inhalation of fresh air made him dizzy.

The mayor leaned closer, his chubby face almost blocking the sunlight. "Excuse me, are these all the vessels you brought?" Sheridan thought his tone impatient and rude.

Sheridan looked down at the man. "Yes they are. This is my fleet and the only ships they have given me..."

When the mayor spoke again, he was on the verge of complete panic. He wanted to leave the planet immediately and not wait around for the Minbari to show up. "But we have over five thousand people, they will not fit on those vessels."

The mayor was an overweight arrogant ass, but he was right. Despite his best intentions, there was no way Sheridan could squeeze that many people aboard the cruisers and not compromise the safety of both the ships and the people. He needed an alternate plan and he needed it yesterday.

After a pause, he had an idea. "Mayor Allan-" He walked off the ramp onto the dirt spaceport. "-you have mines and caves around this area, correct?"

The mayor looked on as he fiddled with the buttons on his bright red waistcoat. His stylish clothes were in sharp contrast to the run-down, dingy surroundings. Sheridan had read in his dossier that the mayor regularly had fashionable clothes imported to the colony, even if his people needed shuttle space for food and medical supplies.

"Yes, we have disused mineral mines and we have charted several caves in the area, Why?" He scratched his head, not understanding Sheridan's idea.

*Christ, how did an idiot like this ever manage to get himself elected mayor?* Sheridan thought.

"Good!" He walked along the ground towards the town hall that was constructed from local metals and glass. The settlement looked run down and the only thing that gleamed was the town hall. *I bet Allan sleeps in that building.*

"We can take a limited number of people off this planet, women and children first, but the rest will have to find shelter until we can arrive with a star liner."

The mayor proceeded to ask more questions, wasting more time, which Sheridan could not afford. He barked angrily, "Look, we don't have much time. Start loading the civilians and we need to inspect the mines."

After hours of chaos, Sheridan sat on a bench thinking about his wife Anna. She was resting comfortably and performing her duties at the Casabianca city. He drew strength from the knowledge that she was safe in the largest human

hyperspace city ever created. Even if the Minbari managed to find the city –located far out in the deepest depths of hyperspace, where no vessel would dare explore- the defences and weapons would certainly destroy them. He only wished the cities could function outside hyperspace. Then they would have the upper hand in the war. As it was, the cities were just safe havens for the human race to run to.

Although his wife was safe, he was always out in space picking fights. He knew that she dreaded the day he would not return home. *A true woman devoted to me.*

As he studied her picture, Sheridan realized again the depth of his love for her. He planned to return to the city soon and see her, but first he had to deal with this mess first.

He looked up and noticed the annoying mayor trotting towards him with great haste. He braced himself for the onslaught of the mayor's questions.

"Sheridan! Glad I found you. I must request that I accompany you on your vessel and leave this planet. I have all my things ready."

Sheridan snorted in disgust. *There's not even enough room for people, let alone personal belongings,* he thought.

The wind picked up as the electric storm moved in. "Mayor, let me give you an answer." He stared into Allan's eyes. "NO! You can come, not your things. We're pressed for space already; there's no room for personal belongings. Make sure the underground mines are secure and then get your ass onboard."

Sheridan marched off towards the *Agamemnon*. He vanished into the stormy weather, which chose this moment to burst from the roiling cloud that had been creeping across the sky all day.

The door to the *Agamemnon's* command deck hissed closed as Sheridan walked in to take his seat. He checked the latest reports as he tried to shake off his irritation at the mayor's ridiculous request.

Sheridan noticed his communications yeoman listening unusually close to her headset. "Is there a problem yeoman?"

She cleared her throat. "Sir, we're receiving an urgent transmission from the Star Fury you left as a sentry earlier. The pilot says that the Minbari warship has entered orbit."

"What?" Sheridan sat up in alarm. "Put it through."

As the yeoman opened the COM channel, the hiss and crackle of static filled the bridge. "*Aga—non, come in. Come in, do---read me? Minbari warship—tering orbit. Closing immediately. Evacuate at once, do---hear? Ev--- They're firing!*"

The airwaves burst with the sounds of an explosion. Then Sheridan could hear nothing but white noise, as the Star Fury succumbed to its doom.

## Chapter 4

(Shaal Mayan)

**I**n her chambers deep within the *Yellow Star* war cruiser, Shaal Mayan sat with a new and insightful poem she'd written for the inhabitants of a far-flung colony.

She liked to create poems and pray for the well-being of her people. Her spiritual mission was a challenge, but she accepted it with grace and enthusiasm. She understood how to speak the visions in her mind in such a way that everyone could accept them without question. Such powerful revelations led to different opinions and heated discussions within the Minbari castes.

The words and ideas flowed through her blood. She was a true poet, known and cherished by her people. Her gift has even changed the minds of other alien species and Shaal hoped she could make a difference in the future.

At the moment, she was reading aloud a brand new poem she'd created especially for a Minbari colony isolated in the far reaches of space. Her childhood friend Delenn listened with delight to her powerful words. With applause, Delenn stood up and applauded. "Those were the most enchanting words I have ever heard. Even for such a small colony, you've outdone yourself."

Shaal smiled in the flickering light and accepted the comment. She looked up from the scroll to Delenn. "Thank you Delenn. Your words mean a lot to me. I can only hope that my poems can enrich the lives of the colony that is living in such isolation."

Delenn walked over to the candle-lit shrine and gazed into the single glowing flame, lost in her own thoughts. "Yes, this war with the humans has lasted far longer than anyone would ever have imagined. We're stretched thin and we need all the enlightenment you can give us."

Shaal knew the war had turned into something that couldn't be stopped. The humans had no home world and they kept appearing all over the place, attacking Minbari colonies and stealing vital cargo. But Shaal was not sure about her thoughts on the humans. Like all Minbari she was surprised about the sudden and complete destruction of the human's home world. She'd hoped the warrior caste would stop their senseless war after they conquered Earth. But after the planet blew up, humans scattered like the seeds off a flower. Bit-by-bit and over time, they sought revenge on the Minbari.

"We should not have done what we did.... It was wrong. The Minbari cannot claim victory in destroying a young race that was unable protect themselves. What kind of example did we set?" Remembering that she was in the presence of a Satai, a member of the Grey Council, Shaal immediately realized her mistake and curtailed her sentence.

Delenn gave her a warm smile. Her friend might have overstepped her mark, but she did mean well. The general Minbari did see the war as a waste of time. Now they had no chance in stopping the humans on their never-ending crusade.

"Shaal, you are the cultural treasure and the soul of our entire race. You don't have to hide your words. I will always cherish your views." Delenn walked closer and extended her warm smile further.

Shaal felt embarrassed to question the motives of the Grey Council, but at least her friend understood.

"Such complicated and unprecedented times we live in. I only hope we find a way out of this dreary situation. My poems can only do so much." Shaal took a gentle sip from a glass of flavoured water Delenn had prepared for her.

Shaal could feel her friend was troubled with the responsibilities pressed on her. She often heard about the war having a mind of its own, dragging everyone down a dark hole.

Shaal stood up and wandered the room. She touched a few items and then looked at the shrine. She'd tried, time and again, to project her words and thoughts to Valen, but it seemed that the more she tried to reach out with her prayers, the more her questions remained unanswered.

Still deep in thought, Shaal turned away from the faintly lit candle. "It was a pity we needed to take the warrior caste cruiser to the colony. The caste doesn't appreciate my teachings and it's been a stifling journey."

Delenn laughed causing Shaal to smile, before too long, they were laughing in unison, clearing away the misty mental cloud that had developed in the room.

But before they had had any chance to speak, a gruff Minbari dressed in all his warrior caste clothes and high-ranking insignia marched in. Shaal wished that was some form of privacy in the ship they were travelling in, but it was not the warrior cast way. *How convenient!* She thought.

Delenn and Shaa tried to form their faces into stoic expressions but, as feared, he had already seen them giggling like girls.

"Satai Delenn. I have come to inform you that we have intercepted some human transmissions and are taking a small detour to an asteroid field."

Shaal interjected, "I don't see how this would warrant us deviating from my route to the colony. Surely we can leave the humans alone this instance?"

Delenn stared in disbelief at Shaal's interruption, usually her friend was never this outspoken.

Shaal looked back at the gruff Minbari as he responded, "The humans are our primary enemy and we will take every effort to kill every one. We are a proud people and do not take kindly to rodents that hide from us. We will exterminate them all." He turned to Delenn. "Satai Delenn. If you have no further questions, I must return to my duties."

Delenn looked at him in contempt. "Is it necessary to deviate from the plan?"

The Minbari stared at Delenn with thinly veiled scorn. "I'm sorry Satai Delenn, but it is what the commander of this vessel wants to do. Do not worry, we will cleanse this area of humans and proceed to the outer colony. It will not take long."

He turned and left Shaal's quarters before she could ask any more questions. Shaal assumed the man didn't want to explain everything to her; it might put him in more turmoil.

Shaal turned to Delenn who looked displeased. "Do not worry yourself over the simple matters. I will meditate until all this is over. Perhaps I will say a prayer to the humans they'll exterminate."

With a trace of sadness, Shaal placed her hand on Delenn's shoulder and accompanied her to the entrance of her room. "It is a pity, but I am glad we had the chance to have catch up. We have been separated for so long. You are a treasured and honoured friend, Shaal. I will face this moment with joy, knowing you are by my side."

Shaal blushed with the comment. "Delenn, you know you are my closest friend. I cherish every moment we have together."

Shaal walked over to the port window and stared through into space, watching the asteroid field grow closer. Asteroids orbited each other in random trajectories, as if someone shovelled up a load of gravel and tossed it into space. She felt sorry to the humans who were trying to hide, trying to be safe. But there was nothing she could do but wait for the massacre to end.

## Chapter 5

(Elvis Vaghoon)

*Elvis was the most evil man given command over the Batastar Asteroid Complex. The African American had skin the colour of coal, the attitude of a bull, and enjoyed his job to the*

*letter. He looked down upon his crew as if they were flies hovering around manure. He always wore his impeccable uniform and was ready to stomp on anyone he saw fit.*

He always kept a conveyor belt of employees running day and night and he would sack or employ people at his digression. He himself would kill a child if he decided on it. So over a very short space of time he'd been given the most hateful reputation a man could possibly have.

Elvis sat in his office as the light warmed of his baldhead. He scanned through the employee database looking for absentees and any staff that were occasionally late. He often enjoyed this method of harassment and it was an easy way to drag people into his office. He spent most of his time shouting at unruly employees and enjoying his time with female members of staff. He kept a tally on the entire female workforce and scanned through each record as if he was visiting a porn site.

With so many refugees arriving daily, jobs on the asteroid complex were hard to come by. At this rate, he could get people to pay him for jobs and a guaranteed place to live. A kickback. Oh, yes. Just the ticket. Elvis cackled at his own brilliance.

After sacking six people in one day, his reputation passed from one person to another like wildfire.

The computer scanned through the female workforce. He wanted to find someone he could play with, someone who would not resist. He paused the search when a blonde haired female appeared on the screen. He'd encountered her before and enjoyed it immensely. A telepath named Talia Winters. "Perfect!" He grinned.

He leaned on his desk and called through the intercom, "Could Talia Winters please come to Elvis's office immediately."

The idle chatter stopped when his monstrous voice bellowed through the entire complex. It was cold, stern and practiced. Elvis had mastered the technique at broadcasting his voice over the intercom and this skill could beat any voice actor. But his menacing voice only sowed the seeds of hate throughout the workforce.

Talia Winters dropped her pen on the floor. Her stomach cramped and her temperature jumped several degrees. Dread filled her. Everyone looked at her in guilt, wishing they could do something. Even her friends standing around backed into the darkness and hid.

She glanced around like a lost child; she was unable to use her telepathic powers because the Minbari used a weapon that had damaged her gift. She was normal like everyone else, with a few exceptions.

Elvis had already targeted her once and now he came back for seconds, out of spite. She did not know how to fight or how to dig herself out of the pit she was in. She could only accept and wait for an opportunity to escape.

Stood at the entrance to his office, Talia could not hide her fear. She wondered what Elvis wanted and nervously fidgeted with her gloves. Her grey uniform looked pressed and cleaned by professionals. She tried her best to hide the terror that coursed through her veins.

Elvis looked through the small window on the door and could see his prize female waiting outside. He raised his voice, "Talia Winters, please come in and take a seat."

He stared at the computer screen, adding his threatening mood to the stale atmosphere. Talia opened the door and walked in. He could almost imagine her feeling like a child entering the headmaster's office. *She should be submissive.*

Elvis leaned on the chair and looked at her records. "Talia Winters, could you explain to me why you were absent for these days?"

He rotated the screen so she could clearly see her records, as if he was tormenting her, giving her a reason, or giving him permission to do something. Finding a way to keep her quiet.

Elvis leaned forward and highlighted the days on his computer, making it easy to read. But it was all made up. Before Talia entered the office, he edited the entries so he could have a legitimate reason to see her, to perform his sick deeds.

She tried to remain small and unobtrusive, but from the records she knew she was at work on those days and she saw where this was going.

"You changed the records, you..." She was about to insult the man with all the hate she'd built up. But she needed to control her temper and keep her job. She paused, reeling in the fact she could not release her frustration.

Elvis straightened his neck and his polished white teeth crept through his thin smile on his face. Talia flinched. He tried to be professional, but as he looked at Talia, he just wanted her now. But he needed to reel her in like a fish on a hook: slowly, methodically and carefully.

"Talia Winters, the records can't be changed and why would I do that? I have no reason to treat you with ill will." He crossed his beefy arms over his barrel chest and carried on, grinning to himself. "I can only go by what I see on my screen. Do you have a reason for not turning up at work?"

The question added to her harassment, as she was unable to defend herself from the set-up he had created. She knew exactly what Elvis wanted and he could threaten her any way he saw fit, he was the boss.

The atmosphere grew cold and dark, even with the lights on and the room stuffy. But Talia didn't feel warm at all, even when Elvis kept the heating on.

Like being tortured, Elvis carried on with his speech, useless and intimidating. "You see Talia, we have been entrusted with a huge task, and that is to build the hyperspace cities." He stood up and strolled around the room, getting close to her. He sat on the edge of his desk and laced his hands together as if to keep his hands off her body. Talia knew what he was doing.

"Arriving on time to work is the most important role an employee can perform. We don't know how long it will take the Minbari to find this facility and we need all our staff working efficiently and promptly."

His voice carried a hint of sexual desire as his eyes scanned all over her body. She felt violated again.

Talia didn't need her powers to read his mind. He'd raped her before, and now he was performing the same ritual again.

"Unfortunately, you have overstepped the mark on a number of occasions and I need to issue some kind of punishment for your behaviour." He stood up and walked over to the bookshelf, posing in front of Talia.

Talia looked straight ahead and did not make eye contact and then she heard the sound of the door locking and the blinds unfolding. She closed her eyes and she could feel the presence of that animal, Elvis. Tears stung behind her eyelids, and her jaw ached from clenching her teeth so hard. She knew what was about to happen. She remembered the last time he raped her. He forced her onto the table and entered her.

Elvis prepared himself for pleasure, like a roman preparing for a all night orgy... Something he had waited to do for a long time.

He stood tall and his uniform fluttered under his movements as he continued to soften his prey. He had a horrid habit of reciting junk, just as he mentally and physically prepared himself for the encounter.

Then the dark menacing words came out. "You know what to do Talia and this is the only way you can keep your job." He was not direct in his orders, but Talia knew exactly what he meant.

She opened her eyes and pleaded with him, tears flowing down her face as dismay struck her like a hammer blow. "Please, Elvis, please don't rape me. The last time you did that I was ill and in great pain for a few weeks. *Please!*"

Elvis looked cold and stony. He would not flinch. He stared at her with no emotion, just a direct command through his body language as he un-strapped his belt, as if it was an immediate order.

Talia could do nothing. She knew it was useless to scream and she had no good memories to hold on to. She assumed the position and waited for the tell-tale signs that he was about to come closer.

She closed her eyes and her hearing amplified tenfold. She could clearly hear the unzipping of his trousers and the fabric flowing down his legs. As he raised her skirt, his hand send a shiver up her spine like someone shoved a pole of ice up her back.

*Moments later, quiet noises emanated from Elvis's office as Talia endured the rape she was undergoing, something that would last for hours, slow and painful.*

## Chapter 6

(Jeffrey Sinclair)

**A**s a successful commander with the responsibilities of a hyperspace city in his hands, Jeffrey Sinclair liked to use his time productively. Instead of moping around in his quarters for the next hour, he got up and prepared to start his shift early.

Minutes later, he left his home and walked down the sleek, narrow passageway of Spartan design. The occasional missing steel plate snuck its way through. The entire apartment complex should eventually have a homey feel to it, once it was finally constructed.

Moving on, he finally stepped outside through the main entrance and was immediately greeted with a spectacular view of the entire city, which was surrounded by natural vegetation and trees.

The view always left him breathless. He stepped forward and placed his hands on the main walkway rail, drinking in all the details as he scanned the distant skyline.

Buildings stretched into the artificial sky like steel-glass fingers reaching for the heavens, and huge wind-fans in the middle of the city circulated the air and created a warm breeze. The entire city was encased in a shielded dome, away from the harmful effects of hyperspace.

The titanic city stretched as far as he could see. Lakes and huge grasslands mingled inside the city where people carried on their everyday lives. It was as if someone scooped a city from the Earth and dumped it into a domed ship.

Hyperspace clouds created shadows that swept throughout the city, adding a night-time-red-illusion that began to dampen Sinclair's early morning mood. He knew the automatic clock would change the filter of the dome shield soon, but since he was already awake, he decided to call and have it changed immediately.

With a gentle tap to his wrist-com, he said, "This is Jeffrey Sinclair to Control Centre. Can we activate the shield filters and bring in some proper light? This redness is straining my eyes."

With confirmation from the Control Centre, the filters on the massive shield altered the hyperspace environment into a sky blue atmosphere with the hyperspace clouds moulded into normal planetary clouds in the background. The area was as bright as daytime.

With a smile, he walked along the balcony, noticing many civilians seemed happy about the additional daytime he'd given them. *That's the power of being a city commander, the ability to change day and night, just like God.*

Electric vehicles whizzed back and forth below his walkway, and ships glided past in the open air ferrying people and goods from one end to the other. Shuttle cars also shot past on tracks in the middle of the city, providing rapid transport. A building with a symbolic design stood tall in the middle of the metropolis. It was the Control Centre that ran everything from defence to water. He was due to start his shift in one hour, but problems needed to be solved and Sinclair did not like to leave them unsolved.

He took one final breath and headed to the rapid transport system. Officers saluted and civilians gave their warm greeting as they passed each other. Sinclair was proud of the inhabitants of the city. Everyone had helped build the city with their own hands and that earned them the right to live here. Construction still carried on in some undeveloped sections, and that helped fuel crime and unjust behaviour. But the city was one step closer to being paradise.

As Sinclair disembarked from the rapid transport system that had taken him over one mile from his home, he slowed his pace in order to read the newest reports that came through his holographic data pad.

With a slight frown at the disappointing report, he deactivated the handheld-holographic-device and then it closed into a rectangle no bigger than a cigarette lighter. He promptly shoved the device into his pocket and walked into the Control Centre.

He strolled along the hallways of the Control Centre with a small matter on his mind. He didn't dwell on small matters, but this small problem could escalate into something catastrophic. Sinclair had doubts about his own solution, but he needed to observe the current situation first.

The corridors offered a hint of fragrance in the air from potted plants and prominent mis-painted bulkheads sprung up from time to time.

Before he had the chance to enter the elevator that led to the top floor control room, he heard incomprehensible screams down the well-lit corridor.

When he investigated the source of the disturbance, Sinclair entered the dimly lit room. He smiled as he approached Bester.

Bester stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking at the drained and torn features of a captured Minbari prisoner. He glared into the Minbari's mind, inflicting great pain. "Ha, Sinclair. What a pleasure it is to see you on this fine day."

Sinclair smiled even more boldly as he entered the room. "Bester. It's always good to see you doing your best work."

"Thank you for your encouragement, it always brightens my day." He interlocked his gloved hands together and walked around the table, slowly and methodically. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing much. I heard screaming and decided to investigate."

"Sorry to cause you any problems, Sinclair, but as you can see, I have a small task to complete. I'll make sure he does not make too much noise in the future." Bester grinned at the blood-soaked Minbari.

"No need to do that, you can carry on anyway you see fit. But I am curious as to what you're doing?"

"The standard-" He removed one of his gloves and placed it on the side table. "-finding out intelligence and just messing around. I am not taking much care in his mind as you can see. Much more efficient that way." His ghostly eyes stared at the Minbari and his grin grew broader on his face.

"I see, having fun... I always enjoy a little fun from time to time myself. It tickles the fancy." Pausing for a moment, he remembered the small problem that needed his immediate attention, so he wrapped up his conversation.

"Anyway, Bester, make sure you leave a report about what you've discovered and do whatever it takes. That intelligence is vital for the human race, and... I hope you enjoy yourself." He gave Bester a sideward grin before he departed the room. Bester grinned back and Sinclair could only imagine Bester's face turning cold and hard as he looked back at the Minbari.

More screams echoed through the passageway as Sinclair strolled along. In his mind, the cries were those of the suffering humans during the Battle of the Line. Bester was good at his work and Sinclair allowed him to use any technique available to gather intel, even if it killed the victim. *Chances are, the victim will eventually be executed anyway.*

The lift stopped at the Control Centre and Sinclair stepped out into a flurry of activity as people rushed around as though something worried them. People carried data pads and screens flickered with alarming trajectories.

"What's going on?" He pulled one of the workers to the side and gave him a stern look that made him spill the information faster than he normally would.

"The city has drifted from its local position. We have no Vanguard's to give us the correct coordinates to get us back; we are drifting blind in hyperspace." The worker hurried off to deliver his data pad.

"Sinclair! Where the hell have you been?" A gruff looking man named Bill approached, his uniform was all wrinkled and his body odour followed him like a rain cloud.

"I've been in my quarters. What the hell's going on? Something about this city drifting off its point?" He couldn't suppress a hint of panic in his voice.

Sinclair knew all too well the enormity of the situation. If a hyperspace city drifted off its mark in hyperspace, that city would be lost forever. The people might survive for years, but the last city to drift off had never been found again and no one knew the effect of such isolation. The human cities were drifting so deep in hyperspace anyway that a slight miscalculation would cause the loss of millions. Sinclair was not going to let that happen.

"Where the hell is the new Vanguard? He was supposed to be here yesterday!"

"I don't know, Sir, we've lost contact with the anchor probes and our trade ships are cut off." Bill handed Sinclair a data pad with devastating reports flashing for his attention.

"What about the new Vanguard recruits?" Sinclair was at a loss for ideas. He didn't know what to do. This was a situation out of his control and only a Vanguard could help. But even as he suggested the idea, Sinclair could clearly see the look of fear in Bill's eyes.

"Are you crazy, Sir? The trainee Vanguard's aren't ready for this. Only an experienced pilot can help us out of this mess!"

Sinclair's heart skipped a beat. The entire city was in peril and only a hyperspace Vanguard could save them. *And we don't have one.*

# Chapter 7

(Susan Ivanova)

The leaked documents that happened to 'fall' into Susan's lap had been more than she prayed for. She was face to face with a huge Centauri transport full of valuable cargo. *Cargo to steal.*

She grinned at the thought of the marvellous profit she could make from the transport that was pathetically trying to escape.

"Disable that damn ship, I don't want to waste fuel catching up with it." She crossed her legs and smoothed her hands over her leather skirt and down her dry, itchy legs, feeling the need for some skin cream once she delivered the cargo to one of the deep hyperspace cities.

Cargo shipments had become a booming business throughout alien worlds and stealing them was a risky business. Susan had been doing this most of her life and it had turned into a career she was good at. She preferred to steal from the Minbari, but at the end of the day, money came first. Centauri cargo ships were easy prey, for now.

A few sparks of plasma drifted through space and struck the engines of the cargo ship, leaving it dead in space. *Just waiting for me to collect.*

"This is the Centauri transport *Alcart*. You are illegally attacking Centauri property, which is an act of war!" The captain's vidscreen image appeared mad to Susan, but she also sensed the fear in his voice. It was all she needed to increase the effectiveness of her plan.

Most cargo captains who were unlucky enough to get caught by raiders were normally killed. As soon as Susan identified herself as a human collection agent, he released a sigh of relief. But he still acted stubborn.

"Listen, I know you humans are bound by rules to not harm the inhabitants of ships you capture, but this is *my* vessel and I'll do what I can to keep it."

Susan raised her eyebrow. "If you want, you can declare war on humanity and send a fleet of ships to Earth." Her tone turned sarcastic. "Ho, wait. It's not there anymore, so shut up and surrender, otherwise I will vent your sorry ass into space and take your cargo!"

She cut the channel and ordered her vessel on a docking trajectory, with the ease of long practice. Her vessel's grapples grabbed the Centauri cargo ship and locked it tight.

Several minutes later, when all the detainees were placed into holding cells, Susan marched down the passageways of her vessel. *This cargo ship and its goods will fetch a good price.* She finally walked into the brig that resembled a zoo.

"How long do you intend to keep us waiting? We're loyal servants of Centauri Prime and they'll get a full report about this human behaviour." The gruff Centauri stood out like a spot on a well-polished plate. Susan wasn't in the mood for games.

"I'll dump you on the nearest habitable planet and -" She let the silence hang for a bit. "- I might let your home-world know of your location."

She walked further into the stuffy room that smelled of Centauri booze and terrible body odour. "Now, what are you carrying and is any of it dangerous?"

The Centauri sat down with his comrades and said nothing. His silence was all Susan needed. She felt frustrated and wanted that damn skin cream.

"You won't talk? Fine. Guards?" With a gesture, Susan ordered her guards into the cell. They moved in with urgent steps, and grabbed the commanding

Centauri. They dragged him into the neighbouring room for Susan's little surprise while the atmosphere became stifling. Susan deliberately raised the temperature to provoke a more 'relaxed' attitude. She loved playing cruel games and in her own sick way, she could sense the Centauri begging for her attention.

Susan paced the room and pulled out a bloodstained table, which locked into place. The air filled with an undertone of metallic taste and the smell was of putrefied flesh. She could imagine the stench that lingered in the Centauri's nose.

"Pull out one of his genitals," she said over the hum of the running ventilation system. She went over to the control panel and turned it off. She didn't want the air cleaned. *Not cleaned yet.*

Hollowness haunted the Centauri's eyes as he looked with shock and disbelief. "You aren't going to do that? I know you humans."

She didn't even have to think about the question. She grabbed a thick-bladed cleaver from the counter of tools and waved it in the air. Her body language demonstrated her resolve better than words and she let the Centauri dwell on that for a few seconds.

Almost immediately, the Centauri began to struggle as the guards dragged him over and pinned him to the table; the guards pulled one of his genitals and placed the horrid thing onto the bloodstained steel.

Susan glanced down at the tool and rammed it as hard as she could towards the table. She didn't even give a warning. She'd already asked him the question and he'd messed around with her. Now Susan enjoyed the blood and screams.

A roar of cries drained out all background noise as the Centauri fell off the table and cowered on the floor like an upside down insect; he looked as if this kind of pain was new to him. Susan surmised that this Centauri was pampered and worshiped back on their home world; he had one less genital to share now.

She walked closer to him, his clothes stained with blood, sweat poured from his head. The smell was worse.

"Tell me what I want to know or I will chop off another one." She raised her weapon in plain view.

The Centauri trembled in agony and fear. "I... I'll tell you everything -just don't hurt me again!"

Susan could finally finish the 'interrogation' and get back to more important tasks. The Centauri was about to tell them everything and she had more important engagements to attend to. But she could not resist adding a little bit more to the Centauri's suffering. "Make sure you store that piece of meat in the ice freezer. The pak'ma'ramight want to trade for it. Last I remember, Centauri genitalia was a delicacy."

## Chapter 8

(Vanguard, Alice Jones)

**T**he ceremony of becoming a Vanguard was the final stage in the process of learning, and for Alice Jones this was the moment she had waiting for.

Her companion, Samuel Blake, followed her with brisk steps as they approached the opening to their docking bay.

The background noise thrummed as cheers bellowed throughout the entire area. Two individuals stood with their custom-made vehicle behind them, ready for the challenge-race that was about to start in a few minutes.

Alice looked towards her Vanguard partner, filled with excitement. "Are you ready for this? If we succeed in this race, we will earn our gold stars. This will insure our destiny."

She brushed aside her mousy blond hair and picked up a spanner to tighten a loose nut in her vehicle.

"You know I am always ready for this. Most of my life I've been ready." Samuel sounded like he was holding something back, so Alice gave him an encouraging glance.

With his fists clenched tight, he said what was on his mind. "That numbskull Brian has been hindering our progress for months. I know we can beat that son-of-a-bitch."

The artificial air began to blow through the complex and the assembly platform roared up in a din of engine motors and excited chatter. Alice knew the race was about to begin. She made some final modifications to her ship and watched her companion teeter around the area.

"That should do it. Our Van-ship is primed and ready to go. "Did you remember to set up the fuel systems." Alice asked him. "I don't want to lose to the lower contestants."

Samuel seemed even more excited about the race than she was. His strange blue eyes and wild-boy persona heightened the unexpected fascinations he'd always displayed when he entered the cockpit of the vehicle. He waved his hands over the old-style controls and primed all the systems to her request.

"Don't worry Alice. I've arranged everything the way you like it. The fuel cells are fully charged, the hyperspace booster is aligned and we managed to shed some of the extra weight by changing the radiant mix to the new standard."

Alice couldn't hold back the grin that was creeping onto her face. "That hyperspace booster will take us further..." She frowned. "But it was expensive."

Samuel looked down at her. He knew Alice was strapped for credits and the mere mention of it would be touching a delicate subject. Alice flared her nostrils and shoved the tool back into its compartment.

"I know you sacrificed all your savings for this moment. But don't worry; I will help you achieve victory. We will be Vanguards!" He clenched his gloved hand into a fist, symbolising his determination. Alice smiled and stood up.

"C'mon! Let's get this bird started!" She jumped into the pilot seat and strapped herself in before securing her helmet. She gazed at the cockpit readouts in the flickering light from the overhead light.

Samuel transmitted through the suit radio. "You know, I've managed to isolate my telepathic powers now, I can focus on any target I require."

Alice spun around in her enclosed alcove. "You've never told me that. Any other secrets you may wish to tell me?"

"Well, I haven't perfected the technique, but the training school has offered the best studies on the matter. You know how important a telepath is to a Vanguard pilot."

"Hey, you are my best friend. You're always important to me no matter what anyone thinks. Not because of your gift, but the handy work you can do with the engine." Alice returned to her controls and primed the fuel supply. With a loud groan, the van-ship purred like a kitten on a good day and hovered in the air. Attached piping strained from the added torque creating weak points in the seals. Alice could hear the hissing and knew it was time to go.

She detached the air hoses and the two-man vehicle shot off into the depths of the hyperspace city.

Alice clenched the controls of her Van-ship as the vessel careened through the steel structures of the city. Before long, the area was bustling with air traffic and spectators ready to witness the challenge that was about to start.

The flurry of Van-ships grouped themselves into an unorganised pattern as they raced towards the allocation dock. This was the moment everyone was waiting for.

Shouting through the suit radio, Alice heard the sneered words from a common competitor. "Alice Jones... If I may live and breathe, you're finally out and about. This will be an interesting competition."

She gazed to her left and saw Brian's ship flying next to her. "It's 'as I live and breathe' you moron and you're too close. I don't think you have the flight skills to ride beside us!"

Brian laughed. Most men would quail under the sharp icy tone Alice broadcasted, but this individual only smiled and carried on. "Don't worry my sugar-petal, I can show you a few tricks once in a while. After all, you are still young. How old are you? Sixteen?"

Alice sneered at the overdressed and pug-faced individual that appeared to be heading straight into the nearest building. *Ha! Looks like that jackass isn't as smart as he thinks he is.* With a thoughtful gesture, Alice pointed to the building and Brian followed her guide. Then realising he was in for a hard encounter with the wall, banked right and narrowly missed his death.

After seeing the shocked expression on Brian's face, Alice had to laugh; she could only imagine him urinating his pants. "He's supposed to be a Vanguard with more skills than me, but he failed to spot the building."

Samuel replied flirtatiously, "That's because he was hypnotised by your good looks."

She took note of Samuel's good humour. "Good looks? I am completely stunning, like a young English countryside girl... Lovely!"

Laughing, Samuel broke off the cheerful mood. "Watch it, the fuel regulators are out of phase..." He thumbed around in his cockpit, located behind Alice. "I got it. We will have to replace that device once we get some credits."

"Come on baby, I know you have it in you." Alice cast her prayers into the body of her ship and hoped they could win this test. If they could, they would be regarded as true Vanguards. *I can finally do the job I was born for!*

Ahead, the allocation platform grew larger and larger as they approached. Huge screens displayed the assignments each pilot could request. If they were successful, they would be allocated the job and then have a limited number of days to deliver the message and receive the confirmation cylinder, which they had to return. If they failed to deliver it in a set number of days, a search team would be dispatched and they will have failed, even if it cost them their lives. Alice concentrated on the postings.

"That one... A priority one message to the Batastar Asteroid Complex, someone called Elvis." She pointed, and the detail of the allocation platform came into focus. People bustled around in awe and excitement at the approaching Van-ships.

"Are you sure you can handle this assignment? I'm not sure they'll give it to us." Deep down Samuel was sure they could handle the job, but he was sceptical that the allocation authorities would allow them to take the message tube.

"It's a four-star danger rating and it should pay good. The complex is in normal space which will make things easier." She sent a data burst through the COM system and within seconds, to her delight, she was allocated the task.

She flew their craft in at a parallel course that should take them under the message cylinder. Prior to the test, they lunged their ship forward to reach the desired speed before grabbing the cylinder that was flung on a hook into their flight path. Alice stretched her hands and grabbed it. *Yes! It was a success!*

The ship careened through the hyperspace city's domed air and roared towards outer docks located several miles away. Alice looked back to see a steady line of Van-Ships leave the allocation platform on their respective missions. The race had started and now it was the question of who would return first and safely.

"Did you see all the people on that platform?" Samuel said. His voice quivered on the borderline of excitement.

"The only thing they'll see is our exhaust smoke. I floored it past the recommended speed." Alice loved to show off her piloting skills, something valuable in a Vanguard. "But this is important. We must deliver this message and earn our stars. This will give us that chance!"

She held the gold tube that contained a data crystal. She did not know what was on it, but it would contain a massive amount of letters, video messages and transmissions that could never be sent by standard means. If anyone did, the hyperspace cities could be tracked. Alice remembered the news feeds before she became a trainee; the Minbari discovered the transmissions of a distant colony and wiped them out. *They were animals.*

Samuel brought Alice out of her deep thoughts. "We are approaching the exit hatch."

She looked up, and the gigantic metal airlock hatch opened on the side of the city's dome. Vessels bustled in and out, fighting for a clear route through, but as soon Alice announced her Vanguard identification, they scurried out of her way and allowed her to pass with good grace. She'd never seen huge vessels move so fast. This was the start of a brand new career.

## Chapter 9

(John Sheridan)

**D**efenceless as a beached whale, Sheridan knew that he had to get his small fleet of ships airborne before the storm passed and exposed his grounded vessels.

He heard the frantic call for help over the intercom from the doomed Star-Fury and assumed the worst. Now Sheridan feared they'd taken too long and a direct confrontation might be inevitable.

Banks of computers flashed, displaying trajectories of the incoming warship. He did not want his crew to panic, so he resolutely maintained his calm, even though he was flooded with uncertainty himself.

Lightly tapping his finger on the armrest, Sheridan focused his gaze on the latest status report. The remaining star ship was still loading refugees and Sheridan was considering whether to open a COM channel to ask about their status.

But with seconds to spare, someone shouted the news that Sheridan wanted to hear: "All the civilians onboard and we're ready for take-off, Commander."

"Thanks for the update." Sheridan leaned back in his chair. "Helm take us up at a deflect angle and keep the scanners on maximum."

Sheridan felt the sweat on his forehead as memories from past battles reminded him off how primitive human vessels were.

He could not afford a direct confrontation, especially with a ship full of refugees.

He didn't know how much time was required to escape the planet's gravity-well, and he feared that the Minbari's hidden location would make the escape harder. Sheridan was sure it wouldn't be long before the Minbari bombarded them from orbit.

He gazed through the huge panoramic windows, then jolted in his chair when streams of hot yellow light rained down on the settlement. Due to the massive storm that hid the colony, it was obvious that the Minbari had no clear target in sight and could not lock onto anything.

The crew flinched as blast after blast shot past the windows at close range. Everything on the surface was gradually laid to waste.

Like drunken bumblebees, the huge star ships began to heave themselves into the sky, blasting rings of smoke into the air. Wave after wave of energy beams continued to rain down, hitting perilously close to the ships.

With his ship's engines roaring in the background, Sheridan looked through the window to see the rest of his fleet bellowing up through the clouds. The heavy acceleration, which seemed to take forever, forced everyone to into their chairs and limited movement to that of basic controls.

In the background, Sheridan saw the anger in his crew's faces as Minbari beams rained down on the colony below, crushing buildings and ploughing long furrows through the crop fields.

Inch by inch the colony was destroyed and replaced by black stains that grew on the land. Then all view was obscured by the storm. Sheridan wondered what else humanity had to pay for the mistake that happened over ten years ago. This was the seventeenth colony destroyed, and no one had managed to put up a suitable defence. But Sheridan felt relieved that he was doing something about this colony.

"Captain, I've just received a situation report." Sweat glistened on the tactical officer's forehead. "One of our ships is lagging behind."

With gravity almost back to normal, Sheridan rushed over to the tactical station to identify the troubled ship. "Damn, it's Anderson. Open a channel."

Sheridan knew Anderson from joint battles in the past and it was unusual for him to be so slow in getting off the ground. But as he looked at his friend on the view screen now, he could only see his brave appearance hiding his inner turmoil.

"Sheridan, we're having trouble keeping up. One of our engines overheated and we had to shut it down, but we should be able to break orbit."

Sheridan frowned. "We've lost track of the Minbari war cruiser, and you can bet they will be searching for us. As soon as we're out of the storm they will come gunning for us. You need to rejoin the fleet," he told his friend.

Sheridan could see Anderson staring at him on the screen and he understood all too well the problem his executive officer faced. His vessel, the *Heracles*, had fallen far behind the rest of the fleet. Faint explosions on the planet surface lit up the lower deck clouds through the port windows. The Minbari would be coming for them soon.

As if fate had a cruel side, Sheridan was thrown off balance when an energy beam struck the underbelly of his vessel. Alarms went off and warning lights flashed over the workstations like fireworks going off at a coronation show. The crew scrambled back to their stations while Sheridan demanded updates.

As he feared, the Minbari had noticed their escape. *Shit, the warship is now hunting us, and how did it get below us?*

The cloud deck burst open like a blister and Sheridan could only watch hopelessly as he saw the raging war cruiser gain height below them.

Through the panoramic window that faced downward toward the surface of the plant, Sheridan had an all-round view of the entire area as his ship roared upward at a sixty-five degree angle. His fleet of ships followed closely behind, but his respected friend trailed in the distance, above the Minbari vessel.

Random blasts of energy cut through the clouds, striking more of his ships. Metal plating broke off and fell back down to the surface, but still the Human vessels roared onwards.

"All ships, open fire! We need to divert that warship's weapon fire away from *Heracles*. We've got to make ourselves a bigger target." Still, he knew the Minbari would not let an easy target like that go to waste.

Close in formation, Sheridan's vessels fired all their beam weapons and projectile cannons. Each strike hit home, but no visible damage was done to the sleek blue hull of the Minbari war cruiser. The enemy kept coming and there was no way to stop it.

Lancing beams of yellow light streaked through the clouds and tore open the aft section of one of the star ships. Calls came in to Sheridan's lead vessel as the other captains gave him damage reports and support, but it did not look good.

Marching back and forth between the *Agamemnon* weaponry stations, Sheridan ordered more direct hits at weak points on the war cruiser. But they did not have the firepower to cause the damage he desired.

"Captain, we are firing as much as we can, but at this distance, we are not causing any damage," informed the red-faced gunnery officer.

Sheridan slammed his fist down on the console and his crew raced to update their stations with new frequency armaments from transmissions received from Anderson's vessel. Modified blast bolts pummelled the Minbari war cruiser, causing some damage and ripping holes in its hull. But it was too little, too late.

The Minbari vessel began to evade the counter attack, by ducking under the cloud deck, or so Sheridan thought.

Moments later Sheridan could only look in awe as the Minbari vessel leapt out of the cloud deck at a ninety-degree angle right under the lagging star ship. It fired its primary weapon straight through the ship, like a shark that had jumped out of the water to kill its prey.

Anderson's vessel was completely caught off guard and reeled with the damage inflicted upon it.

The *Heracles* pivoted on its axis, but still carried on at full thrust. More direct hits destroyed two of its four engines, leaving the vessel doomed. With only one visible engine online, it was obvious that the *Heracles* could not remain in the air.

Minbari fighters streaked through the sky at unprecedented speed to attack the rest of Sheridan's fleet. They attacked weapon ports and engines casings, intent on causing utter mayhem.

As if it was a game for the Minbari, they lagged behind watching the stricken star ship trying to escape. Sheridan wanted to throw a nuke down the bastard's throat for the prolonged suffering they were causing; it was a cruel game.

But the screen came to life with Anderson's defeated face, "Sheridan, we're doomed. The damned Minbari are torturing us. I will not give them the opportunity. Use this chance to escape. It might be your only chance."

Before Sheridan had the chance to reply, the screen went black. As if watching an old war movie, he watched *Heracles* turn though the panoramic

windows. Cloud decks rolled and stirred below, as if they knew the sacrifice that was about to unfold.

The *Heracles* rotated on its axis and fell at a sideward approach to the Minbari war cruiser. He watched as the enemy vessel opened fire on the incoming star ship, but nothing could stop the hulk of metal falling towards it.

The rest of the fleet opened fire with everything they had; high-powered beams and blast bolts ripped through the air in an attempt to soften the Minbari war cruiser.

The Minbari tried to make an evasive manoeuvre but Anderson's vessel struck home. It ploughed into the enemy vessel and sent it hurtling into the lower cloud deck and out of view of everyone.

The sky was clear except for a few Minbari fighters still flying around, startled.

Sheridan rose to his feet and demanded, "Get those damned Minbari out of my sight!"

A small flurry of blasts incinerated the Minbari fighters, leaving the area clear for the fleeing ships – for the moment.

"Sheridan!" The sensor operator looked up, as if he couldn't believe his readings. "That Minbari warship's back sir! It's rising out of the clouds!"

## Chapter 10

(Kalain)

**T**he Humans didn't have a chance and Kalain knew it.

Each pitiful human battle had brought him that much closer to receiving high honors from his clan. At the beginning of his command ten years ago, there were many doubts about his ability to command. But Kalain managed to squash all of them and now he was going to increase his honor ten fold.

Looking through the holographic real-time viewer in his cruiser, *the Trigati*, he watched the helpless human vessels on the surface of the planet. The storm had offered some resistance to scans, but that did not pose much of an obstacle. *It should be easy to annihilate the human infestation.*

His orders were simple: hunt down any human military ship and incinerate them. The order came from the high-ranking members of the Gray Council, and he accepted them with grace.

Kalain looked with keen eyes towards his staff in the command chamber. Each one had their own look of satisfaction and eagerness to destroy any human target; it was what gave them purpose. An enemy they could see, touch and kill.

In orbit, he watched the scurrying humans flee the colony and board the pathetic human vessels. He decided to start the massacre and ordered his War Cruiser into atmosphere to give chase. It was a dangerous maneuver, but he had trust in his crew to keep the *Trigati* safe.

It was the moment of truth for Kalain. This was the decisive moment that would allow his name to be spoken in the Gray Council. It had been a long time since he'd been face to face with a human warship, and this group was more than he could ever ask for.

The human vessels began to lift into the air behind a heavy smokescreen; he assumed they tried to hide their presence with a few particles of dust.

*How foolish of them!*

With a crooked smile, he gestured toward his second in command, Deeron. "Activate the gun ports, I want to play with the humans first."

He could almost imagine the excitement that drummed in the back of Deeron's head bone. He wanted to touch and caress her, a feeling that he'd been holding back for several hours. But he needed to keep his appearance in perspective and there was no point in giving the humans even the slightest opportunity to escape.

He moved forward to get a better view of the escaping ships. To his surprise one of them was still on the ground. *Making a final prayer to your Maker, humans?* he thought.

"Target that ship," he said, instantly gaining silence and attention. "I want it destroyed!"

He sneered at the holographic projection as the weapons rained down on the landscape. But after several unsuccessful hits, Kalain could not understand why no one could score a direct hit on the stranded vessel. "I said, *target that ship!* Why hasn't it been destroyed yet?"

"The storm is interfering with our targeting array. We're currently firing blind, but will only add to the excitement." Deeron gave Kalain a smile. "We'll get them eventually."

Kalain could not believe it. A simple storm deprived him of his victory, how ironic. *How was this possible? Did nature give the humans a chance?* With all his will, Kalain vowed that nature herself could not stop his advance.

"Flatten everything, I want every building and structure destroyed." Kalain ordered, pointing a finger at the colony.

*Perhaps we might hit that ship.*

Kalain looked from side to side, studying the real time footage that was being broadcasted on his holographic display. The struggling vessel was airborne and clearly lagging behind. This was his chance to score a direct hit. "All weapons, there's your target, *fire!*"

A few minutes later, his vessel was in prime position to strike a blow. Kalain ordered hits on the distant ships that were vanishing into the cloudbanks. They offered the most resistance and he saw no honor in attacking a vessel that didn't fire back. Kalain left the straggling vessel alone, for now. He let loose with all his forward cannons and even decided to release a few hard-nut Minbari Nials who wanted to deliver personal blows to the humans.

The battle began to heat up, and Kalain felt the vibrations as several direct hits struck his vessel. The projection flashed before resuming its normal function. Kalain looked at Deeron, he wanted to make sure she was not injured. But the ship did not vibrate hard enough for that; he just wanted a legitimate reason to sneak peeks at her. She returned the favor by looking at him. He was not sure, but she might have sneaked in a smile. *Perfect timing. Once I get rid of the humans, I can get back to my romantic endeavors.*

Kalain assessed his response and then gestured towards his senior weapons controller. "Take us below the clouds and fire the main cannon at that lagging ship." He moved forward, pointing at the lagging earth vessel. "I believe they fired at us. This protects our honor."

Moments later after the command was executed, Kalain could almost imagine the stunned and panicked crew on the human vessel. This made him feel victorious. He ordered his ship into a full dive through clouds and when they turned and

regained their target, they had a clear firing line straight to the underbelly of the human ship. He could not resist, “*fire!*”

The satisfying roar of the cannon gave Kalain pleasure as he watched the underbelly of the human ship tear open through the middle of the ship. Hull plating tore off in all directions, spilling people and fluid into the sky. He felt an orgy of success; he wanted to do it again.

“*Fire!*” Kalain yelled. His body was encased inside the holographic image of the doomed human ship, as if he could feel the mortal blows the vessel was taking. *This is ecstatic! My own fair victory! Damn the humans!*

Moments later, as he assumed victory, the human vessel reeled in space. Its primary hull had stopped rotating and the sky shone through the hole in the ship. Kalain was puzzled. Why was the ship intact?

“The humans have reinforced their armor.” Deeron said, as if she heard Kalain’s thoughts.

Kalain looked towards his comrade and replied, “It’s no obstacle. Fire again at the reactor and finish them.”

Before he could issue his final orders to obliterate the mortally wounded vessel, it changed course and headed straight for them.

“*Pull back, pull back!*” he yelled, but his command crew scattered around the dark room, vanishing into the dark corners as the huge human vessel increased in size on the holographic screen. Upon impact, the room shook violently and then fell into darkness.

Kalain rolled along the floor as the impact sent debris flying in all directions, but one thing remained on his panicked mind, how the hell could the humans do such a thing. He was sure of victory, which required one shot. But he failed to remember the one-thing humans would do when cornered, the ability to sacrifice their lives. *Damn them!*

## Chapter 11

(Michael Garibaldi)

News spread fast about what happened to Talia Winters and Michael soon heard of it. Over the years he had developed a personal bond with the blonde-haired beauty and he protected her as much as he could.

But this incident was something he could not forgive, nor could he allow it to pass as if nothing happened. Elvis’s behavior was unacceptable and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Garibaldi knew that, so what could he do?

Chased by Zack’s problem and the incidents that seemed to spiral out of control, he wished that someone else would take over his responsibilities so he could sit on an alien planet and drink in the sunlight. But he was second in command and his job was to keep everything running.

Concerned about Talia, Garibaldi searched for her high and low throughout the complex. He had a close bond with her and often tried to pursue a relationship with her in the past, often leaving him red-faced in public. Deliberate run-ins and skilled chat up lines had finally scored him some dates, which had improved their relationship during the entire year they’d known each other.

But when he finally found her, he was unprepared for the scale of the incident. “*Talia, what’s happened to you?*”

“That bastard Elvis raped me.” She held Garibaldi tight. “Again!”

"Again?" He gently moved her back, to face her. "You mean this happened before?"

"Yes, when I got here a year ago, as part of his job interview, he, he..."

Michel pulled her into his arms. He didn't know what to say. It was a delicate situation, but his anger churned inside him, like lava in a magma chamber.

Garibaldi changed position with Talia still clinging on for support. He placed a supportive hand around her back and held her tight. Talia was contaminated by *Elvis's smell*.

He moved her backward so he could get a clear view of her face. Her makeup was smudged and she had tearstains all over her face.

"Come with me. I'll take you to my quarters and you'll be safe. I'm going to sort this *Elvis* out." His tone carried a hint of fury as he escorted her out of the side office and away from the complex.

The corridors were eerily quiet, but Michel knew that everybody was either hiding, or concentrating on their work. The fury that was about to erupt would see any bystander in the crosshairs.

When he reached the boardroom, Garibaldi marched right in, ignoring anyone that got in his way. He tossed aside the assistant who tried to block his entrance and barged through the huge wooden doors that were welded to the asteroid walls.

Members of the board all stared, as if they could not believe someone would be crazy enough to barge in to one of *Elvis's* board meetings. Anyone who dared would end up spaced. But Garibaldi had gone supernova and Elvis was going to get spaced himself.

"What the fuck have you done, you pig." he roared down the room.

Elvis stood in his impeccable uniform in front of the projections of profits and city status reports. He placed his laser pen on the table and smiled at his associates.

"Please, gentlemen, if you would excuse us, we will continue this meeting shortly." He raised a professional hand. "Please follow my assistant who will offer you refreshments and some entertainment. This shouldn't take long."

His voice carried such calm and professionalism that Garibaldi was even more insulted.

Elvis did not falter under Garibaldi's sudden outburst, not even a drop of sweat could be seen on his face.

As if he were going to present another board meeting, Elvis placed his papers on his desk in a neat pile and deactivated the wall imaging screen. "So, Garibaldi, what can I do for you?"

His question was insultingly calm. Garibaldi could not detect any worry in his body language; it was as if the ordeal did not happen for him.

He marched up to the black man. "You know what this is about. You raped Talia! *You fucking bastard.*" He grabbed Elvis's suit, not caring about the consequences.

"I must warn you, Garibaldi. My guards are outside. All I need to do is call them and you will be dead... Watch yourself."

"Not if I kill you *first.*"

Garibaldi stared into Elvis's eyes. He wanted to see fear, or regret. But he only saw a cool, calm businessman.

"Just try it. Then your little Talia *pet* will be the next death statistic." The words tugged at Garibaldi's heart. He'd forgotten that Elvis could threaten her life. He was pure evil and would carry out the threat easily. Rumors had spread around

the complex about someone losing a whole family because they opposed Elvis. He needed to find another way.

He backed away, leaving Elvis to straighten his uniform.

"I must say *Mr. Garibaldi*, your Talia girl...she has a real tight body. I must make a note to add her into my sex log for more sessions. Perhaps I can break her in for you, she's very tight." He gave Garibaldi a sly smile; his ice-white teeth glowed in the low-lit background.

Garibaldi could not hold his anger anymore. He imagined himself leaping forward, grinding Elvis's head and his brain matter into the white carpet. But it was just a thought, something he couldn't do.

Instead, in a fit of rage, Garibaldi grabbed the nearest chair and threw it at his portrait that hung on the wall. It fell to the floor and shattered into many pieces. Garibaldi felt a satisfying thrill but Elvis was not amused.

Elvis walked forward and like stirring the pot, he said, "Get out of my sight and resume your work, otherwise you'll be the next one to be fired. You don't scare me Michael. *Get out.*"

Garibaldi could only stare. He knew Elvis had the power; but that inbred bastard would need authorization from higher up to sack the second in command. Garibaldi knew this and was able to slip the line from time to time and not pay the price. But that could only last for so long. Elvis was sly and would eventually find a way. As he turned to walk out, he swallowed the knot in his throat and planned his revenge.

*That bastard called me Michael!*

## Chapter 12

(Delenn)

**W**ith each passing second, the Minbari war cruiser glided closer to the asteroid complex, like a deep sea predator stalking its prey on the surface of the water.

Delenn stood in the control center as the shroud of darkness surrounded her. The mushroom-shaped projector filled the area with a dazzling 3D representation of the entire human facility. She studied the live feeds being transmitted from the Minbari scouts.

Delenn walked forward to the huge structures that were blurred. They appeared to be the center point for the whole operation.

"Are we in range for a more detailed view? I'm curious to know what the humans are doing." Delenn un-hooded to show her bold head wrapped with a graceful bone.

A Minbari stepped forward and introduced himself as Ral'Car of the warrior cast. "Whatever they are doing is irrelevant to the mission that is upon us, Delenn. We will obliterate the infestation and move on. You yourself stated that you want this over and done with!"

Squinting her eyes, she turned back to the projection. "Have the humans detected us?"

"Our scouts have not been detected. They have gathered all the relevant information to launch an attack. It will be swift, and end in a great victory."

His tone of voice did not offer any victory from Delenn's point of view. She had seen too much killing and she wanted it to stop. She had already seen blood-in-

the-face combat and the humans had failed almost every time. She felt like a bully and that the Minbari had fallen from grace. *How did we come so far?*

"We have intercepted the human transmissions and understand they call this place—" Ral'Car's face curled up at the mere thought of a name for this *human* place. "-Batatar Asteroid Complex."

Delenn looked closer at the projection that began to clear in resolution as they approached. "Such an unusual name for a complex."

After what seemed like forever, the image cleared and Delenn could not believe what she was seeing. A titanic structure was being assembled that reached for miles throughout the asteroid field. Thousands of humans moved back and forth from one section of the structure to another, welding parts and adding armor, wearing no more than space suits. The holographic projection was so vivid and detailed that even Delenn was surprised at the work the scouts had done.

*What are the humans up to? Is it a ship or colony?*

She strolled from one section of the holographic image to another; the massive complex appeared to be split in two. From what Delenn could understand, the humans seem to be building two giant vessels, or ships that were the size of cities. *How can they create such things?*

The projection switched to real-time mode and Delenn was able to see the full scale of the work being carried out. Huge metallic ships constructed towers and plating, while, throughout the construction, thousands of bots swarmed in and out of sections, like insects in a hive nest. It was an impressive sight.

"The humans work hard to build whatever it is they are building." She strolled through the projected image, like a holographic model in front of a spectator.

"It does not matter if they build hard or not. We will destroy it, exactly like their home world. Really, Delenn, is this necessary? This complex will be vaporized soon, why dwell on what the humans are making?"

Ral'Car was right, the humans could not withstand them and almost every battle was a failure for the humans. Why dwell on the construction? But she could not escape the question. She was curious.

Wrapped in her own thoughts about what they were about to do to the settlement, the projection caught her attention as a flurry of activity erupted. Humans scattered around and alarms flashed everywhere.

"The humans have detected us." Delenn pressed one final time, "Is it necessary to attack the settlement? Shaal Mayan needs to get to the colony and this is a waste of time."

"Whether it is a waste of time or not, the humans have declared war on us and continued their resistance. Even after their home world was destroyed, they raided our outposts and continued to take our supplies. They must be stopped."

Outflanked by his sudden outburst, Delenn could only stand there and watch as the war cruiser prepared to release its onslaught.

## **Chapter 13**

(Vanguard, Marcus Cole)

"Where is that damn city?" Marcus waved his hands across his ship's controls as his small custom-made spacecraft glided through hyperspace. Marcus sighed, he decided to take the job in training new recruits and improved benefits, but he didn't

anticipate the city would have drifted away from its anchor point and ended up completely lost. *Brilliant. I wonder what Merlin would do in a time like this?*

He had taken the time to build his vessel over the years, as most Vanguard did, so he knew the systems intimately. Most Vanguard ships resembled an old two-seater Earth airplane equipped with two pilots: one telepath and one highly skilled pilot capable of recognizing all hyperspace currents or natural markers.

Marcus had spent all his life studying how hyperspace worked, ever since his parents' ship strayed off the local beacon and was never seen again. He hoped that someday he could find their old vessel and bring them back home.

But as time went on, Vanguards had gradually become honored people. There was no greater honor than becoming a Vanguard, but he preferred to keep his profile low.

His Vanguard insignia reflected off the cockpit controls obscuring his readings. The symbol of two humans holding an old Earth sextant was widely recognized. He looked at the colored indicator band that around the outside of the insignia; it indicated his rank and status. But he chose to tuck it in whenever he left his vessel, as a sign of respect for his family. He didn't want glory.

Marcus had already explored the center of the anchor point. The hidden transmitters from the node-net sent out a continuous radio signal so that grid patterns could be established for any incoming ship. The transmitters also posed as an early warning system for the cities, if any vessels strayed too close, especially Minbari vessels.

But no sign of the city existed. He loaded his hyperspace module and input all the new data he received from the node-net. Using complex algebra mixed with other calculations known only to Vanguards, he estimated the drift patterns and plotted a rough course. He was confident of finding the lost city.

The nightmarish clouds and red environment of hyperspace seemed closer to him as he moved his head around inside his helmet. His space suit was the only protection he had from the strange vacuum of hyperspace. It was the only way Vanguards worked, a way they could feel hyperspace. Marcus had a bond with it, like all Vanguards.

But in this instant, he wished that he had the assistance of a telepath, as was standard for Vanguard crews. Both individuals would work as a team for as long as they were together. Their lives depended on it.

Time passed slowly as Marcus shifted through the calculations on his screen. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. But no matter how hard he looked, no trace of the city could be found. "Looks like this is going to take more effort. Never mind, I could practice that song I've made up."

It was common knowledge to everyone, including Marcus, that all telepaths could sense the thoughts of any life form in hyperspace. Not only that, but the strange physics of hyperspace would amplify someone's thought patterns extensively. But his last partner was a wretch of a man, someone who made his life hell and he was glad to see the back of him as he flew away many weeks ago.

Just as he thought that his search had come to a dead end, some traces of basic gases caught his attention.

Marcus sighed in relief as he input the coordinates into the navigation system; time was limited and he was already behind schedule. He ploughed on, through the red space with a new surge of hope.

After twenty minutes of searching, the misty clouds deep within hyperspace slowly uncovered a titanic city. When his proximity alarms sounded he managed to swerve and avoid an antenna array. After he regained his bearings, he looked in awe

at the huge city beneath him. It resembled a huge deep-sea creature that would frighten any would-be aggressor. But as Marcus approached the familiar sight, he was abruptly interrupted by panicked control staff that seemed to recognize his ship.

"This is Jeffrey Sinclair of the Tyrone City. We're mighty glad to see you, Vanguard."

Marcus felt relieved that he'd managed to find the city, even after many years of experience and skill; he had never come close to losing an entire city before. "Just glad to find you. Your city has drifted far off its anchor point. Are you having problems?"

As Marcus listened to Sinclair's explanation, docking plans for his vessel were transmitted to him. His flight path was cleared from all the traffic in the area and a din of cheers were transmitted through the COM as he approached.

He'd never visited this city before. The limited reports he'd received beforehand stated that the last Vanguard assigned to this city was killed when the Minbari intercepted his vessel.

"You are clear for docking bay eight. Glad to have you on board, Vanguard," someone on the COM channel directed.

He piloted his custom-made vessel into the wide bay and the overhead hatch sealed. He heard a torrent of air as the area re-pressurized, making the environment breathable. Scanners ran over his vessel checking for damages and any contamination that might linger in hyperspace. After the all-clear, he was allowed to disembark. He assumed the automatic systems had the whole decontamination routine down to perfection because the last city he visited did not, and he was light headed for several months.

Upon leaving his vessel, Marcus expected to be greeted by someone. But as he removed his helmet and looked around the docking bay, it looked empty. Only the storage crates could be seen scattered around.

*Someone must know I'm here by now.*

He looked around and finally said. "Hello... I'm Marcus Cole... your savior. Anyone here?"

His humorous attempt to startle anyone out of the shadows failed. His ship cooled down behind him, smoke hissing in the stale background.

Unable to wait any longer for a reception, he walked along the corridors to the main cities control complex. He had no idea where he was going, but the layout of the city should be on similar designs as all the others. But as he progressed along the endless passageways and wide-open parks, he soon discovered that it was completely different.

Lost, or on walkabout -as he liked to call it- Marcus asked a few people, but they dismissively walked away before he had the chance to identify himself. Moments later Sinclair arrived with a relieved grin on his face.

"You must be the new Vanguard." Sinclair approached and shook Marcus's hand so hard that he nearly fell over. His wet palms obviously indicated that he was under great deal of pressure.

"And you must be Sinclair, just the man I needed to see." Marcus spotted the shocked and disbelieving expressions of the people that originally refused to help him.

Vanguard teams were highly respected. They saved countless lives every day. Vessels that were unfortunate enough to drift away from a hyperspace beacon and end up lost were often saved by a passing Vanguard. They were also responsible for keeping the titanic cities hidden from any enemy, especially the Minbari.

*Payback is a good feeling.*

“Yes, that’s my name. Sorry no one was around to greet you but, as you can imagine, we have a bit of a crisis at the moment. We urgently need you to place this city back onto its anchor point. What do we call you?” With a gesture, Sinclair steered Marcus to the city’s control center.

As if a fire was lit under his ass, Marcus arrived at the control center in breathtaking time and, as he expected, people rushed around like headless chickens.

*This should be interesting.* Marcus thought to himself.

## Chapter 14

(Londo Mollari)

Londo stood with his face close to the window as he looked out into the depths of hyperspace. The swirling clouds and wave patterns could not dampen the anger that had built up after hearing the news about the hijacked Centauri transport.

“This is an outrage!” He spun in place and slammed his glass to the floor. “The wretched humans are at it again. Stealing our cargo ships! This must stop *now!*”

Vir seemed anxious, but Londo didn’t care. He wanted results and someone to blame. “You know, that cargo shipment contained vital supplies for Centauri Prime. Those humans are going to pay. I want an assault force sent to the area.”

“But Londo, our forces are spread thin along the Narn border. Pulling our forces away might open up a weak point in the defences. You know about the confrontation at Ragesh 3.”

Londo poured himself another glass of his favourite wine. “Since when did you start sticking your nose into Centauri business? Just do what I say and get out!”

Londo knew Vir’s judgement should not be ignored, but the skirmishes with the humans had taken their toll on him. Every week he received reports about human raiders taking what they wanted and then jumping into hyperspace.

Even the vague reports about hyperspace cities made him addicted to finding them. By now it had become an obsession, but he had his responsibilities as an ambassador to Centauri Prime.

But the most infuriating memory that stayed paramount in his mind was when the humans had taken his own battle cruiser right under his nose. He could not stand the thought, and he had sworn revenge on the human called Susan Ivanova.

Oh yes, she would pay the price all right, and it was only a matter of time until he found her.

“Before you go, get me another bottle of this.” He held up a small bottle and then tossed it to Vir. Like a faithful servant, Vir scurried out of his room and out of sight.

Even though Londo should have been concentrating on the problem that threatened to start a war with the Narns, he could not get the hijacked transport out of his mind. He strolled over to his computer terminal and brought up the spatial projections of its last whereabouts. Perhaps he could find something that his analysts failed to detect.

Stories drifted around like solar winds. Stories about the immense power a single hyperspace city could hold and its technology. But at the end of the day, no one knew whether there was more to the stories than simple myth. If he could track the raiders to their base, or perhaps to a hyperspace city, then he could use that myth and power to put Centauri Prime back on the map.

His heart raced with thoughts about seizing an entire city and bringing that female to justice. He had a special place in his quarters for her head that was to be mounted on the end of a pole. Oh yes, he yearned for that moment. But every so often the Minbari would stick their nose in where it didn't belong. *Yes, the Minbari, they are so small minded they don't believe in the cities. Such an arrogant race.*

Londo rubbed his itchy eyes and immediately noticed something on the computer readout that was only readable in his peripheral vision. He entered a few commands and discovered some new information.

"Yes at last, I have finally found a trail!" He reacted with delight and stormed over to his communicator.

"This is Mollari, set course for these coordinates and get there as fast as you can."

After the confirmation from his bridge officer, Londo looked back out towards the window. His face reflected against the darkening glass and he could see his own smile develop on his face. At last, he was feeling better.

## Chapter 15

(G'Kar)

G'Kar was ecstatic; his forces had single-handedly destroyed the Centauri resistance at Ragesh 3.

With hands stretched out wide, G'Kar walked down his ship's lowered hatch and took in a lungful of air. The Narns had reclaimed this world. *Perfect*, he thought.

Lined up in front of him, sixteen scruffy, overdressed Centauri kneeled. Caught straight away, they would meet their maker immediately. The rest would be found later. G'Kar was sure of that.

"G'Kar, today's a victorious day. We've managed to seize these Centauri scum and arranged the chamber for you." Na'Toth chimed in from a distance.

The sun shone high in the sky, encouraging an even more vivid smile from G'Kar. He clasped his hands together, turned on the spot and enthusiastically said, "Perfect, I always wanted to try the human court system." He projected his voice to the Narn group. "Have them taken to the court room."

G'Kar could barely contain his excitement; he was very fond of old human text about trials, especially the most recent one about a murderer sent to court and eventually executed. He found the whole law process amusing and wanted to adopt this behavior on Ragesh 3.

Then the cunning Narn had another idea; he turned and signaled to his companion. G'Kar felt a rush of sadistic pleasure, like adding salt to an open wound.

"Na'Toth, I want you to contact Londo Mollari." He chuckled. "I want him to witness the trial of his nephew. I'm sure he'll find it quite amusing."

Na'Toth didn't require any convincing. She made the appropriate salute and rushed off. Now G'Kar could concentrate on matters that really entertained him.

Perched high above the room in his ornate clothes, G'Kar scanned the room, which was to be his kangaroo court. He had made sure that the builders constructed the room correctly, right down to the hardback chairs for the audience to sit. He wanted it perfect.

Grinning, he spun the judge's hammer and made a few test bashes on its stump. "Off with his head. Off with his head," he chirped, getting ready for the day's events.

The room began to fill up with curious Narns, all clamoring to take a seat. A chosen few were hurried to the juror's chairs. The front row was reserved for the Centauri. *Especially the Centauri.* G'Kar could not believe how efficient and entertaining the whole thing was.

"This is not a trial! We didn't *do* anything!" one disgruntled Centauri roared.

"Quiet in my court!" G'Kar slammed his hammer. "Do that again and I will have you personally executed right now."

It took fifteen minutes for the room to fill up completely. Finally, G'Kar could start the proceedings.

"Could we have the first prisoner please?" G'Kar gestured towards the recorders. He wanted recordings for his personal pleasure later on.

"Your Honor," the defending Narn announced. His words carried a hint of hatred toward the Centauri prisoners, and he was awfully overdressed for the event. But G'Kar loved every moment. "My client, Gnore Holori is innocent of his charge and throws himself on the mercy of this court, safe in the knowledge that the great G'Kar will hear his claim."

Gnore Holori, a scruffy-looking Centauri – *but then, they all look scruffy,* G'Kar thought – reacted with outrage. "This is preposterous, hoo-" He was immediately gagged and bound by Narn heavies.

"I'll have order now..." G'Kar rumbled, then continued.

"Gnore Holori...I can see from this scroll that you're guilty of so many crimes against the Narn regime that I shan't be bothered to list them. The proof of your actions is around you." G'Kar gestured towards the mismatched Narns sitting in the audience with scarred faces and missing limbs. They all stood and cheered, knowing what was to come.

"With these facts in front of us, I'll take this matter to the..." G'Kar's eyes flickered to Na'Toth, who mouthed "jurors."

"Ha, that's the word I was looking for. Now then," G'Kar stood and extended his hand, "what's your verdict?"

Ninety percent of the jurors all shouted "guilty," with the rest spewing words like "hang the bastard " and "off with his head."

G'Kar raised his hands for the final sentence and felt a rush of excitement coursing through his veins. "Gnore Holori, you have been found guilty. Your sentence is death, to be executed as soon as possible by the worst possible means. May your maker forgive you."

At a swift wave of his hand, the heavy men dragged the struggling Centauri to the execution table inside the courtroom itself. A Narn in all his traditional clothing strolled towards the tied individual, and with a rough pull, he tore off the prisoner's head and held it high. The audience went wild.

G'Kar was on the edge of his seat with excitement. He wanted to proceed quickly to the next similar case –*all of them were the same anyway*- but a transmission came through on the hovering view screen.

"G'Kar, you sniveling excuse for a Narn. What is it that would cause you to interrupt my private time?"

At the sound of the familiar voice, G'Kar didn't bother to hide the growing grin on his face. "Londo Mollari...it's a pleasure to see you again. I would like to show you something."

G'Kar gestured with his hand and the camera turned to display the kneeling group of Centauri. As expected, Londo went ballistic. He roared through the screen, as if his words could release them. But the Narn raised his glass of water and took a sip.

"Londo, you can rant and rave all you like, but the..." He paused, remembering the human phrase. "The show must go on. I welcome you to watch. Especially this next person." His tone darkened.

"Could we have the next prisoner please?" he asked.

Then a Centauri dressed in fine clothing was dragged to the hastily constructed bench to stand for his *crimes*.

The same Narn that was supposed to defend all the Centauri, announced in his deep bellowing voice, "Your Honor, my client, Carn Mollari, is innocent of his charge and throws himself on the mercy of this court, safe in the knowledge that the great G'Kar will hear his claim."

"What's this?" Londo's clipped voice disturbed the silent room.

"Silence in my court!"

"What court? What the hell is going on, G'Kar, and why did your forces invade Ragesh 3? This is an act of war! What are you doing with my nephew?"

Questions flowed from the screen like an avalanche. G'Kar had heard enough. He moved the screen closer to himself and said some final words to Londo. "Your forces invaded this system hundreds of years ago. We simply took it back. Now your invaders are to stand trial for their despicable crimes. Including your nephew."

He deactivated the sound and pushed the hovering screen away from his elevated platform. He signaled for the trial to continue and murmured under his breath, "I must have a wig."

G'Kar sipped his water and unraveled a scroll that had detailed listings of events and crimes inside. He held it high and announced. "Carn Mollari, I see that you are the leader for this colony. Am I correct?"

Carn rose to his feet, but G'Kar gave a little nod, and his heavy men forced him to sit. He didn't want any Centauri standing. Oh, how he loved to see them suffer.

"I'm not the leader. I was assigned as head researcher on Ragesh 3. I have nothing to do with the colony or any deaths."

"That's not what my records show. They report that you have committed crimes against the Narn people. Slain innocent children and executed many fine Narns in the most unimaginable ways...so you plead innocent?" G'Kar grinned; he knew Londo could hear every word and his actions on the screen proved this. He felt a malicious pleasure, and his excitement grew. *Yes, the humans have a fine justice system.*

As expected, Carn Mollari pleaded innocent and the case dragged on with heightened excitement. One by one, Narn families of the 'so called' butchered, lined up and gave their horrendous accounts. G'Kar held his composure and tried not to show his excitement. His heart raced and his clothes seemed to tighten. He knew that executing Carn would enrage the Centauri to the point of war. But it was time for the Narns to show the Centauri what it was like to be invaded.

When the final witness climbed off the witness stand and hobbled over to the chairs, G'Kar finally spoke. "It seems your crimes are verified. However, I'm not allowed to decide if you're guilty or not. According to human laws, only the jury can decide."

G'Kar pointed a gloved finger. "Jury, what is your answer? Guilty or not guilty?"

Everyone stood and a torrent of words rushed around the room in a defining din, "*Guilty!*"

G'Kar raised his hands and prepared to deliver his sentence. The way the humans did it, the judges were supposed to go to their chambers and decide the punishment. But G'Kar had made his decision from the beginning and he loved the jury's verdict.

The courtroom went silent; everyone waited for his punishment. G'Kar stood and placed the scroll neatly on the table. He saw Londo staring through the hovering view screen. With his decision, which would start a war, firmly in his mind, he announced, "Carn Mollari, you have been found guilty of crimes against the Narn people. Your sentence is...to have your head removed from your body in the most horrendous way possible. Then it will then be displayed as a reminder to all Narns of the genocide the Centauri caused over the years... May your maker have mercy on your soul." He slammed a satisfying hit with the judge's hammer and placed it gently on the table. There, it was done!

G'Kar ordered the view screen sound to be activated -at low volume- and almost immediately Londo shouted obscene words. That only fuelled G'Kar's resolve. Inside he was on fire with delight. But he kept his composure.

After Carn was dragged to the bench and tied down, G'Kar stood and stared at the Centauri. He wiggled on the bench like a worm. G'Kar was so high up he could squash that *insect* under his foot.

At G'Kar nod, a huge burly Narn stepped out of the shadows, grabbed Carn's head and heaved with all his might.

Carn screamed, squealed and finally, the ripping of his throat indicated that the job was done. Jets of blood continued to spray all over the already bloody floor as the heavy Narn showed Londo his nephew's head.

Londo went red, shouted some obscene words with a pointed finger and finally threw a bottle at the screen, terminating the transmission. G'Kar felt like a hero to his people as he prepared the stage for the next Centauri. This was going to be a long...*fun* day.

## Chapter 16

(Elizabeth Lochley)

**A**s alarms sounded throughout the facility, Elizabeth threw on her jacket and hurried to discover what the chaos was about.

She poked her head outside her quarters and looked down the long rock-walled corridor. When the intercom voice called for all personnel to be at their stations, Elizabeth knew this was not a drill. Something terrible was happening.

"This is base commander Elvis Vaghoon. The Minbari are on an intercept course. All personnel report to your battle stations. City commanders, you're needed at the central control station."

That was the call that grabbed her attention. She legged it down the corridor, almost mowing into people; she knew she would be urgently needed.

Upon arriving at the central control station, she heard alarms shrieking throughout the control centre. Elizabeth stood with Garibaldi, staring through the gigantic panoramic windows that stretched the entire perimeter of the main wall.

Two semi-circular decks contained chrome-metallic workstations and railings that overlooked the entire room. This was her first time in such a place and despite the professional appearance, she could feel the uneasiness settling in.

Elvis was there, sitting in his upholstered armchair, while his technicians and crew were forced to sit in lower chairs with hard backs and metal seats.

Elizabeth was not impressed and she remembered the rumours about his adventure with Talia Winters. She looked away to hide a disapproving scowl.

Flashing spotlights re-directed Elizabeth's gaze back to the impressive panoramic windows that displayed the two-hyperspace cities below them. Docking arms stretching for miles, asteroids and small planetoids rotated in their respective orbits and the local sun lit the entire facility.

She had never seen a view like this, especially from this high up. Elizabeth felt like a classic air traffic control officer back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She'd seen some history news feeds that brought back some momentary flashbacks. Despite the grim situation, she could not hold back a gratifying smile. Suddenly the magnitude of her responsibility struck her. She felt weak at the knees

"Look over there." Garibaldi took a step forward and pointed towards the Minbari cruiser that appeared to be a speck of cosmic fluff in space.

"Get a lock on that thing. Power up the facility's cannon." Elvis rushed down the metal stairs to the first deck and approached the slim line holographic computer terminals.

"Elvis, that cannon is useless. It's used to deflect asteroids and we're not sure the damn thing works properly." Garibaldi looked worried and angry but Elizabeth stayed unobtrusive and watched.

Crews rushed around the large room swapping data pads and shouting quick orders to each other. Elizabeth clenched the railing tight as the Minbari cruiser grew larger in the distance.

Elvis swiftly stepped into the middle of the room. "Can we launch the cities into hyperspace?"

It took her a moment to realize that Elvis was talking to her. But Elizabeth snapped out of her trance and responded. "No, not yet, the hyperspace engines have yet to be installed."

Elvis walked back to the operations console. "Shit. That cruiser is going to fuck up this whole operation."

Glancing back at the window, Elvis snapped quick orders. "Target that vessel with the cannon, then fire at will."

Someone confirmed the command and within a few moments, a salvo of plasma blasts streaked through space and impacted the Minbari cruiser. More plasma bolts were fired from the facility, but the effect was minimal as Elizabeth watched the cruiser approach unhindered.

With a swift, stabbing beam, the cruiser blasted the cannon off the facility. Then like a raindrop over a pond, the cruiser directed its attention to the titanic city below.

"One of the cities is under fire," one of the bridge officers shouted across the room, as if nothing else needed to be said. "The Minbari have begun their attack!"

Elizabeth couldn't believe what she was seeing; sparks flew and chunks of buildings were torn off from the cities' foundations. In comparison, it seemed the Minbari had bitten more than they could chew. The epic city spanned for miles and

the small cruiser could never do much damage, but it was slowly slicing it up like a roast.

She was due to take over one of those cities, which was the highest honour someone could receive from the president. *One of those cities!* A city that was being sliced and diced. She found it *very* hard to control her anger and clenched the railing.

"Well, something's got to be done. It won't be long before that cruiser calls in reinforcements." Garibaldi paced back and forth from station to station looking for a solution to the problem. But from the expression on his face, he had nothing.

More chunks drifted in space, another block of buildings were torn from its foundations. The Minbari vessel seemed to enjoy the destruction it was causing. But it would not be long before it turned its attention to the main facility. Everyone feared for that moment.

"We're getting calls from the cities. People are starting to flood the hospitals. It's turning into a bloodbath," another technician shouted.

Elvis stared at the industrial readouts on one of the larger screens above the windows. Elizabeth was not sure what he was looking at; but it seemed to give him an idea. "Which scavenger is closer to the Minbari ship?"

Garibaldi grinned. Elvis had thought of something and he knew it. Garibaldi rushed to the industrial station and began to furiously input commands.

Elizabeth needed to ask, "What are the scavengers?"

## Chapter 17

(Elvis Vaghoon)

**E**lvis had a plan, and God help the Minbari. No one was going to destroy *his* facility today. He had spent most of his adult life planning and cheating his way to the top and now he planned to uphold that role to the best of his ability.

Staring at the console, the scavenger readouts were listed in mechanical font in front of him. Several scavengers had been damaged, others were offline, but scavenger 8127 was online and processing raw material at optimum speed. *Time to give it something fresh to eat.*

With a smile, he looked up at Elizabeth's question. Although she looked dashing herself, he took the time to examine her body and imagined her naked in front of him, the perfect curvature of her buttocks indicated that she was wearing a T thong, an image that excited him. At last he answered her.

"The scavengers are industrial resource gathering units." He tapped at his console and displayed a magnified image of a scavenger on one of the panoramic windows.

The maggot shaped machine had most of its body burrowed inside a large asteroid, eating away at the core and spewing large nuggets of processed material into space towards the complex. The machine seemed content in its small quest, but Elvis had a new mission for it.

"The scavenger processes the raw material in the asteroid. It refines it and then compresses it into nuggets, which are then catapulted back to this facility. I intend to redirect its course straight for the Minbari cruiser." Elvis felt like giving Elizabeth his own refined product; she looked very inviting in her form-fitting uniform.

As Garibaldi approached, Elvis knew that he was still harbouring ill feelings about his relaxation time with Talia Winters. But both parties knew that survival of this facility warranted teamwork.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking? If we give scavenger 8127 a new target, like that cruiser, it’ll burrow into it and disable the thing. The scavengers are made out of solid material and designed for rough environments. I think it should withstand the Minbari weapons for a prolonged time.”

Elvis didn’t need any more convincing. He issued orders. “Scavenger control, redirect scavenger 8127 towards the Minbari cruiser, set to full speed.”

Still, with *his* great idea now in motion, Elvis felt vulnerable. He stood in the middle of the control room looking over the entire facility. *Such a fragile place and one shot could kill everyone.*

But he was on a space facility on a spinning rock attached to two huge cities. How much more protected could he get? Damn the rest of the crew, if he needed to escape, he would with his waiting escape pod. But he was required to defend his hard work first and the scavengers were the key.

Sitting in their chairs, everyone waited in silence as the magnified image of the scavenger showed it reversing out of its burrowed hole.

The horrid looking machine, all in brown and rust slowly spun in place and exposed its grinding metallic teeth. Spinning at high speed, vomiting out excess amounts of asteroid that had failed to go into its refinery chambers, the scavenger’s mouth reminded Elvis of an alien creature he’d seen on the news feeds. All black and horrid looking, it looked like an insect with millions of teeth, waiting to chew on anything.

Now a confirmation call popped up on Elvis terminal under the scavenger’s highlighted name. It turned red, indicating it was looking for its next target. *Perfect.*

Within striking distance, the scavenger traversed the sea of space within minutes. It looked all puffed up and ready to devour the blue menacing ship. *Now it’s payback.*

As everyone held on to hopes that the scavengers direct attack approach would work, the Minbari vessel spotted the huge machine and turned to face it.

The sleek refined body armour looked appealing to the industrial machine, which was half its size and looked terrible. Elvis didn’t see the point in painting the huge scavengers and over the years, patches and scars appeared all over their hulls. Most of the asteroid’s own material was plastered on the hull of this one like plaque on someone’s teeth.

A flash of hot light stabbed into the mouth of the scavenger, and everyone backed away, all in awe. *Would the scavenger survive?*

The Minbari fired again and again, and small metal blades spun off into space. Scorch marks resided on the hull, but the armour was too tough. From the initial attacks, Elvis knew that the Minbari could not stop this thing. It was a massive industrial machine designed for grinding. Elvis grinned. “This is the moment! The Minbari will be sorry.”

The scavenger ploughed straight into the sleek refined material of the Minbari cruiser and chomped away the entire front section off the cruiser, devouring everything; it was like a hot knife in butter.

Like a maggot burrowing into an apple, the scavenger wiggled and jiggled, creating a hole in the middle of the vessel. Girders and chunks of hull broke off and drifted in space. Vast cracks formed on the skin, stretching all around the cruiser like a cracked egg. Elvis finally placed his hand to his chin when the lights blinked out on the enemy ship.

This was Elvis's cue to do something. "Scavenger control, retract the scavenger and put it on standby. Salvage and security teams, prepare to board that vessel."

Elvis left his station and climbed the metal stairs, walking into Elizabeth on the way. He glanced at her backside and licked his lips at the smooth bend of her cheeks. She gave him a dismissive stare before walking to the other side of the room. He did not like that. *I'll deal with you later.*

"Garibaldi, dispatch the teams. I want them on the Minbari cruiser and to strip it bare. There might be tons of technology onboard and we are not letting this opportunity escape. Once we have everything we need, command that scavenger to devour it." Just before he left the command deck, he finally said, "You may kill whoever is onboard."

## Chapter 18

(Shaal Mayan)

**S**haal stood by the window and watched the destruction of the magnificent city. She saw the energy beams plough through the streets, ripping huge chunks from the human city; there was no way the humans could hide from such destruction. *Such a waste, why do we have to do this?*

But suddenly, Shaal spotted something strange. The view of the city outside slid past her window, giving way to a rugged scene of rocks and asteroids. Her mind began to fill with questions and then she saw *it*.

Like a living creature in space, the object flew *towards them*. Shaal stepped back from the view-port and her reflection shone on the glass surface with the colossal object in the background moving slowly. *Was it a ship? Was it deliberately sent to us?* she asked herself, clutching her shawl.

But as the ominous object drew closer, Shaal was finally able to see the razor sharp teeth spinning frantically, like the mouth of a hungry predator.

In slow painful stages, the object or machine advanced toward them. Shaal saw lancing beams of yellow light strike at the heart of the machine, but the human device continued, clearly on a collision course.

When the huge blades filled her view-port, Shaal backed away, horror filling every inch of her body. *Is this my end? I'm too young to die!* But a hand grabbed her shoulder and yanked her out of the room. She looked around and saw Delenn. She hugged Delenn in relief, but the danger was not over. They ran as fast as they could to the centre of the cruiser before the device impacted.

Violent vibrations shocked the entire vessel causing a storm of destruction everywhere. People fell over, bulkheads were ripped apart and an invisible hurricane swept throughout the corridors, dragging everyone to their doom. In an instant, the entire deck was vented to space.

With seconds to spare, Delenn managed to drag Shaal through a closing bulkhead. Razor-sharp pincers tore apart the deck they had just escaped from, as if a wrecking ball had smashed through the whole area. But the destruction still continued. They needed to move *now*.

Minbari flew past the transparent bulkhead doors as the decompression dragged them into the jaws of death. Shaal could not understand why the humans had created such a horrible, relentless machine. Perhaps it was a new invention to

stop her people, but why did she have to put her life on the line for something that didn't involve her?

Blood began to stain the steel jaws as they continued to press forward. Delenn picked herself up from the floor and ran, as the machine slowly reached the bulkhead door.

Glass shattered and the storm blew everyone, who wasn't holding onto something, back towards the monster. Shaal managed to grab a metal bulkhead while Delenn held open another door. She reached out, but Shaal found it almost impossible to pull herself closer to Delenn.

Shaal's arms were overworked and she felt her grip begin to falter. She knew it wouldn't be long before she was dragged to her doom.

"Don't you give up on me, Shaal! Take my hand! I will pull you in!" Delenn held the door tight, her clothing flowing around her in the gale.

"I don't know if I can. I can't pull myself..." But before she lost her grip, the machine stopped dead. The sudden deactivation had jammed one of its house-sized spikes into the deck, momentarily sealing the breached hull. Shaal fell to the floor and ran to the bulkhead door. Delenn closed it before the machine could move away and allow the decompression storm of air to ravage the rest of the ship.

Before anyone could grasp the reality of their situation, the main illumination in the hallway failed. The remaining twelve people stared at each other, terrified of what would happen next.

Shaal raised her head and looked down the shadowy corridor that once led to her chambers. Now, only space existed.

## Chapter 19

(The President)

**S**tanding at the boardroom window, the president gazed at the metropolis that was under her control, her empire. She had been president during the Earth/Minbari war and had guided the human race painfully to where it stood today. Without her leadership, everything would have collapsed into chaos and the human race might not have survived.

Dapper and distinguished, the president wore her impeccable historic black suit with a dark red blouse that heightened her grandmotherly persona. Her ginger hair was always kept at the same style throughout the years, as a symbol of her determination. She wanted to use her image as a figurehead for every human still alive.

But the president was not a vain woman. She'd seen the Earth destroyed and the countless attacks on human colonies and ships. She wanted revenge just as much as the next person.

While her assistant droned status reports and complaints at her, she stood with her hands behind her back, studying the portraits of all the hyperspace cities that spanned the course of years.

The portrayal of the cities represented the greatest achievements for mankind and a constant reminder of the darkness the Minbari had forced on the human race. The cities lifted the human race back into the light and provided a home. As a sign of success, the president always kept up-to-date pictures in her boardroom.

Three days ago, a new portrait had been delivered to the room and had personally seen it installed in its permanent place on the wall. Like all the images

before it, this picture added proof that human strength would live on, no matter what stood in its way.

She looked at the first picture that showed the very first Babylon station. It was a prototype and the very first attempt at human ingenuity to house the largest human drifter-colony safely. Next came four more of the stations that were needed to house the ever-growing human population. She remembered giving the first approval to build the stations. It had seemed the only feasible idea at the time. Humanity had been living in star ships and poorly constructed colonies that were constantly invaded and destroyed. Within months of the project's announcement, hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life had descended on the construction site and helped to build the very first Babylon station. Babylon 1.

Then after the initial success, the rest of the stations came online at rapid pace. Citizens began to live on the other stations before they were even constructed. Such a monumental achievement the president could feel proud of.

However, it was not all successful. Babylon 4 had disappeared when a strange anomaly hit it, killing many of the inhabitants in that event. Thankfully most of the population had escaped. But the tragedy did not end there.

She strolled over to the last Babylon station portrait, Babylon 5. Then the assistant interrupted her train of thought.

She stared at the magnificent blue space station as the assistant enlightened her.

"According to the latest reports from Dr. Vance Hendricks, the artefacts he found on Ikarra 7 have brought up a wealth of data. We predict that we should be able to graft the organic technology onto the human clones for the perfect weapon." The assistant moved a few devices -the size of a cigarette lighter- until he found the one he wanted. He pressed the activation button and the device opened up into a holographic screen.

The assistant continued. "If our calculations are correct we could have twenty warriors at our disposal. But we do not know their initial behaviour and some scientists are concerned about the... 'control' mechanism."

The president wasn't troubled, but preoccupied. *It's a small issue. Surely the scientists can easily overcome this.* "Don't worry about it. The scientists know what they are doing. I suggest activating the warriors once they are transported to a Minbari colony. Then we can study the results from orbit."

The President strolled along the boardroom wall until she came to the first hyperspace city. Then all the memories of the Babylon stations' destruction flooded back. Out of nowhere the Minbari swarmed in and destroyed everything. Millions of humans died, homes lost. All within one year after the stations were completed. It had been a disaster for the human race. She had seen it all. She cried back then, but not anymore. She vowed to do the same to the Minbari.

The city wasn't much to look at, just a large lump of metal in the sea of red, but it housed over three million people all-clamouring for life. It had been the first city residing in hyperspace, drifting off the hyperspace beacons for added security.

This had been the moment the Vanduurs were discovered. A group of humans who flew their custom-made ships in the depths of hyperspace to escape the Minbari or any other race. They had finally joined the struggle, offering their services to keep the very first city safe in the deepest reaches of hyperspace. It was a unified encounter that benefited everyone and the Vanduurs soon became the most respected group of humans ever to exist.

Another portrait showed the construction of a more advanced city. This time it resembled an egg with a glass dome constructed to house open space such as trees,

buildings and parks. After the success of the first city, the president saw no reason not to allocate people and resources to build a better city. The ideas that flooded the designers ranged from plant life parks to outside buildings, something that impressed the president profoundly.

Then she looked at the next city that hanged on the wall, the city that would change the way humans lived forever. Constructed entirely from new technology, it boasted shield devices and new defensive weapons. A scientist named Jun Cho had developed an engine core that would channel the hyperspace partials and transfer them into energy to power the gigantic shield that replaced the fragile glass domes. The engine core also channelled huge amounts of power to the new alien weapons. She did not understand the concept, but she was glad to be part of it.

While the human population of Earth had been scattered along the stars, the president sent teams of rescuers to search for humans and bring them back. It had turned out to be an overwhelming success and before long, the city began to expand. The president had decided to build the human capital city.

She stopped in front of the portrait of her own city, Casabianca. It was the biggest city the humans had ever built. The centre of the city spanned fifteen miles, which branched out into independent domed structures that housed manufacturing complexes and farmland. Millions of people had helped build the metropolis and it soon became the inspiration to construct smaller cities out in plane space.

All of this was done for the good of mankind, and she was proud of her people.

Then she looked at the newest portraits that were completed, sent from the Batastar Asteroid Complex of the two newest cities. The two new advanced cities would ease the overpopulation strain and offer new homes to the thousands of humans who desperately need the shelter. The president felt like a saint, bringing the human race home to live safely in the depths of hyperspace. Now their efforts could be focused on the Minbari.

The assistant's voice changed into a shy tone. "Forgive me Madam President, I have some information you should know. Are you listening to me?"

She turned and smiled. "Don't worry. I know about the alien gate and its technology. So you are saying there is not much left to study."

The assistant, who sat at the highly polished table, shuffled his projection devices until he found the correct one and activated it. The holographic projection opened into the middle of the table along the surface.

An image of an ancient device that was shaped as a 'T' came into focus.

"This device has proven its worth. Since the Vanguard's found it in hyperspace nearly eight years ago we have jumped ahead in technology further than anyone. But it can only be powered by Jun Cho's power plant, which will only work in hyperspace. We don't have the technology to produce that kind of power in normal space. A major set back."

The president sat at the table, examining the device. She clearly remembered her first sight of this thing. It had been found deep in hyperspace and the scientist who discovered it had believed it opened a doorway to thirdspace. But psychological problems had begun to develop in the city, and it wasn't long until all hell broke loose. She remembered very it well.

With the civilians under some kind of mind control, officials forced the city out into normal space and teams of dedicated people took the artefact apart to find the source of the disturbance.

Once the components were destroyed, they jumped back into hyperspace and thousands of scientists descended on the gate and dismantled it, using the technology to their own advantage.

Shield technology was the biggest breakthrough, and with Jun Cho's power plant, they had all the energy it needed. Cities could be built with less material and the shield itself could be used to filter the light rays from hyperspace to add a more Earthly feel. Next came the powerful blast weapons and advanced utilities that allowed them to recycle almost everything, from asteroids to any alien ship. They had it all.

"I believe Jun Cho has developed some kind of capacitor that can store vast amounts of power capable of powering a shield on a star ship for a short period of time. I believe that will give a small advantage for our new warriors?" The president handed a data crystal over to her assistant. "Make sure the research division gets this. I want to strike at the Minbari as soon as possible. The combination of those clone warriors and Jun Cho's capacitor might offer us a chance."

She dismissed her assistant and approached the boardroom window. The magnificent view of the Casabianca was below her feet. She smiled. The metropolis was marvellous.

## Chapter 20

(Susan Ivanova)

As a successful 'merchant' roaming through space and picking up all the opportunities that crossed the bows of her ship, Susan Ivanova could not have found a more profitable cargo.

She stood next to the cargo hold entrance, staring at the glistening wealth of jewels and diamonds the Centauri 'had' been transporting. Susan imagined that someone would be angry at the loss. She wished she could have been an observer, spying on the looks on their faces when they finally found out.

"The Centauri will be pissed. Whom do you think these belong to?" Susan said in a quiet voice.

"Needless to say, whoever this *used* to belong to will be gunning for your ass now Susan." Said her companion, who added a little sneer to his words.

Susan, made wary by her companion's good humour, winked at him. "And a cute ass I have too."

As the wealth of fortune twinkled in the dim light, Susan left the area to deal with the imprisoned Centauri. She'd yet to devise a plan to deal with them. *I would sooner see them vented into space than use my air and food.* She thought. But she was bound by the human code.

Like a puppy following its master, Susan's companion stopped when she turned to face him. He was a slim faced individual who went by the name of Roger. His skin was pale and he wore clothing that looked like they had been thrown on in five minutes. His hair could have been brushed too.

"I've got an idea, we'll locate the nearest suitable planet and throw them on it. That should solve our problem for a while." Susan said, grinning. Her definition of a habitable planet was one that vaguely looked blue and green. Even then, she was not about to waste the time to locate a planet of that colour tone, let alone scan for oxygen.

"Are you sure that's a wise idea? We have not detected any suitable planets in this sector." Roger was good at his work and he cared for the lives of everyone. But his interest in the well being of other life forms might -one day- get him killed; Susan needed to cure him of that.

She tuned and walked down the corridor. "The Centauri are such simple people intent on their own glory. They probably won't know the difference from a habitable planet to a moon. We'll leave them some transmitting equipment."

Seated comfortably in her command chair, Susan leaned her head on her headrest and gazed around her bridge. Crews worked at a leisurely pace as her ship was set on a course through the local solar system to the nearest 'habitable' planet.

"How long until we get there?" Susan asked dryly as she tried to prevent her underwear from creeping up her butt. The chair was supposed to have been replaced, but she didn't see any improvement.

"We should be there in approximately one hour," A voice called out. It sounded like Joe, but she wasn't paying much attention.

"Good, I'm going to get something to eat. Call me once we're in range." Susan left the bridge.

Scoffing down the last of her food, she spotted the green blob of a planet outside her port window. It was time. *And where was that call?*

She eased on her coat and headed out of the mostly-deserted mess hall.

Susan eventually received word that they had entered orbit of the planet and preparations were underway to transport the Centauri. She wanted to see them off. With an ironic smile tugging on the corners of her cheeks, she went to the holding cells.

"What do you intend to do to us?" a Centauri prisoner snapped. He looked desperate.

Susan walked up to the cells. "We have found a planet. It should be suitable for your species and we'll leave you on it with some communications equipment."

The Centauri looked at Susan, alarmed. "What do you mean, *should* be suitable for our species?"

"Just what it means. It might support your species for five years, or for five minutes. I really don't care." Susan signalled for her officers to remove the Centauri from their cells, stunners ready in their hands.

The Centauri shared panicked glances and were hastily dragged away to the bodedged up life pods that would take them down to the planet.

When the ejection system finally jettisoned the Centauri away from her ship, she pulled out small container and took a small sniff. The aroma of the drug forced her to relax and she could finally enjoy the final moments before hurrying to the next problem.

Susan left the docking hatch and progressed down the corridor to the bridge. Roger was not too far behind, hurryingly trying to catch up. It appeared that he couldn't stop himself from spewing more rubbish about treating prisoners fairly. *If he had any sense, the man would keep his opinions to himself.*

Before he had a chance to speak, Susan cut him off. "Cut your whining or I'll shove you out the airlock. I told you about this line of business. If you don't like it leave."

Susan entered the bridge and entered commands into the navigation system. She'd noticed Roger had stopped whining. *There, that shut him up. Good*

Not wanting to make any eye contact with anyone, she sat back down on her chair and watched her hauler jump into hyperspace. The drug was finally beginning to kick in and Susan relaxed on the chair and allowed her mind to drift into bliss. She

had the time. They would have to wait for a Vanguard to take them to the nearest Hyperspace city, something that would take a few days.

## Chapter 21

(Zack Allan)

Crammed in a small transport, Zack glanced at his assault team who were doing their normal pre-prep operations before they boarded the Minbari vessel that was conveniently molested by the facilities Scavenger. *What a perfect way to disable a ship!* Zack thought.

One officer picked his nose -like he had got nothing better to do- while the others messed around with their weapons. One rookie appeared to have difficulty inserting the power pack into his weapon, which made Zack wonder why the higher ups had given him a virgin team. He wished Garibaldi had sent that transfer request a few months ago. *At least I could be serving in Casabianca city.*

"Everybody pay attention. We're about to enter a hostile environment. I've fought these people before. They're cunning, hard to kill and they *will* do everything to kill you." Zack stood up and walked down the centre of the confined transport. "They're using hand weapons that can kill a human instantly. There're no second chances."

Zack reached the end of the crew compartment and turned around, snappish. "I will be honest with you gentlemen. *Some of you will die.* But I will do everything in my power to keep the deaths to a minimum. If everybody follows my lead most of you might come out alive, but these are the Minbari and I guarantee nothing."

The transport had been under heavy acceleration for half an hour. Zack's pulse pounded. His mind sharpened as he turned his full attention to the job at hand. *Finally. Time for some payback.*

Last time he'd been faced with the Minbari, they'd skewered his eye with a small blade. Now he intended to repay that little debt.

Zack approached the cockpit and opened a COM channel to the rest of the ships in his makeshift invasion force. "All ships we are about to enter the enemy's firing range, if you see their gun ports warming up, break away immediately. Elvis has assured us the vessel is disabled." *Although I don't trust that asshole as far as I can throw a comet.*

Bursts of confirmation came back over the COM unit as the invasion force lined up for a direct penetration at the Minbari cruiser. A flurry of football sized asteroids ricocheted off the hull, prompting the redheaded pilot to make some hasty course corrections.

"Easy there, pilot, I want to get there in one piece." Zack said softly.

"Sorry sir, there's a lot of debris around here, it shouldn't happen again." Zack knew the pilot: a damn good pilot too, who managed to pass all the tests and skip his way up the ranks in just a few years. Whenever he needed a pilot for the most dangerous missions, Sappho was his man. Although he could not understand how the man had gotten the god ugly name anyway.

His invasion ships continued to close the gap as the Minbari vessel hung in the middle of space, completely dead. No power and no weapons. Nothing. *Perfect,* Zack thought.

Zack threaded his fingers together and looked out the port window. The docking bay was in sight and open, like an all round invitation to a state dinner. "All ships, we go in there."

Zack's teams finalized their preparations and stood beside the exit hatch. Everyone glanced around, looking at each other as the air began to fill with hot anticipation. The COM system chattered with calls of "Those Minbari won't know what hit them!" "Time to kick some ass!" and "Let's unleash the dogs of war!"

A final thump of the ship indicated that they had landed in the launch bay and the transport's doors opened into a ramp. The invisible storm only lasted a few seconds as the compartment depressurised; then, suited teams rushed out and took their positions.

Staring in awe, the suited teams gazed at the racks of Nial fighters and transports. They'd never seen anything like this up close and Zack saw this as a good opportunity for the gathering team to nick all the hardware. With luck, the humans on the asteroid complex might have a way to defend themselves if the Minbari ever returned. *Use their own technology against them*, he thought.

As they made their way to the airlock door at the end of the bay, Zack prepped everyone before they entered the long chamber that would allow them to enter the corridors of the main vessel.

His lips twitched. "Everyone stay frosty. Once this door opens, you can bet the Minbari will come gunning for us."

Quickly, the technicians hacked the Minbari locking mechanism and pressurised the inner chamber to the rest of the ship. Zack's team barged out into the corridors with pulse rifles hissing in their hands.

So far Zack did not see any Minbari. His teams fanned out in all directions taking defensive positions at each corridor intersection. Lights flashed and smoke poured from the damaged conduits. Delicate artwork and walls had fallen in, but Zack did not care about that. He relished the idea that the Minbari could be defeated, and defeated by something so simple as an industrial machine.

One of his officers turned towards him, calm and eager for some action.

"Sir, it looks cl..." His words cut off as a Minbari soldier appeared around a corner, firing a blast from his weapon.

In response, a hail of pulse blasts roared down the corridor as Zack's teams tried to defend themselves. With hissing weapons finally free to fire, it was every man for himself. After a short moment of frantic activity, the area was clear.

"Everyone stay in formation and don't get distracted," Zack shouted as they progressed further into the ship.

More teams scrambled through the airlock and spilled into the corridors, adding to the group of humans already inside the vessel. Zack quickly gave orders, reorganizing his team to cover more ground. *So far, everything seems to be going according to plan.*

Suddenly Minbari blasts erupted from a pool of darkness down one of the long corridors. Zack's pumped up team ran forward, ducking and dodging the blasts and finally firing their weapons at any Minbari that appeared. Other teams hid behind fallen bulkheads and fired their rounds. Zack felt a satisfying rush of emotions as he fired his pulse blaster at a rushing Minbari, sending him headfirst into the hard ground. One blast blew another into the next room. *This was simple, payback's a bitch.*

Zack's team continued to fire, moving with fluid grace through the passageways and delivering lethal blows to the enemy. But suddenly, as he turned a

corner, Zack came face to face with an unarmed Minbari. He placed his weapon aside because Zack fancied a good old-fashioned fight.

The Minbari, all in black, growled. His boot tapped the steel floor before he leaped at Zack, catching him by surprise.

The attacking Minbari forced Zack into the wall and the instant impact caused a striking pain up his spine. Zack made fists with his hands and pounded the Minbari without thinking. The weapons fire that streaked past two men diminished as they fought with great strength. Attacking blows were beaten back as each man gave as much as they could. Despite the Minbari's greater strength, Zack could feel that he was holding his own, even winning. The rest of his team carried on. Some watched with cheers and mutters while others held weapons trained on the Minbari, ready if anything went wrong. Zack knew that once he was finished, this Minbari would die anyway.

Zack lunged forward striking a blow, then drew back, keeping his distance like a boxer in an arena, although he'd never used these skills in the past. The Minbari shuffled his feet and staggered around. Both men had given decisive blows and they had begun to bleed from the wounds. Soon both men began pouring sweat and clothing began to show signs of damage.

More blasts from the background made stray rounds of plasma shoot over the heads of the combatants. Zack felt the incandescent bolt near his ear. *That was close, now time to finish this.*

Both fighters stepped back, panting and dripping. Then they lunged forward for the final blow. By some miracle, the initial blow by the Minbari missed Zack's chest, and he tripped. Zack took the opportunity to add some force to his already-falling body and shoved him toward a chunk of jagged metal shrapnel sticking out of the floor. The Minbari fell on it, skewering himself through the chest.

The Minbari gasped, struggling to free himself. Zack decided to end the battle. Grinning, he stepped on his back, pushing the doomed Minbari closer to the rest of the razor sharp spikes. After a short resistance, and then soft crunches, the Minbari stopped moving and was dead.

Some of the men clapped their hands and whistled, but Zack directed them to stop. "Enough. Get on with the search."

The crew rushed through the passageways killing anything they saw fit. His team barged around the corner with Zack leading the way. He saw a group of Minbari huddling in the corner, and then something caught his eye.

*Holy shit! Female Minbari.*

His men raised their weapons preparing to take the shot, but Zack shouted orders. "*Stop.* Do not hurt these; take them back to the transports. We need to take some back...alive."

He walked closer to the two female Minbari. He'd never seen a female before and this was a treat. His men tied their hands together and stood them up. Zack gave them a perverted look. *Yes, these are my new little playmates.*

He wrinkled his nose at the nearest female. "What's your name?"

She did not answer.

"Tell me, Minbari, or I will have it forced out of you." Zack wedged his weapon under her chin.

She still did not answer.

Zack eyed the young Minbari and then focused his gaze on the furthest one. She was cuter, yes, far more. He strolled over to her and placed his face just inches, making sure that his nostrils flared; he wanted to be intimidating.

"Leave her alone!" the other Minbari said.

Zack snapped around, staring back at the first Minbari. But suddenly, one he was nearest to shouted, "*No, Delenn!*"

*Got it. A name!* Zack sneered at Delenn. "So, your name is Delenn?"

She remained quiet, only an eerie stare heightened Zack's erotic mood for the Minbari females.

Zack approached Delenn, deliberately hovering around her, taking in her scent. He finally spoke. "What's your friend's name?" He waited for an answer, but she never gave one. Zack continued. "I suppose it doesn't matter. I will call her *Blossom.*"

Zack turned to his team. "Take these back to the transport and be careful, especially with 'Blossom'. I'm going to have fun with her later."

His team dragged the small group of captive Minbari away and Zack continued down the passageway, firing his weapon at anything that moved.

## Chapter 22

(John Sheridan)

The jump-point dominated space and the swirling portal provided the means for the two remaining vessels to escape. But Sheridan knew the Minbari would not give up that easily. Although it was mortally wounded and spewing out liquid like a wounded predator, he knew it still possessed the firepower to cause severe damage.

"How long until we jump into hyperspace?" John sat on the edge of his seat as he watched the enemy vessel on the view screen creep nearer to his ship.

"Just a few seconds. But sir, it'll be no good." The ensign turned and looked at him. "They can still follow us in with their own jump engines."

"We just have to pray that Anderson took out their jump engines when he sacrificed his life." Sheridan's snappish tone surprised the young officer, before he returned to his displays.

As his vessel was pulled into hyperspace, Sheridan fought back the minor gravity pull and watched Minbari cruiser vanish behind the closing epicenter of the jump point. For the moment, Sheridan knew that they would have some time alone.

Unfortunately that peace was short lived when one familiar wide-eyed mayor strolled onto the command deck, demanding attention. Sheridan spun on his chair and a thought crossed his mind. *That annoying little shit should be asleep. Why is he awake?*

"Ah Sheridan." He raised a plump hand and his jewelry glinted under the artificial lighting. "Can you explain to me why your crew is persistent in forcing me to sleep?"

Sheridan swiveled back to the view screen and refused to answer. In fact he whooshed out a deep breath and tried to think pleasant thoughts. Perhaps, if he'd explained the situation, the overweight mayor might understand.

"This vessel is only designed to hold a limited amount of crew during operational space flight. You might not have noticed," Sheridan replied, making sure sarcasm was clearly noticeable. "There're far too many people on this ship for the life support systems to handle."

He stood up and casually walked over to the plump mayor. "Now, I'm going to ask you as a gentleman - *get the hell off my command deck.*"

The man jumped back, clearly unprepared for the last outburst.

Sheridan thought he had the upper hand and was prepared to allow the grin show on his face, but the pudgy mayor stepped forward and exercised his authority. "Now you listen to me. I'm the mayor of a once-powerful colony and have the ear of the President of the human race. If you treat me with ill will, I'll make sure..."

Sheridan had enough and to demonstrate, he stunned the man with his taser. He fell to the ground like a tub of jelly, crapping everywhere.

The smell of rotten eggs was enough to prompt the commander to shove him on ice for the rest of the journey.

"What a disgusting individual. He can't even handle being stunned." Sheridan covered his nose to stifle the smell. "*Security*, take this...person to the cryogenic decks and put him on ice before he stinks up the ship."

As the attention of the entire crew was focused on Sheridan and his heroics, he returned to his post and prompted everyone to return to their duty. That Minbari cruiser was still out there.

"Are you still detecting that Minbari cruiser?"

"There's no way to tell, sir. A jump point did form behind us, but the Minbari must have activated their stealth technology."

"That doesn't make any sense...why didn't they activate it on the planet? I know the main cannons on these ships are new and not installed properly. But still, to leave themselves wide open like that doesn't make any sense."

The young officer seemed to have a suggestion. He looked into Sheridan's eyes and explained. "I believe the Minbari were testing us. They've never seen these types of ships before and it would make sense for them to remain visible so they can see what we have to offer."

Sheridan inclined his head. "Those bastards. They killed Anderson. And for what? A test? We need to get the primary weapons up and running. Perhaps the two of us can destroy that cruiser."

The weapons officer exhaled sharply and interjected. "I'm sorry sir, the main weapons are not finished yet. They still need the conductor coils from the Casabianca city."

Sheridan glanced down towards the floor and only looked back up when a stir ruffled the air. He saw the Minbari vessel and shot out of his chair, eyes-blazing. "Is that thing in firing range?"

The pause was too long. Sheridan looked towards the young ensign who was rooted to his console in fear. He could understand the young man's fear and his reason for clutching the armrest of his chair with white knuckles. But he needed answers now. Sheridan had to stop the spread of fear before it infected everyone. He raised his voice, impatient. "*Ensign!* Snap out of it. Is that thing in firing range?"

"N-No sir. But it will be soon."

Sheridan was capped for ideas. No matter what he did, that vessel was always on their tail. Something had to be done, but what? He roamed around the deck like a caged and frantic tiger. Then a voice boomed over the active COM system.

"Vanguard Alex Drake to Sheridan. We've detected a Minbari war cruiser on your current trajectory and have come to offer our assistance."

The voice was like a message from God. The spiritual message traveled around the deck from one person to the next, delivering calm and serenity to the crew. Everyone knew that a Vanguard was right outside, and his years of experience with the Minbari would steer them away from danger. Like a lighthouse on a stormy day, steering an old ship away from the dark and barren cliffs.

"We..." Sheridan was cut off by the vanguard; Alex was not finished with his initial speech.

"Both vessels, you'll need to transfer your navigation and engine controls to my ship. I've detected a hyperspace eddy stream fifty degrees off your port bow, but be prepared for sudden acceleration."

Yep, Sheridan knew it; the local eddy stream of current was something they'd detected when they approached the system several days ago and they'd made every effort to stay away from it. How typical that the very thing that could send them into the depths of oblivion could save their lives.

Sheridan sat in his command chair and gave the all clear, but his crew still hung on to tender strings, this was the moment anything could go wrong.

He watched the small vanguard vessel swoop down and take the lead like a small hornet. Sheridan only seen this type of maneuver once, the time his own ships fled the Minbari advance from a small colony they failed to save.

"Is everything set up as that Vanguard requests?" Sheridan felt the high temperature in the room and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Affirmative sir, all navigation and engine controls have been linked."

Sheridan felt like he was alone on the command deck despite the obvious presence of his crew. The eerie silence was like a prelude to a horror vid scene, while everyone anxiously waited to be saved.

Watching from his throne-like chair, Sheridan watched the Vanguard vessel fire a tow cable that instantly attached itself to his ship. Then, like a kite tied to a piece of string in a storm, the vanguard vessel swerved, fought the hyperspace eddies and finally shot forward into the storm cloud.

Gravity shifted as the two remaining omega class vessels banked to the left and following the vanguard slowly into the eddy cloud.

"All right crews, buckle up, we are going into the Tilismer Eddy Stream. It's going to be a rough ride." Alex failed to give enough notice as the two Omega-class ships were hurled through the storm at incredible velocity.

Lights dimmed and the deck shook violently, causing banks of computer systems to short out. Crewmembers gripped onto their stations for dear life as the gravity went mad.

Through it all, Sheridan kept his eye on the young officer, who was rooted to his station in terror. The young man remained motionless, fighting for every breath. Sheridan could relate to his horror, because he too had faced that same experience long, long ago, before the Battle Of The Line. But he had mustered up his fear and used it against the Minbari. The very moment he had used a nuke and saved the remaining lives of his crew.

Sheridan struggled out of his chair and staggered over and placed a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder. The ensign flinched at the touch and Sheridan saw the look of surrender in his eyes.

"Don't worry. Let the Vanguards do their job. Trust me."

"Y-Y-Yes sir," he said feverishly.

Sheridan knew this crewman would snap at any moment. He recognized the signs: the sweat, the clutching of his chair and the sheer terror in his eyes. But if he could lay down the foundations of authority in this young man, perhaps he could stand an equal chance at controlling his fear. This was the perfect opportunity.

The cracked and distorted Vanguard's voice came over the COM unit. 'Stand by, crews, we are about to exit the eddy stream.'

He quickly maneuvered back to his chair and issued orders for his crew to prepare. Sheridan knew the extreme forces that would be pulling at the vanguard

vessel once they left the eddy stream, so he prepared a grappling team to retract the steel cable that was attached to the Vanguard's vessel.

"The tidal shears will be upon us the moment we exit. My small vessel doesn't have the mass to make it safely through. I'm going to release another cable. I need teams to tie me up."

"No problem." Sheridan knew the risks the Vanguard would be taking. He clenched the armrest tight. He didn't want to be the commander that lost a Vanguard; that would be catastrophic.

He gave clear and precise orders, but he didn't envy Alex and his companion who would be dangling on a string at the edge of a storm.

He watched the launch bays open through the cameras and a small wave of anticipation stirred the air. The steel cable was released from the Vanguard vessel and inch-by-inch the lifeline drifted closer to the lead destroyer.

Only mere minutes remained before everybody was tossed out into the depths of hyperspace. Sheridan knew that if he lost the Vanguard they would be stranded because the currents could drag vessel light-years inside hyperspace itself.

The cable wobbled, whipped, curled and flapped, making the job of securing it that much difficult. Sheridan watched even more closely as the cable edged itself through the front launch bays and flapped vigorously around the bay. Men tumbled and Star Furies were whipped as everybody tried to anchor down the cable.

What felt like hours for Sheridan only took minutes to complete. They finally managed to secure the vanguard ship and the small group of vessels emerged from the eddy stream.

A sudden jolt rattled the inhabitants of both vessels, but Sheridan still kept an eye on the young ensign at his station. Normally he would not concentrate so hard on such matters, but this individual reminded him so much of how he had once acted all those years ago. But the situation demanded his attention.

"Any sign of that Minbari cruiser?" Sheridan expected the silence to hang for a bit, but to his surprise, the ensign chirped up.

"No sir! I'm not picking up any hyperspace bacons, that cruiser can't possibly follow us."

The fact that they had escaped the Minbari vessel brought a wave of relief to the crew. Cheers rang throughout the bridge as people hugged each other and blessed their lucky stars.

Sheridan sighed in relief, even though everyone was lost in hyperspace. But they had a Vanguard. He controlled the celebration of his crew and waited in silence for the communication. A communication that would, no doubt lead them home.

The steel cable was unhooked from the *Agamemnon* and reeled back into the vanguard ship. At last, Sheridan heard the call he wanted.

"Sheridan, looks like we did it again. They told me that this was a three star danger rating, but it should have been a five star. I'll be updating their records once I get back." Alex's cheerful voice relaxed the crew and offered Sheridan room to breathe.

"Can you get us back to Casabianca?" Sheridan asked.

"We're currently making the calculations to determine where we are. That eddy stream was stronger than I thought." He paused, made a pleased noise then continued. "Yup, not as bad as I thought. It will take several hours to get there, so tie your systems into my van ship and we'll be underway."

Sheridan leaned back in his chair. Finally he could see Anna again and this annoying mission would be over.

# Chapter 23

(Jeffrey Sinclair)

**I**t had only been hours since the entire city had fallen into a state of panic, caused by the accident that had propelled it into the depths of hyperspace. But somehow, the Vanguard Marcus Cole had managed to discover the metropolis and arrive safely onboard.

Equipped with his Vanguard training and ability to issue decisive orders, he was able to activate the colossal engines that rested on the outer edges of the city and steer it back into the center of the beacon net.

Sinclair looked out through the building's windows at the cheering crowds below, waiting for a chance to see their savior. Even the young ladies clamored at the front of the crowd to offer their support for the new Vanguard. Sinclair was more than certain that Marcus would enjoy his time here. After all, what young female could resist the charms of this individual? Marcus could have them, for all Sinclair cared. He was glad to have a Vanguard around. After the last one had been captured by the damn Minbari, it had taken several months for them to send a new one. He preferred not to lose this one.

"Sinclair, It looks like everything's complete and we are slowly drifting back into the center of the beacon net." Marcus strolled over with his hands clasped behind his back; he appeared cheerful, as always. So far Sinclair had not seen him angry or upset. *Must be a very content man.*

"Fine, Fine," Sinclair responded.

"Tell me, Sinclair." Marcus appeared excited about something. "I've been receiving rather colorful remarks from someone called Susan Ivanova. She's called me so many names I've never heard of before that I don't understand how a woman like that could command her own ship."

"Ahh, Susan Ivanova. I've done some business with her in the past. Quite a good person, once you get past her outer shell."

"I see. Well, I'll make a note to see her once we arrive at the anchor point." Marcus studied his data tablet and then continued, "We should be there within a few hours."

Sinclair turned towards the windows and looked out over the skyline. The swirling clouds of hyperspace were filtered through the shield and transformed into a tranquility of whites and blues that pleased the eye. The exposure to the constant redness of hyperspace would drive anyone insane and the ability to filter colors using the shield-light frequency was ingenious.

But the day had dragged on for a long time and his shift was almost over. Sinclair would often take his long walk in the local park when the city's nighttime cycle began to kick in. But Marcus was reluctant to take the credit for the city's rescue and the last thing Sinclair wanted was to confront the hordes of people that would follow him everywhere.

"Why don't you want the credit, Marcus? Everyone would love to see the Vanguard that saved them." Sinclair allowed a smile to tug on the corners of his cheeks. "There're young ladies that would be willing to show their thanks in more ways than one."

Marcus responded with a dull smile and slowly sank into the darkness that lingered in the corner.

"I'm not one of those people that seek out fame and fortune, Sinclair. I just want to help the human race in any way that I can and perhaps find my missing family lost somewhere in hyperspace."

"Your family?" asked Sinclair.

"That's correct. My parents to be precise. They were trying to escape a Minbari pursuit when they wandered off the hyperspace beacon. The last thing I was told was that their small ship was never to be seen again."

Marcus walked over to the nearest chair and sat down. He placed the data pad onto the desk and went into more detail. "Hyperspace can engulf any ship it wants to, like being in the depths of hell. Eddy streams and storms can toss a vessel in so many directions that the onboard computer can't keep track of the standard beacons. If that wasn't enough to frighten you, then imagine being in hyperspace with just an EV suit."

As if he was telling a ghost story at a campfire, Sinclair saw some of the workers pause what they were doing and listen with burning ears.

"Wearing an EV suit can be one of the most rewarding or horrifying experience anyone can have. In hyperspace, the burning clouds of hell surround you. When they look down, there is no ground, it's just clouds that churn and stir below your feet. It's endless. It's the same in all directions. But the most chilling experience is...falling."

Sinclair tugged on his collar; the experience was very real for him. Memories of the arid landscape that was hyperspace flooded back, the moment his Star Fury had become stranded from the rest of the fleet that escaped Earth over ten years ago. Thankfully a lone trading vessel had picked up his distress calls, but the haunting memories of hyperspace still lingered in the deepest recesses of his mind.

"Every now and then, in the hyperspace eddy cluster, I can detect the faint echoes of a distress signal. I am always hopeful that it's my family's vessel, but I've never been able to venture close. Hyperspace contains countless souls and ships that drift for infinity and..."

Caught up in Marcus's idle ramblings, one of the workers accidentally knocked over his coffee into the console.

Suddenly, as if a switch had been flicked, the outside light began to fade away and Sinclair began to hear the hissing of rain on the windowpanes. He turned and the water droplets obscured his panoramic view of the city.

Marcus stood up and walked over to the windows, "It's a bit odd to activate the city's rain cycle now. Are you trying to piss off the cheering crowd below, old chap?"

Sinclair thought for a moment, then strolled over to the window. Perhaps the Vanguard was right in his assumption; the accidental rain would make them go home.

Then he remembered the worker who spilled his drink over his console.

"Your ghost stories caused this poor guy to spill his drink all over his work station," he said, smiling and patting the worker on the shoulder to reassure him. "He probably accidentally started the rain cycle. It doesn't matter, the crowd should dissipate and go home." Sinclair looked out at the scampering people, listening to the incomprehensible hum of their voices far below him. The pavements turned brown and the foliage began to glitter under the light from the shield.

Within moments the rain came down hard, belting at the window, streaming off the roofs and pouring down drains. Streets were cleaned and the stale air that lingered over the city began to clear up. But that did not stop the normal operations of the city.

As the hours ticked past, the city slowly drifted back into place and the sudden rush of transports flooded the entrance gates to offload their goods and refuel for other missions. Some were just glad to be back at home, other were ecstatic that they weren't lost in hyperspace. But for Sinclair, the nighttime that rolled over the city was the moment he'd been waiting for.

Sinclair had no idea if it was really night or day, every city abided by their own daytime pattern. It was a normal twenty-four hour timescale, but each city set its own time zones. Most new cities would set their clocks to the day they were launched into hyperspace. Since the shield controlled the light from hyperspace, it was down to the city's commanding officer.

But this didn't matter to Sinclair. This was his moment, a moment he could relax and let the chaotic day pass. After all, the city had almost been lost today.

The rain washed all the impurities from the atmosphere, another successful operation of the aqua jets in the middle of the lake. The shield of the city no longer provided daylight, but instead allowed a dazzling display of blue curling clouds through the idle darkness. Sinclair strolled over to a bench that overlooked over the entire park, sat down and marveled at the entire view. The shrinking and expansion of the shields created high and low points in different sectors that allowed a cool breeze of air through the commander's hair. It reminded Sinclair of a fresh warm summer downpour on Earth.

The night arrived at its scheduled time. The park's main path snaked its way through the inky darkness, like a sacred river through the depths of an ancient forest. Flowers that blossomed in the daylight still offered their enchanting scent, which wafted on the wind around the spots of greenery and humid gardens lit up by lanterns and streetlights. It was a miracle of creation, a marvel Sinclair was proud of.

He sighed faintly and then was interrupted by a distant voice.

"Do you know that when you sigh, your happiness escapes with it?"

Sinclair turned towards the voice. The sentence in itself was confusing but he recognized who it was as he watched the figure come into focus.

"Sinclair, what a coincidence to see you again. I trust you managed to escape the lynch mob after the little mishap with the weather." Marcus strolled over to Sinclair's bench and stood under a spotlight that lit the area in a warm yellow glow.

"Marcus...I'm surprised to see you here. Is your apartment not to your satisfaction?" Sinclair could not understand why not. It was the best place in that particular building, which was reserved for high-ranking officials and Vanguards.

"No, everything's perfect."

"So, what do I owe the pleasure?" Stood Sinclair.

"Just out for a stroll, like you. I must say, this park looks impressive. I've never seen anything so peaceful, yet it holds an enchanting richness that I can't quite understand."

"That would be the scent from the plants. We had them imported from a distant world. They release a fragrance that relaxes the human mind. Very important in a time of war," Sinclair said.

Marcus looked towards the park, enjoying the fresh air. After a few minutes, he finally spoke. "There is one question that I would like to ask."

"Go on."

"That delightful character Susan has just landed her vessel in one of the loading bays and I overheard her saying that she's heading to the trading post. Could you direct me there?"

"Why?"

Sinclair didn't know what he was playing at, but from his initial interest it seemed he was interested in her. Why, the commander didn't know, but he felt Marcus would be getting himself into trouble.

"She looks like an interesting woman. I would like to meet her." Marcus smiled. "I've never seen anyone with such a serious face before. Perhaps I might be able to change her negative attitude."

"I'd stay away from her. She can be more trouble than she's worth. But I know you're going to ignore my warning anyway, so ask the computer. It will guide you to where you want to go."

Marcus moved closer to Sinclair and his playful persona disappeared. "Before I left the city's control center, I thought I saw an unknown vessel in hyperspace, approaching the city. It did look vaguely familiar, but it could be my fatigue playing around with my eyes." Marcus handed over a small device, which opened into a holographic data pad that displayed some sensor readouts and red hyperspace clouds. Nothing noticeable was seen, but Sinclair took the data pad anyway.

"If my suspicions are correct I have run into this race before. A race that called themselves Volvos."

"Volvo, sounds like a manufacturing company," Sinclair said.

"Well," Marcus replied, dismissing the joke, "Be careful. I heard many rumors about this race, but what confuses me is the Volvos don't normally visit other races. Why would they bother coming here?"

"It's probably nothing but a sensor echo. But I'll look over the reading later back at my apartment. It would be interesting to have first contact with a powerful race that could help up with the Minbari."

"Everybody has their own agenda Sinclair. Still, I best get going, I have a lot of work tomorrow."

Marcus slowly disappeared into the darkness, but Sinclair did not feel alone. He looked around the shadowy darkness for any sign of movement, but saw nothing. Then, after a few moments, his eyes adjusted to a figure in the shadows.

"Hello," he asked, "Can I help you?"

Nothing was said. The figure was large, too large to be a human. Then the haunting tale about the unknown ship flashed into his mind. Could this be an alien life form? *It's definitely not Minbari. And why did the alarms fail to go off?*

Sinclair stepped back as the figure moved forward. Its movements were not typical of someone walking, more like hovering or rolling. *A machine?* Sinclair shone the holographic data pad in its direction to light up the darkness and saw a cloaked shape that slithered into view. Then its one eyed head bobbed up and down as it approached Sinclair's bench.

The commander stood motionless, rooted to the spot in fear. He tried to step back, but his legs faltered for no reason. *Why can't I move?*

As a chill ascended his back, Sinclair heard an emotionless voice call his name.

*"Sinclair. You are the one. You must prepare."*

## Chapter 24

(Susan Ivanova)

**W**ith the initial help from the Vanguard and the simple route to the city of Tyrone, it should have been an easy journey. However, that was not the case.

Susan had been standing at her station for most of the damn day waiting for the city to arrive.

Initially she was given the coordinates by an overweight and overdressed trainee Vanguard, who was currently participating in a race to earn his stars. However, Susan was not impressed when she arrived at the coordinates only to discover a lump of metal commonly known as a beacon. Later in the day more transports arrived, only to be as equally shocked as she was. It quickly became apparent that something was terribly wrong.

Sure, Susan would have loved to spend all day chatting to the captains of the neighbouring ships, but her legs began to itch and she really wanted that skin cream. The Centauri cargo was worth more than a year's salvage and she wanted to hand it over to some dealers for cold hard credits. Tyrone was the closest and best city to hand her haul over to without too many questions. So where was that damn city?

Just as everyone assumed the worst, a small blip appeared on radar. Then the swirling clouds gradually gave way to the huge city as it slowly maneuvered itself back into position. Susan watched in amazement as the queue of ships scampered over each other in order to get out of the way. Every vessel had powered down their engines. Now having to cold-start them to get out of the city's way was no easy task. Hyperspace and conventional engines were always shut down to save fuel. Engine fuel was very expensive and only a few cities could produce the stuff. This was a disadvantage Susan knew all too well.

"Ma'am, Tyrone control is calling us," Roger said, bringing Susan back to reality.

Susan stared at the titanic city that appeared out of the mystic red clouds; she hesitated for a moment before responding. "About time they showed up. Put them through."

"This is Tyrone control to vessel one-one-seven-nine-five, you are clear for docking bay two." Susan scrunched her nose at the mechanical voice that identified her ship number and ordered her to a bay. "What's this, don't they have human control staff anymore?" She murmured.

As her vessel entered through the outer shield hatch and into the city that was lit up by lights in the sea of darkness, Susan yawned at her station and spotted Roger taking some sporting glances at her. She'd seen him do it from time to time, and this time she decided to play with him. "Excuse me, what are you looking at?"

Roger jumped at his station. "Kyahhhhh! Nothing, Nothing. Sorry Susan, I was distracted."

"Don't call me Susan. Who gave you the right to call me that? Do I *not* look like your captain?"

"Y-Y-Yes..."

"What is my name?"

"C-Captain."

"That's right, don't you forget it!" Now Susan was right next to Roger. She made sure that he could smell her perfume and maneuvered her slender body inside his personal space. It became obvious that the man was breaking under her playful advances. She decided to increase her cruelty. "Don't think you are off the hook that easily. I saw you looking at me. Why?"

"Ah, I just...just..." He stuttered and failed to answer. Susan was annoyed. *Why can't he just say that he was looking at my ass?* That would have been a flattering

comment. Then a call came over the communication system. "This is docking bay two. You're clear to land, please follow the docking beam."

*Saved by the bell*, Susan thought. Roger may have gotten away with it this time, but she'd be sure make an appointment with him later, to continue her little torture.

Susan gazed at the huge area of land just outside the city limits that housed a multitude of buildings: shipyards, warehouses, construction sites, offices and transportation networks zigzagging into the city. Numbers marked on spacious pads indicated each landing area that was connected to the loading warehouse. From there, goods would be shipped off to the highest bidder.

However any supplies that would benefit the city would be taken and paid by the city's resource department. She loathed that department because they often undercharged for her goods and it was barely enough for fuel. She had no choice but to operate on the black market as it would fetch a good price. The city's authorities didn't mind as long as they got some of the cut too. Even in this state of human civilization, they were still twisted and devious as always, but Susan enjoyed the challenge.

After the vessel landed in its designated spot, albeit slightly off centered, Susan emerged from her vessel with her trusty crew in tow. "Make sure everything is where it's supposed to be. I don't want my stuff going missing until I've talked to my contact."

Roger looked calm. "Yes, captain. It'll be here when you return."

Susan walked down the gangway and onto the hard outer floor. The rubble at her feet prickled through her shoes and she was glad to be back on solid ground. Still, this solid ground was part of a ship in its own right, a ship that passed itself as a city. For the first time in months, she felt the wind brush through her hair and smelled the familiar scent of industrial solvents, burned metal and fruit.

She paused. *Oranges?* The smell was almost as good as sex. She couldn't remember the last time she tasted oranges. The only time she'd seen one, let alone tasted one, was back on Earth before the Earth-Minbari War. Unfortunately, oranges failed to survive in space. Before long there were no seeds left and oranges became things of the past.

Susan walked up to a desk beside the two warehouses and saw the plump fruit just sitting there, waiting to be touched. The round oily skin, its small little dimples. Then Susan imagined the individual sections of orange that could be peeled away and then burst in the mouth, releasing a torrent of flavor. She almost wet herself at the mere thought and was transfixed by this small orange. She could not hold back the desire.

With slow and precise movements, like stalking her prey in space, she edged forward, picked up the fruit and held it in her hands. It felt better in her hands. It felt heavy and she gripped the fruit with all her will. She would never let it go.

Suddenly, a brawny man sprang out from around the corner and snatched the fruit from her. With one bite, the enormous man, all in spoiled clothing and greasy looks, devoured half the fruit. He finished the second half as quickly as he had the first.

Susan was enraged. "You animal, don't you know you can't snatch something from a woman's hand without asking!"

The man bellowed, "Lady! This is mine. Now buzz off and let me enjoy my food or I'll hang you in the rafters to dry."

"You dyke digging tosspot. Just who the hell do you think you are? Why, I should kill you on the spot..." Susan was livid. This filthy rag of a man had just

taken the most succulent piece of fruit she'd seen in a long time, and now this lowlife was talking to her like some trash. *No, not any more.*

She was about to strike the heavyweight giant across the face when someone barged around the corner, took her hand and tried to calm the situation. Susan needed a moment to recover from the sudden rescue, if she could call it that, and her eyes refocused on the longhaired individual.

"What do you think you're doing? I was about to kill this asshole," Susan exclaimed.

"I don't think that would be wise." Marcus gestured between Susan and the man, indicating the obvious size difference. It was simple mathematics. The man was a giant.

Susan lowered her hand and took the gesture as a warning, but she still snarled at the man who mumbled something about Vanguard's and slinked off into the darkness.

Now Susan was furious at her wasted effort. First she was about to let the grubby man have all her wrath and then this longhaired *wannabe prince* sprang around the corner and interrupted her. *No sense letting all that anger go to waste.* She turned on her would-be rescuer. "Hey, who the hell are you and what do you think you are doing? I had him right where I wanted him."

"I'm sorry, Susan, but I think you were out of your league on this one."

"I'm sorry, who the hell are you and how do you know my name?" Realizing that her hands were raised to strike him, she forced herself to relax and listened to his answer.

"My name is Marcus Cole. I'm the dear *sweetie* that introduced himself when you blacked out everybody else on the communications channel."

Susan's eye widened. "Oh really!" She slapped him across the face. "That's for the trouble you caused me and the sly insults you beamed across my bridge."

"Sly? What do you mean?" Marcus appeared uncomfortable and unsure of himself, but Susan was not going to bow down to his puppy dog eyes.

"The 'Oh, such a lovely voice you have there' and 'you look fabulous Susan.' Do you often try and chat up female commanders on their way to this city?"

Marcus scratched his head and avoided her eyes. "Well, I don't think I said it quite like that. I was being friendly." Marcus suddenly changed the subject in a smooth transition that impressed her. "And speaking of friendly, why don't I offer you a warm welcome to the city of Tyrone and a first class tour to the farm greenhouses on the outskirts of the city. There are hundreds of ripe and ready to pick oranges which I would be happy to purchase for you."

Marcus seemed arrogant, like a prince on horseback with a huge grin on his face. But Susan could not pass on the idea of...oranges... She had forgotten the taste. The tangy scent lingering in her nose was all she needed to convince her to accept the offer.

Marcus grinned like a boy and kindly escorted her away from the dingy loading area. An overhead crane drowned out his rambling and Susan could not hear anything. Once the huge crane passed, Marcus explained that he had just arrived on the city.

"Wait one minute. If you just arrived on this city, how the hell do you know the location of the oranges?" Susan was not going to fall into this trap; this longhaired weirdo was clearly up to something. What, was another question.

"I make it a habit to learn where all the essentials are and I ran into someone selling oranges." Marcus pulled an orange from his pocket and teased her. "He told me where I could find them."

Susan looked at the orange, eyes transfixed. Her mouth watered and she wanted it. She was just about to grab the fruit, but Marcus nudged it away, mischievously teasing her. Susan resented being controlled by a mere stranger. She gave him such a look of scorn he immediately handed the delicious fruit over.

Staring in the direction of her hands, She glanced at Marcus. He raised a brow in response. Susan was as ecstatic as a child finding a bag of candy, but she didn't want to share it with anyone. She glanced around to see if anyone was watching. But Susan didn't want to show her weakness for the delightful fruit and she certainly didn't want Marcus to think she owed him anything. He was still a man who meant nothing to her.

She dug her forefinger into the textured skin of the orange and heard the pleasant spray of encased juices that ran down her hand. Its cool trickle sent a tingle up her spine and she had the divine impulse to eat the fruit before she peeled it. Susan resisted the urge and removed the thick skin and tore the orange in half. The slices were plump with flesh and juice, and her mouth watered in anticipation.

The citrusy smell brought back memories of her last encounter with an orange and those specific memories made her feel delighted. She peeled the first slice away from the rest of the fruit. It was a slice of heaven, something she had forgotten during the years of hiding and running and then the eventual successes of her own ship and crew.

Susan couldn't restrain herself any longer, she slipped the first slice between her lips, enjoying the cool sensation against her tongue.

She didn't taste much at first, but when she bit down, she sputtered ever so slightly as the tangy flavor caught her off guard. She moaned in delight. She thought she remembered the taste, but re-experiencing it after so many years made her realize how awfully inadequate that particular memory was.

"Tasty?" asked Marcus, grinning from ear to ear.

Susan jumped having lost herself in this stupid piece of fruit. Heat rushed up her face as embarrassment filled her. "Why you..." She lifted her hand to slap him, but she caught herself. After all, he did help her out of a difficult situation and introduced her to the fruit gardens. She decided to let him off the hook, scrunched her nose at him and walked off, holding what was left of the fruit.

## Chapter 25

(Elvis Vaghoon)

**A** dawn of a new day shone its light into Elvis's office. But even the warmth of the sun did nothing to stir him from his status reports and profit margin readouts. Elvis had little or no time for pleasantries and often saw himself the king of his domain. And the current achievement against the Minbari war cruiser only made him bask in the success of his own divine spirit.

But a small issue slowly crept into his view. Elvis picked up his data pad that had the most recent up-to-date reports about the Minbari prisoner situation. According to the report, the initial count of fourteen prisoners was underestimated. As it stood, security teams had managed to swindle out a total of forty-four Minbari, mostly children hiding in the deepest recesses of the Minbari cruiser. Now they were

being held in cells and were currently using the resources of the facility. Something *he* was paying for.

This had to stop now. Elvis leaned over his desk and activated his intercom. "Security teams, I want all the Minbari prisoners transported to the loading bays immediately."

After he heard the confirmation, Elvis calmly cleaned his desk and made his way to the loading bay. Upon arrival, he looked over the helpless Minbari standing in a chaotic group, ready for his commands. Then one of them confronted him.

"This is an outrage. I demand that you release us at once." This female Minbari seemed more in her prime than the others, perhaps the oldest of the lot. Elvis wasn't sure but he assumed she was the leader.

"What's your name, Minbari?"

She said nothing. Her eyes frowned and her mouth set in anger. Elvis did not like the attitude of this female thing. *I'll enjoy watching her suffer.*

As he glanced around the bay and saw children and adult Minbari huddled together, Zack favored him with her name. "I believe she's called Delenn."

Delenn glared at Zack before focusing on Elvis. She said, "If you think by threatening us that we will divulge information, then you are sadly mistaken. You have only captured children and a few worker-caste Minbari. They hold no valuable information. I demand you release us at once."

Elvis considered the remark for a moment, trying to hide his impatience even as it began to boil into blunt rage. "Your ship attacked my installation. In my books you are all guilty of attacking us." He thought of a reason to justify his evil plan. "Besides, we are in a state of war. I don't have to do anything you say."

Delenn looked back, eyes blazing. She appeared the most intelligent of the bunch and so far the others hadn't said a word. But Elvis looked at the overhead digital clock and saw that the time was beginning to drag on. He wanted to wrap this up now.

He called to his security officer, "Zack, did you find out any relevant information from these people?"

"Sorry, sir, they were either tight-lipped or they didn't know anything."

"So you are saying they're useless to us."

"You could say that, sir." Zack replied, but Elvis could tell by the look in his eye that he had another agenda.

"Very well." Elvis gestured towards the access locks on the far side of the loading bay. They were used to allow small bots and vessels in and out of the facility without decompressing the entire bay. The fifteen air locks each had two gigantic doors with a depressurizing chamber in the middle that was controlled by their respected control stations in the main loading bay.

"I want all the Minbari into air lock one. Time to take out the trash," Elvis ordered, before turning away.

Then Zack interrupted his momentum. "Mr. Vaghoon. Sir," he paused, hiding his desire. "I would like to request that the female Minbari, Delenn, and her friend come with me to the holding cells. I believe they might hold more information and..."

Elvis glared at Zack. He knew that desiring look anywhere. "And what, Zack?"

Zack appeared anxious, but he spoke up anyway. "I would like to..."

Elvis spared him the embarrassment. He knew all too well the desire he had for the two female Minbari and he couldn't blame him. He felt a smile grow on his face and responded in kind. "You would like to interrogate them personally. Okay, I

see no harm in this; I leave those two in your care." He turned towards the stunned Minbari, "In-fact, I think I will oversee the execution of the rest...Keys..."

As Elvis moved, crews nudged the frightened Minbari into the gigantic airlock chamber. Children stared around in all directions, not knowing their fate and some of the senior Minbari watched with panicked eyes, belying their cold expressions.

Delenn rushed forward. "Please do not execute the women and children! You can do what you want with me, please. I'm begging you!"

Elvis turned and faced her. He felt nothing for the Minbari filth and began to regret his decision to hand her over to Zack. But she was dragged away before he could change his mind.

The Minbari were tossed into the grimy metallic room with flashing amber lights and reinforced steel doors that slowly dripped with condensation. The walls, floor, ceiling were made completely out of metal and some of the children fell into the tracks that lined the entire room. With a wave of his hand, crews activated the huge doors and they closed shut, the rumbling from the motors echoed painfully.

The deafening din caused the Minbari great pain and they squeezed together with hands on ears. As Elvis entered the small control room, he stared at the cowering prisoners through the dirty reinforced window.

Once the inner door slammed shut, the control panel went green. He pulled out a small metallic key and inserted it into the locking mechanism. The Minbari could do nothing but stare. Some cried in fear, as they knew what was coming, but Elvis felt no compassion for them. He knew he was doing everybody a favor.

With the first turn of the key, the entire chamber flashed red. A warning. *Such a drama for something so small*, he thought. Then someone interrupted his pleasure time.

"Sir, is this completely necessary? You're going to space women and children."

Elvis turned and discovered Garibaldi standing there with his weapon in his hand. Luckily he had it pointed to the floor and seemed in control of his emotions.

"You know what this race has done, Garibaldi. They wouldn't hesitate to do the same to us."

"I know, but we are more civilized than that. We should demonstrate our resolve and not act like cowards. You've made your point."

"You are overstepping your mark, Garibaldi. These people arrived at this facility with malicious intent. I will show no mercy."

He turned the key to its final locking point and the outer door slowly opened, releasing a burst of air that catapulted the inhabitants towards the outer door, smashing skulls and breaking bodies until the gap was large enough to allow the mutilated corpses into the vastness of space. He grinned. "Garbage disposal is my specialty."

Garibaldi looked appalled, but Elvis didn't care. Elvis left the launch bay twirling the key in his hand and whistling an old tune, ignoring the stunned looks and sick glares. After all, this was his place and if needed, he could sack everyone and get a new batch of crew. *There's always a long list of eager workers.*

With satisfaction feeding his stomach like a three-course meal, Elvis returned to his computer terminal and began the search through the female employee database. The fresh new recruits looked appealing and it didn't take long for him to find his new victim. He leaned forward on his desk and pressed his intercom.

# Chapter 26

(Shaal Mayan)

Tossed into a dark room with Delenn, Shaal Mayan vomited at the shocking treatment and execution of the children. Delenn moved slowly in an attempt to comfort her, but Shaal was unable to hold back the grief that exploded in the form of tears.

"The wretched humans. How could they do such a thing to defenseless women and children?"

"I know, Shaal. They have really fallen from grace. I think we've inadvertently changed this people into a race of monsters. What confuses me is why we've been spared." Delenn said as she glanced around the dark room.

Delenn had a very good point. *Why have the humans spared our lives?* Shaal thought. It didn't make any sense at all.

Suddenly the doors opened and a group of humans stormed in. Shaal struggled as the guards grabbed her and Delenn and tied them up to two slanted tables in the middle of the room. Once tied and unable to move, the group of humans left, except for one man.

"So, Delenn, we meet again." The human with a patch on his eye waltzed over to Delenn and glared at her. His eyes examined her body and he suddenly touched her hand.

Delenn jerked back and shouted obscene words in Minbari, which the human didn't understand. But then switched over to English.

"You humans are animals. How could you do such a thing?" Delenn shouted.

"I did nothing...yet. That was my boss, Elvis," the human said sneeringly. "You're very lucky. I saved you." The human acted very strange and Shaal was unfamiliar with his body language.

But she had to say something. "Why have you spared us? Why not let us die?"

Then something changed in this human. He moved away from Delenn and stared directly at her. Shaal felt his burning glare pierce into her soul, like an intruder. His face had some strange perverseness to it. Then suddenly it dawned on her. That glare, the way he leaned on the table. She couldn't be sure, but this human might rape her.

The seconds began to drag on and the human got closer. Then he touched her face. Not to hit or maim, just to touch, caress. He stroked her cheek, mouth and bald head; he seemed mesmerized by the entire feel of her skin. His touch dirtied her skin and she shivered with every intrusive touch.

"Please, what are you doing?" she begged.

Then the unthinkable happened, the most savage act that could fall on a Minbari female. The dirty human touched her breast. The sharp sensation cut through her mind like a knife. Only a male Minbari, with marriage vow, could perform such a ritual. Shaal was single, unmarried and completely powerless. She couldn't believe what fate had planned before her.

Then someone interrupted the horrid moment. "Zack. Can I see you for a moment?"

"Okay, Garibaldi." Zack said, taking a perverted inhalation of her aroma and then leaving the room, just outside of earshot.

Shaal couldn't make out the words, but it seemed like a heated discussion. Then Delenn murmured something. "I'm sorry, Shaal. I'm sorry for the trouble I caused."

"No Delenn. It was me that got you into this mess." Shaal fought to contain her emotions. "You had nothing to do with this. In Valen's name, how are we going to survive this? What does this human intend to do?"

"Don't worry Shaal. I'll accept this human's advances. I will protect you."

"Delenn, no, you mustn't."

"Shaal, you're a poet and inspiration of our people, this human cannot taint your soul."

"But..." She was cut short when the human, Zack returned. The door slammed shut and he stared at Shaal with such desire it made her shiver.

He strolled up to her and muttered something into her ear. "Now, where were we?" Suddenly Shaal felt his hand on her skirt. The very touch sent static up her spine and although it was protected by cloth, she could feel the sweat on his hands soak past the fabric and pollute her skin... Shaal yelped loud when his hand touched her leg. Direct contact. She panicked and struggled. But being tied to the table, she could not move. His hand wandered higher, and then it touched the most sacred spot on her body. Shaal lost all control and cried violently. Her mind crashed and she felt her blood build up around her cheeks.

"Umm, the Minbari don't wear any underwear!"

Shaal scarcely made out the sly smile on the human's face and there was only one thing left she could do. Shaal spat in the human's face. But the human didn't get angry. Didn't slap her. He did the most unexpected thing; he licked the fluid from his face.

"Ummm, petal, you taste sweet. I am going to savor your taste. I've always wondered what it would be like to *do* a Minbari. " His chilling voice drilled into her mind. This was going to be the most devastating moment of her life.

"Stop human!" Delenn shouted. Her slight pause indicated to Shaal that she began to regret the decision she had to take. "I will let you mate with me. Please leave my friend alone, she's no use to you."

Shaal looked up in horror as Delenn offered herself to this animal. He removed his hands and slowly walked over to Delenn. She panicked and appeared to regret her decision, but it was too late. The human leaned over Delenn and spoke, his deep voice echoed around the room.

"Delenn, I like your devotion to your friend. However, I'm not interested in you. But I feel something towards your friend, a strong desire that I can't resist. I'll let you live, so you can watch. I know she's your friend." Zack said gamely.

Shaal heart filled with dread. How did he know her name and connection with Delenn? What was he going to do? Then his eye turned towards her. His smile carved an evil crevice on his face. His eye-patch seemed more menacing as he leaned on her friend.

Somehow Shaal knew that she was in trouble, a feeling that swelled up deep within her soul. She turned away and waited as she heard the sound of footsteps approach. She winced, letting out a quiet moan, as the smell of the human grew ever so closer. It was stuffy and strange smell. She'd never been close to a human before and this sensation was just the beginning of her terror.

"Shaaaaaal!" he ejaculated. "I'll enjoy every moment of you, now, later, tomorrow and the day after. I'll relish every essence that you have to offer." Zack sniffed at her neck and geared up to unzip his trousers.

Shaal could feel his body pressed tight on hers, his hard chest, heavy breathing; even the frantic beating of his heart caused a stifling cloud of heat that shrouded them. She didn't want to get raped and she fought with all her might. She would not give in. But the more she moved, the more his body pressed upon her fragile frame.

She could not think anymore, the only thing she could do was struggle. But Shaal knew that every movement only invited and excited the human.

She flinched violently as he entered her.

## Chapter 27

(Vanguard, Alice Jones)

Alice looked into the gulf of hyperspace and clutched her Vanguard insignia. The swirling clouds always looked the same, even if they'd traveled quite a distance from the city they'd left. Nevertheless, Alice was sure they were close to their destination and she felt excited.

As she looked at her Vanguard insignia, circled by a green band, she knew that her task was almost complete. It was only a matter of returning all the messages from the facility to pass the test and be promoted to the next stage. But she was focused on the bonus prize. If she could be the first one back, she'd win a large amount of credits.

During the job selection process, Alice had used her quick mathematic skills to calculate the shortest travel time against all the others. Since it wasn't posted on the messages, she had to calculate that from the coordinates posted. She was sure it was part of the test, and she was sure her rival Allan would have selected the longest and easiest route.

However, as she daydreamed on what to spend the money on, Samuel said. "Alice, according to the computer readouts, we're at the jump point."

"At last! You know how long I've been staring at the same swirling clouds? It's making me dizzy."

"What happened to the, 'ho, I can do anything' attitude?"

Alice grew annoyed. She scrunched her nose and deliberately ignored her partner. Still, out of the corner of her eye, she caught his boyish smile.

*He does have his uses*, Alice thought, but before she could think about it further, she was pulled towards the matter at hand.

"Primary booster accelerator is online and functioning at eighty percent." said Samuel.

"Good, just remember that the pulse input must not reach the primary's booster function level..." She hesitated for a moment. "You know the mess it would cause if the calculations were off."

"Yes I know," replied Samuel, "What a mess that would be. Do you remember the last incident?"

Incident. Yes, Alice remembered the incident well. Back in the days, when the Vanguards were first starting out, Alice's father liked to tinker with new and exciting ships, making them move faster and harder to catch.

She had always assumed that her father was a thrill seeker and wanted to show off to all the other clan members. But on his maiden voyage with his first craft, the pulse charge was off and it superseded the booster function. His vessel exploded,

leaving her father floating in space with failing life support and a puncture in his suit.

Luckily he had been rescued, but he hadn't been lucky enough to escape a broken back that could have been repaired back on Earth. With Earth destroyed, however, there were no facilities to repair the damage. Alice had to spend the rest of her childhood taking care of her father. Her mother had died during a Minbari raid on Babylon Three and her father perished several years later due to health problems.

She'd joined the Vanguard group later that year to be with a family and was soon paired with Samuel. Together they slowly learned what it took to be Vanguards.

Their first introduction had been a shy and slow start. Alice was slowly recovering from her father's death, the man she'd grown to adore. Her father's disability had been something she fought long and hard to overcome and his death made it that much harder. She closed herself away from the rest of the universe until she met Samuel.

Samuel was a fun and outgoing person with all the energy bubbling to the surface. His humorous side was something Alice was not in the mood for and at first, she often dismissed his kind words and help.

As the training progressed, his constant cheery attitude began to grow on her, although there were still a few times when she wanted to throttle the guy. However, she was scared to develop a bond with anyone, because of the ordeal she had suffered through with her father.

Once she was promoted from beginner to fledgling, things really took off.

She hadn't known why a Vanguard needed another person, but as her training progressed, she'd learned the reason. *It was required that two Vanguards pilot a vessel in hyperspace, with the exception of a select few. Telepaths possessed certain skills that computers simply couldn't handle.*

She recalled her old teacher, Maverick. He was a strong-minded individual who would drill the importance of teamwork into his students. His motto 'never fly alone' was something he'd learned from past experience. He'd never explained what that past was, but Alice had assumed that it had something to do with a previous solo flight.

Most of his lessons had focused on flying the van-ships and controlling the onboard systems.

The most important onboard device was the Vanguard module. The small black cubicle device had a huge storage capacity and was used to store the locations and grid patterns of every city, eddy stream and dangerous location. There was a complicated method to removing the Module, something only a Vanguard knew. Simply removing them from the reader would destroy the device completely, a lesson Alice knew all too well. To her embarrassment, she burned fifteen modules before learning the routine.

Next had come the tedious task of learning the hyperspace storms and eddy currents. The paperwork and books she had to learn turned her desk into a landfill and she still forgot chunks of it. But her module and help from her companion saw her through the basic tests to where she stood today.

Although she was close to Samuel, she never considered him romantically. First he wasn't her type, and she never bothered herself with such nonsense. It would only complicate things and Alice liked to keep herself to herself.

That didn't mean no one was interested in her. She'd had her fair share of romantic requests and confessions from many young lads who would hide in the

shadows, waiting for their moment. But to all of them, she'd offered a shy smile and made her excuses.

But times had moved on and the final stage of her training came. This was her moment of truth; a way to finally validate her life and do something that would make her father proud. She knew that her mother and father were watching her.

A voice nudged her out of her thoughts. "Alice, are you okay?"

She glanced at her controls and replied, as if she'd just woken from a deep sleep. "Yes I'm okay, just thinking about how I got here."

Samuel shuffled around in his cockpit and smiled. "It was hard times, yes?"

Alice shrugged the comment off and then got down to business. "I'm deploying the jumping node. Are all the systems ready?"

"All systems ready Alice. We can jump."

"Okay, let's see what this complex has to offer."

## Chapter 28

(Talía Winters)

Talía stood in front of the window and looked at the awe-inspiring view of the entire complex. A view she'd seen many times in the past. A view that incited mixed emotions.

She still felt that man's touch, no matter how hard she tried to wash it off. But at least she was alone, for now.

Still, Talía could not hold back the hate that boiled inside her. She wanted revenge and began to devise a plan to stop Elvis in his tracks. She'd used her contacts and gained access to the security footage of the entire facility. With a little help from Garibaldi, they'd managed to isolate some key footage.

Talía slowly weeded out details, satisfied at knowing she was doing something about the situation. Even the murdered Minbari could be used as evidence, although she doubted the authorities back at Casabianca would care about them.

However, as she activated the video crystals that recorded footage in Elvis's office, she managed to spot other victims of his cruel game. But before she had the chance to do anything about it, Garibaldi came back and seemed preoccupied.

"Michael, what's wrong?" Talía asked as she watch him prowl around the room.

"It's Zack. He's taken two Minbari females prisoner; God knows what he's doing to them."

Talía felt confused. Why would Garibaldi worry about such matters? They were only Minbari.

"I'm telling you, that man's losing it. His problem is making things worse. Ever since I saved his life in the Mars ambush, things have gotten worse for him. I wonder when he'll stop." Garibaldi trudged over to the alcohol cabinet and poured himself a glass of vodka.

"Michael. I don't know Zack very well, but everybody has their problems. I'm just glad I have you to talk to. I don't know what I would do without you."

As Garibaldi turned towards her, Talía felt her pulse rush and her body tingle with anticipation. He approached very close and Talía never felt so safe.

"Talía, you can talk to me about anything. I wish you had come and talked to me sooner. I could have done something about that bastard."

"I know. I've been so foolish."

"Foolish? No, you're just an innocent victim. Someone I would happily save." Garibaldi paused for a moment. "One who deserves a date? What do you think?"

"Are you taking advantage of an innocent girl in her time of need?"

"You know me," Garibaldi snickered, hiding his sideward grin with the glass of vodka, "I'm a sucker for damsels in distress...so how about it?"

Talia deliberately held back her answer for a few moments, piling on some suspense for Garibaldi. Then she finally revealed her answer. "I would be glad to."

It may have been a basic date for the couple, but Talia felt safe and calm. She'd almost forgotten the horrid events that happened a few days ago and she decided to move her plan of revenge forward. After all, nothing would happen if nothing was done.

She finally brought up the courage to ask for help, and that was exactly the kind of thing Garibaldi was looking for, a chance to help Talia. He sat at the desk and reviewed the latest surveillance footage that was recorded from the secret camera hidden in Elvis' office.

He remembered the time when it was installed many years ago to investigate theft from the office. Before Elvis took over Hank's position at the facility. Garibaldi could still remember the chubby commander who always wore suits and appeared arrogant. But contrary to his appearance, Hank always saw the best in people and looked at his employees with respect. Until he was moved and replaced.

As Garibaldi fast-forwarded the footage, with Talia as his side, he finally came to the moment in question. As expected from the facility's commander, he was up to his disgraceful acts of perverted behavior and Talia mentally blocked the faint cries that came from the monitor.

Garibaldi called to her. "Looks like we've got more evidence. I'll add this to the data crystal and we should have everything we need."

Talia was glad of the news. Finally, hours of painful searching through the recorded footage of her ordeal could now be used as evidence against Elvis. But the final challenging problem was, how to get the information to them without the base's commander knowing about it?

Then she heard the hopeful tone of Garibaldi's call.

"Talia. It looks like we have two Vanguard's. Elvis has just welcomed them."

"Vanguard's? They rarely stay long enough to do anything," said Talia. She knew the Vanguard's only arrived to help guide transports and ships and once they'd arrived out of hyperspace. But once their job was done the Vanguard's vanished back as fast as they came. Talia knew she had a limited time and pondered over how to get the information over to the capital city. But this news was a welcome break. They had to smuggle the data crystals to them and impose upon them the importance of going straight to the Casabianca city.

"I'll keep tabs on them, but I think we should get Zack involved. His team knows this facility well and having his help would make this easier."

"Okay, what do you want me to do?" Talia felt like a third wheel. She was letting Garibaldi do all the grunt work and now three more people would have to be used. She wasn't too worried about the Vanguard's. Even the facilities commander wouldn't dare do anything to harm them, but Zack was expendable. They would have to tread carefully.

She walked over to the center table and picked up a warm mug of chocolate. It didn't taste like the real thing, but nothing tasted the same anymore. But she saw Garibaldi working hard in the dark background, and he was obvious to read. He had some romantic interest in her; the body language gave it away.

"You better pack your bags," said Garibaldi.

Talia was shocked. "Pack? Why?"

Garibaldi replied, "When the Minbari cruiser attacked, Elvis thought it was a good idea to move all the staff to the cities and have the facility rigged for detonation. He also instructed the builders to install the jump engines right away."

This was news and she guessed that Garibaldi got wind of this before Elvis had the time to announce it. Perhaps she could use this to her own advantage.

She got up and strolled over to the computer terminal Garibaldi was seated next to.

"Do you think we can use the move as a distraction while we pass the data crystals over to the Vanguard's?"

Garibaldi took a moment to process the idea, then stretched his back and said in a hopeful tone, "It looks like a good idea. When Elvis makes the announcement I'm sure even *he* would not discover our plan."

"I hope not. I don't want to get caught. Do you think honestly think Zack will help?"

Garibaldi got up from the table and looked directly at Talia, his voice almost boomed. "Of course he will. All the help he asked me for in the past has mounted up. Time for him to repay some of the debt." He offered her a sporting glance before finishing. "Besides, his new playmates will require some special treatment to keep them away from Elvis."

Talia wasn't sure what playmates he was talking about, but as Garibaldi left her apartment with a promise to see her again, Talia was all alone. But she wasn't scared anymore. She knew Elvis was finished with her and now she planned to expose the truth about him. She was angry, very angry.

## Chapter 29

(The President)

The walk to her office took half an hour through the lush green parks and the spectacular views the city had to offer. Her long-time 'Harry' struggled to keep pace as he trotted behind. The President knew she was in better shape than rest of her staff. While the others took shuttle cars and transports, she used her legs. She liked it that way. It showed her confidence and her ability to steer the human race in any direction she saw fit.

Once she crossed the calm street, she inquired about her day's events. "I want to run a test of the new cyborg warriors." The President explained. "Select a Minbari colony and set one of those things loose on it."

"But Madam President," Harry explained, exhausted. "Their operating systems haven't been updated. They'll kill everything!"

"Good, then it should be an excellent test. I believe Sheridan has arrived in the city?"

The young assistant pulled out a device the size of a cigarette lighter and it opened into a holographic data pad. Once he discovered that it was upside down, he turned it around and began searching the database.

The President grew impatient and craned her neck over the wall to see if anyone was eavesdropping. So far nobody was around and the bright sky warmed the chilly air. She was given a reason for the chilly air; the shield in the farming dome that was linked to the main city had lost its insulation barrier for a few hours, so all

the heat had seeped out into hyperspace. The change in temperature caused the air to swirl, which was uncomfortable for the President, but she found it interesting.

"I found him Madam President," Harry said cheerfully. "He logged himself in two hours ago and his vessel is currently being repaired in port seventy-seven. It should take a few days until he is ready to go back out."

"Good," the President replied, walking into the central building and out of the chilly air. "I think he'll make an interesting candidate for this mission."

Once the President was settled inside her office, the assistant continued to lay out her daily routines. Something she felt tired of, but it was necessary. Speeches were an evil task she had to perform day in and day out, but her people needed a firm figure to guide them through the hard times. She knew everything relied on her and she made sure to live up to expectations.

Several hours later, the big meeting was on. Sheridan was called away from his wife and the President assumed that he would be happy to be given a command of his own to strike back against the Minbari. However, when he walked into the office, she was not impressed with the manner in which he conducted himself.

"Madam President, why have you taken me away from my wife? Don't you know I have two weeks of leave due me?" He spoke in a scolding tone with sarcasm layered over it.

She shuffled a few items on the desk and sat down, not making eye contact. "Yes I'm aware of your situation. But I have a mission for you, something you might be interested in."

"The only thing I am interested in is being at home with my wife. Not playing some *catch me up* with official bureaucrats."

The President raised her head and looked directly at Sheridan. She did not like his attitude at all. *Perhaps I chose the wrong person.*

Then to make matters worse, the commander continued to spit out his demands. She could do nothing but wait patiently as the sky vehicles whizzed passed her window and the air grew stale and hot.

"I'm not interested. I have two weeks of leave and I intend to take it. Then you can put me on whatever mission you want."

The President snapped. "Do I *need* to remind you Sheridan, that you work in the defense force at my convenience. It's not wise to refuse my orders!"

"You *need* not."

"Then why are you making snap judgments on something you don't even know? You might want to do this mission."

"I doubt it." Sheridan leaned back on the chair and appeared to think about her last comment. "So, what is this job?"

The President smiled. "You're going to take a lone ship to a Minbari colony and drop off a special package."

Sheridan raised his eyebrow and looked curiously at the President. "What kind of *special package*?"

The President hoped that Sheridan had enough hate to postpone his leave and accept this mission. She preferred not to threaten him. She finally spoke. "A soldier."

"A soldier?" he asked. "How is one man going to take out a whole Minbari colony? And what do you need me for?"

"The only thing I'm willing to tell you is that it's your job to record everything that happens down there." She stood up and walked towards the window. "The rest is on a need to know basis. It prevents the Minbari from finding out."

As always, Sheridan was fast to add his sarcastic comment into the mix; even before the President had the chance to turn away from the window and look at him, he began. "That figures."

Sheridan shuffled in his seat and stared back towards the President. "With all due respect, ma'am, I have to decline. I just got back from a difficult mission and it's been a long time since I've seen my wife Anna. It would be wrong for me to jump at the next job that wants my attention."

The President felt annoyed at this hard-nosed individual. He was not going to dictate his needs today. So she decided to lay down the rules to this meeting. She was the boss and he'd better get in line...

She walked over to her table, sat down and laid her hands on the desk and looked into his eyes. Her words came out firm and stern, like a headmaster in a meeting with disobedient student.

"This is not open for discussion. I'm putting you in command of the *Agamemnon* and you're going to that Minbari colony. You will record the results and return with the data." She stood, walked around the table and added. "If you don't, you can forget any promotion and I'll make sure your cozy home is revoked... This is no time for 'I want, I get tactics.' That's the attitude that started this war!"

Sheridan finally gave in. "Looks like I have no choice. Who's my second?"

The President wasn't sure on his name, so she quickly glanced at the holographic data pad. "You'll have Captain Jankowski serving under your command."

Sheridan jumped from his chair. "Him! That sniveling excuse of a man! He's the bastard who started this damn war in the first place. And didn't he kill himself at the beginning of the war?"

"That's on a need to know basis too."

The President felt the temperature rise in the room and continued as calm as she could. "I'm well aware of his past involvement, but we do not have anyone experienced to carry out the job." She crossed her arms and spoke with some compassion. "Everybody knows that he started this war and caused the destruction of Earth, but now he's determined to do something good. I'm sorry, Sheridan, but we just don't have the manpower to do this mission."

"Something good?" Sheridan snapped. "That son-of-a-bitch should be shot! Why is he even alive?"

The President grew tired. She had allowed the heated debate to carry on longer than it was necessary. Time to put a cap on things.

"That's enough Sheridan," she said in her own Earth shattering tone. "You *will* take the *Agamemnon* to the Minbari colony world. You *will* deploy the weapon. And you *will* record the results and return with the data."

"Do I make myself clear?"

Sheridan made a rude noise with his throat and replied with, "Yes, ma'am." The tone was as angrily as possible.

When the President was finally alone, she gracefully closed all the scattered holographic pads on her desk, strolled over to the alcohol cabinet and made herself a small *Jovian Sunspot* and rolled the tumbler in her hand. She was confident in her choice, although she imagined Sheridan killing his 'second in command' the first chance he got. *Serves the bastard right for starting the war anyway.* But she hoped they would get the mission done first.

It wasn't a perfect plan, but she waited with high hopes for the mission progress, due in a few weeks. The President sipped her drink, then turned back to

the rest of her work. Even with such an interesting mission, she still had a city to run, after all.

## Chapter 30

(John Sheridan)

It was a rare moment when Sheridan got annoyed, but the news from the meeting with the President left him in a foul mood. Not only did he have his long awaited get-away ruined by the President; he was now forced to baby-sit the man that started this nightmare.

But first things first, he had to face Anna. He prepared his lines for what he might have to say and it didn't sound good.

"Hi Anna...guess what, the President wants me to go on another mission and she requires us to postpone our holiday," he said to himself as sarcastically as possible. He felt more nervous as his mind began to falter under the constant worry. He would rather face five Minbari battle cruisers than spend a few small minutes explaining this fiasco with his darling Anna. Still, he continued on his way.

The daylight was bright and the processed rays of light warmed the back of his neck. The movement of air from one domed structure to the other created a warm breeze that massaged his hair gently. The processed air smelt better today because last night one of the farmers had decided to spray human waste over the acres of allocated farmland and the foul smell gradually drifted along with the light wind. Sheridan knew that that farmer would face heavy fines for his little mistake. But for today, it was better.

Now he had to travel home and clean up some mess of his own.

He lived in the twenty-second high rise that resided in the Parkland District, a beautiful area for living. It was also one of the places reserved for military and high-ranking officials.

Other areas were nice, but the Parkland District had more space and spectacular views. Sheridan preferred to live like everyone else, but his past record and ability to deal with the Minbari reserved his family the place. He knew there was always a catch and unfortunately the irritating President trapped him in that situation.

Sheridan entered his vehicle—which was parked on the other side of the park—and steered his baby into the local rush hour traffic. Intersection twenty-one was always daily congestion zone that he would love to see blown off the map. He couldn't understand why the designers of the city had created such a labyrinth of roads, but everybody had to live with it. At least the day was bright and he had time.

He rehearsed his speech several times to perfection, but in the end, all the rehearsing in the world could not match the ferocious power his wife possessed, once she was allowed to let loose.

"Anna, I'm sorry, the damn President asked me..." He corrected himself as a blue hover car pulled in front of him. "No...she did not *ask* me...the President demanded I reschedule my holiday by one month." Yep, Sheridan could imagine that going down well. She would reply with something in a deep tone that would make his skin cringe and heart pound. She would sound very patriotic.

The traffic slowly began to move and Sheridan sat back and relaxed as the automatic guidance system steered the vehicle through the city streets. With inches

to spare, the vehicle swerved, banked and tailgated through the lagging traffic for the best way home.

Once he arrived at the thirty-six-story high-rise, Sheridan took in a deep breath and walked in. He had rehearsed his speech to the best of his ability, but it was down to his beloved wife. But at the end of the day, neither of them had any choice.

The corridor to his apartment was painted white with a proliferation of light fixtures that hung from the ceiling like stalactites. Corners of the corridor had shelves that held potted plants. At the end of the corridor, Sheridan spotted the same inspection hatch open. The plasterboard was removed uncovering an eyesore of metal plates and cables that was left like that for weeks. He knew the infrastructure of this high-rise was made out of metal, but that engineer did not have to be so forgetful in his duties. He quickly replaced the cover and smiled at his own quick thinking.

But as he stared at the copper plaque that had the number twenty-five embossed on it, he soon realized that all the cleaning up in the world would not help his situation.

Sheridan put on a brave face and walked in. Initially he was welcomed by the standard view of the entrance, a creamy yellow hallway that opened up into a large living room with two bedroom doors either side. Huddled in the corner was a small kitchen and a long line of windows covered the back wall. They allowed a wash of light to brighten up the room.

He strolled in, tossed his military jacket on the sofa and inspected the two rooms. It was only after some careful looking that he noticed a note on his computerized desk. The letter read:

Gone out for a few hours, will be back later.

Love Anna

*So basic of her.* Sheridan knew that her adventurous quests to obtain funding to support her need to explore ancient cultures never seemed to dwindle.

Sheridan smiled, placed the letter back on the desk and strolled towards the sofa to watch a spot of television. He might as well enjoy the quietness before all hell broke loose.

## Chapter 31

(Kalain)

**K**alain watched the swirling clouds in hyperspace as they curled and flowed in all directions. He thought about the human vessel that had disappeared into the depths of hyperspace, never to be seen again.

He could not understand what the humans hoped to achieve by diving into something so deadly. He knew that entering an eddy stream would mean certain death.

But as he studied the footage for an hour, he noticed an object that resembled a flyer or a small one-man ship. Curious, he ordered the imaging computer to magnify the spot and sure enough, a small craft could be seen hooking itself to the *Agamemnon*.

Kalain had taken some extra lessons to learn the human language. He loved to hear the humans beg for their miserable lives. His own teacher praised him for his

determination to learn another language but he was concerned for his obsession with humans. It was okay to harbor such feelings, as long as it didn't affect his work.

He slowly drifted back to reality when someone spoke.

"You know the Gray Council will want to know what happened. How will you explain the escape?" spoke one of the cloaked Minbari.

Kalain turned away from the projection. "We will tell them nothing." He waited for the shocked murmurs to fade. "The Gray Council does not need to know about this failure. They gave us our objective and I will see it completed. We will not tell them, because we are not finished yet."

"But Kalain, the Gray Council will demand a report. If we tell them that we had successfully destroyed the human ships, won't they want to see the evidence for themselves?"

Kalain turned his head back towards the projection, annoyed. His operations clerk had a point and it was a good one. How would he explain the failures to the Gray Council? The governing body was already split over the continued efforts of this senseless war and the Worker Caste had slashed the number of workers who were sent to build ships and guns. Even the Rangers had stepped away, like they were afraid of something...Shadows. *Yes, that's what they're afraid of. The Shadows.* A make-believe tale told to scare bad children.

"The Gray Council is currently preoccupied with its own legends about the Shadows and the rising tide at Z'ha'dum. Let them have what little information we can provide and I'm confident that they will ignore the matter for now," Kalain said.

Secretly, he held back his distaste for the whole matter. He must complete his own mission. He must find that human ship and destroy it. Completing this mission would uphold his family honor and he must show that he could command a ship accordingly.

Kalain waved his hand across the projection and watched the image slither up and dissolve back into the projector. A ring of lights slowly activated, illuminating the dark room.

Kalain bowed his head, replaced his hood with both gloved hands and slowly left the chamber, leaving the others to think about his words.

Strolling through the passageway, Kalain felt a brisk hand touch his shoulder. It was Deeron. She looked alluring and spunky as usual. Kalain could not wait to get her back to his quarters, but she appeared to have more important things on her mind.

"Kalain. I've just received word that there's a strange vessel following our course. It's just outside our scanning range. I've already ordered maximum power on the scanners, but the object is too far."

"Are you sure it's not a local life form capable of living in hyperspace? We've run into many of them recently."

Deeron's bright eyes looked into Kalain's. "We're quite sure. And it's deliberately staying outside our range. We have changed course to intercept it, but it only moves away."

"Could it be a human ship?"

"Perhaps, but we should be able to detect it, even at that range. It appeared to have organic technology that makes our scanning ineffective."

Kalain placed his hand to his chin and thought for a moment. There were not many species with organic ships and the only race that came to mind were the Vorlons. But why would they be interested in his ship or his people?

"Have you tried to contact them?" Kalain inquired.

"Yes, but we have not received a response. They could be ignoring us or..."

Kalain looked directly into her eyes. She was not the one to stutter or hold back. "Yes, go on."

She stood straight and appeared to treat his request like an order. "They might be planning an attack."

"What! Don't be foolish. The Vorlons have no quarrel with us. Why would they even plan such an attack? It doesn't make sense."

"I'm sorry sir." Deeron bowed her head.

Kalain placed a compassionate hand on her soldier and smiled. He'd never need this girl so docile and apologetic. He took her hand as a sign of interest.

"It's probably nothing to worry about. Just some Vorlon scout ship." He stopped and looked at her directly. "Tell me Deeron, do you have plans for tonight?"

She tried to hide an embarrassed smile, but the question was so personal it was impossible to stop such simple feelings.

"I am not doing anything at the moment. But I get the feeling you're going to occupy my time later."

Kalain smiled and gestured her forward. It was going to be an interesting night. He still had a dark feeling of annoyance...lingering deep inside, like a child who wants to plot his revenge on his friend for something simple. But Kalain was more than thrilled to spend what little time he had with Deeron.

It was later that evening that Kalain received an urgent call. He'd just finished a rich dish of herbs and fruit for his companion. Something he'd spent most of the night preparing with great care.

Deeron sat at the end of the table with her legs crossed and looking very appealing. The sharp bone ridges heightened her Warrior Caste status and the jagged bones indicated she would make a fine mother. Kalain hid his inner desires. As he placed the soft fruit into his mouth, someone politely interrupted his moment through the ship's personal communications.

"Kalain, you are summoned to the Control Chamber immediately. There's an unknown ship heading this way."

Kalain gazed into Deeron's eyes and felt her disappointment. "I bet the humans have returned to face us, like proper warriors." Kalain stood, beaming with pride. "I've underestimated these humans. I thought they were worthless cowards."

"I recommend that we don't keep them waiting," Deeron said, leading the way towards the entrance of the room.

The projection showed a dark object that felt and looked strange. Kalain didn't know what he was looking at, but he still assumed the humans had made this thing and he was the one to test their new level of technology. He ordered an intercept course and waited patiently for the final battle to start.

Gaining honor, through battles with the humans, had begun to turn into a sport for the Warrior Caste. But that pride had been getting rare and rarer as time went on. The humans were not common as they once were. And finding a human battleship would bestow great honor for that family clan and the ship itself.

Sadly, as Kalain looked into the depths of hyperspace, the ship that slowly solidified into view was anything but human.

Like it was a giant of hyperspace and menacing in every way, the horrifying dark vessel slithered through the clouds and the gap between the two vessels soon disappeared.

Kalain had never seen such a vessel before and its threatening tentacles reminded him of a horrific creature he had once dreamed of many years ago. But what was it? As far as he knew, Kalain had never seen a ship like that in reality. Was this a first contact situation?

Somehow Kalain doubted that.

As his command crew exchanged words, the first sign of something hostile became noticeable.

The unknown ship changed its shape and pointed what appeared to be its mouth at the *Trigati*. Kalain could see the highly detailed vessel as the center of the mouth glowed red-hot; he knew it was about to fire.

When the devastating beam penetrated his ship Kalain was tossed around the Control Chamber like he was a toy in the hands of some absent-minded child. He could only imagine the damage inflicted on his vessel. Luckily, due to the location of the Control Chamber, in the middle of the ship, Kalain and his staff escaped unharmed.

But as they looked towards the ghostly projection of the black ship, Kalain could only watch as the vessel primed itself for the killing blow. As a hot indecent glow began to pulsate from the belly of the beast, Kalain was powerless to do anything. Then a stabbing beam of red-hot light engulfed the projection dome, causing the room to fall into a pit of darkness, emphasized by the howling cries of wind and breaking bulkheads. The room disappeared into the vacuum of hyperspace. Kalain felt nothing as his body was instantly frozen and crystallized.

Kalain knew his body had finally died. He gazed down upon his own mutilated body and felt the pull of the local eddy stream. He was powerless to stop it. He was told that a Minbari soul would return to Minbari and be reborn, but he knew that this was not the case. In his final moments, he saw the twirling tentacles of the departing vessel that had destroyed his cruiser. Then he drifted into the local currents of hyperspace, and Kalain was no more than local energy.

## Chapter 32

(Londo Mollari)

Londo could not hold back his anger. That sniveling excuse for a Narn had finally crossed the line. He'd already set plans in motion to take care of the invasion at Ragesh 3. He remembered the first time he had laid eyes on that Narn, during a basic trade mission with the humans. He'd always assumed that the Narns were doing back-door trading with the humans. It was a sneaky tactic, one that would help the Narns build a stronger friendship with the humans. But he had been instructed to stop this friendship at all costs.

As he watched the swirling clouds in hyperspace from the cozy window of his quarters, Londo knew the time had come for him to take the Centauri people back to the glory days. The attack on Ragesh 3 was the perfect excuse to start a war, and Londo had made sure that the Centauri war machine was ready for action.

A faint chime at the entrance of his quarters brought him out of his vengeful thoughts. He placed his wine onto the nearest table and snapped to whoever was outside, "Yes, what is it?"

The doors hissed open and Vir trotted in like a faithful servant and waited for his commands.

Londo barked, "Well, what is it, Vir? I haven't got all day." He carried on with his vengeful thoughts, not giving Vir the chance to speak. "We will soon be at Ragesh 3. I can't wait to put my hands around that Narn's neck."

Londo demonstrated his resolve with brisk strangling movements with his hands. He noticed Vir jerk back slightly and returned to his normal straight-back position.

Vir stammered hesitantly. "L-Londo, our scout teams have reported back. They say the Narns have abandoned the planet, but not before they soiled the land."

Londo was surprised. He assumed the Narns would occupy Ragesh 3 for longer than a few days, perhaps even start a huge war in Ragesh's airspace. Londo, himself, was looking forward to the first stage of the war, especially after the blunt and unjustified execution of his nephew.

But no matter how much excitement he felt, that sweet taste of revenge was soon replaced with the sour thought of emptiness. He cursed the Narns for leaving.

Still, Londo knew the trip would not be wasted. He could gather evidence and see the mutilated bodies for himself. That would be more than enough to convince the Centauri people that war was needed. Londo loved to 'stir the pot' as the humans called it.

"How long until we jump into the Ragesh system?" Londo demanded.

"L-Londo, we will jump within moments."

*Yes, in a matter of minutes, I can finally see the damage those Narns have caused. This will be a momentous occasion.* But before he had the chance to voice his opinions, Vir sniveled out more unnecessary comments.

"Londo, are you sure you want to see this? You've been under a lot of stress recently. Are you sure you want to drag the Centauri people into a war with the Narns?"

Londo heard Vir's tender words trickle out. He knew his assistant didn't know what he was talking about. How could he? He was merely a faithful servant that liked to overstep his mark once in a while. Normally he would ignore such ramblings, but not today. He shouted some obscene words, threw his glass of wine – again – across the room and marched over to him.

"Now you listen to me. You're nothing more than my assistant. If you continue to poke your nose in where it doesn't belong, I'll have you replaced." Londo made sure his voice quivered with an icy tone. It was his way of squashing any more *thoughtful* remarks.

As expected, Vir bowed and left his quarters in silence. Londo walked back towards his observation window and prepared to enjoy the jump into the Ragesh system.

He would often stare out of the window for hours thinking about his latest plans. The sheer breathtaking view of the swirling clouds often cleared his mind. He was able to devise his brilliant plans that seemed to come from some force deep within hyperspace.

He imagined the decisive blow his fleet could have inflicted if the Narn ships had stayed in orbit. He could have marveled at the destruction of Narn cruisers and battleships, something he wanted to see from the very window he was staring out of. He could almost imagine his ship swooping out of the jump point with guns blazing, taking the Narn cruiser by surprise and watching the debris ricochet off his window. Even a few mutilated corpses would be a sight to remember. But for the moment, he would have to accept the empty view of Ragesh 3.

Londo had never visited this place before. Now he could finally discover why his nephew was so attached to the place.

Many years ago, Londo had been shocked to discover that his nephew had applied for a post so far away in difficult territory.

He had assumed that his nephew wanted to display his heroism and stand in the way of any ill-will people had towards him. After all, he had played with a few high-ranking officials' daughters in the past and almost disgraced the Mollari name. But Londo knew that there was some other deep-rooted reason. It wasn't until he had scanned the local transport database that he recognized a name that appeared in the manifest far too many times to mean anything but a passing interest in a girl. Londo soon discovered that his nephew was running away with an official's daughter.

But that little incident hadn't concerned him when he'd looked through the spaceport window and watched his nephew take off on the transport for his new life. He had wished him luck and denied all knowledge of his involvement.

A disturbance of jump points brought Londo back to reality as the Centauri battle fleet emerged from hyperspace in an immense display of power.

Londo's quest for war would have to wait as well as his sightseeing tour. The main question on his mind was: *why had the Narns left a perfectly good planet?*

He then surmised that the pesky Narn deliberately dragged him all this way to torment him. Londo had always hated G'Kar and wanted his revenge, sometimes it seemed like he'd hated G'Kar even before they'd met, that he'd always wanted revenge on the arrogant Narn.

Those days had been a struggle for the humans, but they were also days for the Narns to show their true colors. Since then, they had crossed paths more frequently and began stepping on each other's feet. But things had taken a turn for the worst once Earth was destroyed.

The disaster in itself brought the two worlds closer to war. With the Minbari now seen as one of the most hostile and dangerous races in the galaxy, relations with other non-aligned worlds soon deteriorated, spreading fear and distrust throughout the sector.

It seemed that the human race had deeper connections with each society than anyone had thought. Even worlds that were untouched by humans had heard about this race and knew of this devastating war between the Minbari. The human race would not be forgotten.

No matter how much Londo thought about the Narns or the humans, the pungent smell of sweaty men and leather boots intruded on him. The transport was too small for Londo to cope with and he could not understand why Vir had assigned him a place here. *What happened to my personal shuttle?*

He placed a handkerchief to his nose and did his best to cope with the journey. He hoped Vir had a good explanation for the mix up.

The shuttle was loud and vibrated badly, not like his personal craft with exotic skinned seats and servants waiting for his every command. He looked out of the murky view window and watched as the clouds whizzed past. The spectacular view of the lush green land came into view. Now Londo could finally understand why his nephew had wanted to come to this planet, but he still could not understand why the Narns had left so quickly. There was no reason. He assumed the Narns had learned about the attack fleet and had run away! *They were cowards anyway. I would be doing the galaxy a favor by eliminating them.* But first, he wanted G'Kar's head on a pole.

Londo had to contend with the present situation. The nervous handling of the shuttle was a tell-tale sign that the pilot was wary of his presence and making a fool of himself.

Londo gave the pilot a few sporting glances and waited for the flight to improve. The last thing Londo wanted was an unpleasant ride down to Ragesh 3.

But the pilot had nothing to fear. Londo wasn't in the mood to berate the poor man. He was more interested in finding the Narns responsible for the needless slaughter.

Yes he thought. *The Narns will pay dearly for their mistake.*

After ten minutes of rattling and cloud diving, the small agricultural colony was in sight. It was only a spot of bright land in the jungle of green, but this was the final resting place for his nephew.

Londo wasn't sure what the Narns were up to. *Why would they incite a war now? Surely the Narn Regime knows they can't withstand a war with the Centauri.*

And still there was another question that confused him. *Why did they run?*

From his confined space on the transport, Londo continued to gaze at the surrounding area outside his small window. The closer they got to the colony, the more detail he could see, and the more he wished he hadn't. The area was not what he expected. The entire settlement had been destroyed.

Thin funnels of smoke slithered into sky as fingers of steel reached for the heavens like great bones of prehistoric predators. The stony roadways had been charred and large scoops of land had been dug up and dumped in random channels. The entire area was a mess.

Charred bodies and items of personal belongings lay strewn all over the streets, including weapons and burned out defensive platforms.

The shuttle hovered over what appeared to be the colony square, marked by a huge iconic water fountain brought over from Centauri Prime. Because this colony was one of the most prestigious ones in the empire, the emperor had decided to move the fountain from the home world and have it placed in the main square.

Such a poetic gesture and now the object stood in ruins with the blood of Centauri citizens flowing through its channels. Londo cringed at the sight but he looked on, respecting the dead.

When the shuttle touched down on the hard surface, Londo remained unobtrusive and allowed the soldiers to leave the shuttle. He was surprised at how fast the troops deployed around the area. Their efficiency told him instantly that the Narns could not win a new war. But Londo still wanted to massacre the entire lot here and now.

The destruction he saw once he walked down the ramp was of total devastation on a scale he'd never seen before. Every building had been set alight long ago and all that was left was charred remains and metal skeletons that zigzagged across the skyline. *The Narns were no more than animals -no, animals would be too kind of a word- the Narns were no more than parasites, leeching on the very fabric of time itself.*

Londo felt the chill in the air dissolve as he contemplated vengeance.

As he touched the crispy ground that cracked and snapped under his feet, he received a new surprise. Even the ground was converted to glass, as if an intense energy beam had melted the loose gravel that once made up the colony center. *Why would the Narns waste resources to destroy useful ground?* Perhaps some Centauri officer had fought back while his nephew was executed; perhaps their own people had drawn out the Narn invaders.

But that thought was overwhelmed by the remaining smell of burned flesh. He covered his nose and watched from a distance as Vir explored his surroundings, prodding the local objects with little or no interest. Londo wasn't sure what his useless assistant was doing and he shouted impatiently, "what are you doing, Vir?"

Vir froze, pointing his chubby cheeks at Londo. His blank stare was more than enough to convince him that his assistant had no idea.

Just when he lost interest and was about to head over towards the damaged fountain, Vir's voice rang throughout the background.

"Londo! Look what I've found."

He looked towards Vir and slowly felt his anger boil up inside himself. *Just what does that blundering idiot want now?*

Vir appeared to be focused on a newly constructed building that had been partly destroyed. Londo had missed this structure on his first round and, from the construction design and layout, it appeared to be of Narn origin.

He bit his lower lip and felt himself ball his hands into fists as he stepped forward into the structure.

It was dark, wet and smelt terrible. The undertone of death lingered in the air.

He slowly walked along the highest point of the room. It was too dark to see anything and what little light there was came from the few sunbeams that managed to sneak past the cracks in the ceiling.

Thump!

Londo felt something at his feet. It was soft with a hardened core. He could not see the object, but it stank like rotten meat.

Londo pulled out a glow stick from his pocket; turned it on and threw it into what he thought was the center of the room. It was his only stick and he didn't want to waste it unnecessarily, but he had to see what was below his feet.

The faint glow illuminated the area. To Londo's horror he gazed at a pile of heads that appeared to have been dropped from a great height. He bent down and looked at his fallen comrades. He called them comrades because they were the bravest Centauri he knew of. To stand in front of G'Kar and resist to the bitter end deserved his respect.

Vir trotted closer, saw the mutilated heads and vomited all over the place like an out of control weapon.

Londo chose to ignore his assistant and looked for his nephew.

**I**t took longer than Londo expected because he'd forgotten to take into account that his nephew was second to be executed. Naturally his head was located under the assorted pile of heads of all sexes and age, but once he respectfully removed the last bloody head he found what was left of his nephew.

Hands caked in blood and the silky texture of skin and nerve tissue under his fingernails, he got up and left the building with his nephew's head in his hands.

Once he stood outside, he held it high in the sky and roared, "I want his body found. Then we will kill the Narns!"

## Chapter 33

(Jeffery Sinclair)

**S**inclair did not know what the chilling words meant. Nor did he understand how the strange beings had arrived in the city.

As he cautiously approached, Sinclair thought that the creature looked like some kind of curtain he'd expect to see at his grandmother's house and with a plastic head wedged on top. He had never seen this race before, but he'd heard the rumors about them, even before Marcus mentioned them at the park.

He was so surprised by the creature's appearance that he blurted out the first thing into his head. "Are you a Volvo?"

The ghostly figure hovered in one spot, silent as a mouse. But soon after his question was asked, vibrant tones and whirling noises gave Sinclair the impression of life.

*Vorlon.*

"What?" Sinclair asked. "I don't understand."

Seconds later, a second figure slowly crept out of the pool of darkness and joined the first Vorlon. He heard some more incomprehensible chatter before the second Vorlon spoke. *We are the Vorlons.*

The first Vorlon spoke straight after the second, like it was some kind of competition to see who could talk the fastest. *You must come with us.*

"What?" Sinclair stepped back evasively. "Now wait a minute, I'm not going anywhere until you explain yourselves."

*There is no time. You must come with us now.* The urgency in its tone was enough to frighten Sinclair. He immediately tapped his wrist COM to contact security. He still did not understand how the Vorlons had entered the city undetected. Sinclair was determined not to go anywhere with some unknown aliens. It was the Vorlons who had stepped into his part of hyperspace.

Stepping back, he called out into his device, confident in a response and swift action. "Sinclair to security."

It was at that precise moment Sinclair discovered the horrible truth.

*We have deactivated your communication device in this area,* the first Vorlon said.

*You will do what we tell you to do,* the second Vorlon ordered. *You must come with us.*

"The hell I will. I can't just get up and leave. I'm the commander of this city and I have a duty to perform."

Sinclair was doubtful that these Vorlons were real and assumed someone had set him up for a prank with some robotic toys that could be used as vacuum cleaners. He stood his ground as a city commander should do and challenged the Vorlons authority. But at the end of the day, he had no idea what they were talking about. *I am the one? I must go with them?*

The first Vorlon slithered forward, like a ghost hovering in the air. This was enough to make Sinclair step back and consider fleeing the scene. But he was the commander. *Fleeing in front of some suited men would seem odd for someone of my status.*

He tried the communication device for the final time. Again, nothing but silence. *Okay, now it's time to flee.* The situation was so strange that he wasn't about to take any chances. The haunting words of, *you must come with us* continued to rattle his mind. *What do they want with me?*

The streetlights whizzed past overhead as Sinclair ran as fast as he could. The footpath that snaked its way through the park appeared longer than before. Perhaps it was some trick of the mind, perhaps it was his heavy feet that threatened to give in, but the faster he ran, the farther the gates appeared. Each yellow light was like the hand of a clock, ticking away. He felt his own heart beat faster and faster.

Sinclair didn't know how much more he could take. But curiosity forced him to look back and see if those so-called Vorlons were following him.

They were.

Dancing in and out of the shadows, the haunting curtains with the plastic heads continued to hover like some eerie apparition that was barely visible in the dark. Once they vanished away from the orange streetlight, the reflective heads were seen against the swirling blue clouds that were filtered through the shield.

No matter how fast he ran, the things kept up a steady pace.

He ran past a lake now and saw the reflective clouds in the water; the objects that were chasing him seemed to have vanished. A streetlight that was there had a busted bulb and the shadows lingered in that area, concealing whatever was inside.

Sinclair was tired. His legs faltered and he could no longer run but the murky shadows continued to hold something deadly inside. A ripple in the water indicated a disturbance nearby. *Perhaps the Vorlons dislodged a stone and it fell into the water.* The ripple was strong, indicating that the dark shadow was near. The Vorlons were hiding inside.

But he wasn't finished yet. With very little energy left, he bolted for the gate that was within eyesight. He could see the gate and the beginning of the streets. Perhaps he could flag someone down to return him to his home. It was a best choice and he made a run for it.

More crackling and strange incomprehensible sounds echoed behind. Were the Vorlons talking to each other? Were they planning a new trap? Sinclair didn't know the answer, but he wasn't going to give up without a fight.

The gate was in reach; he could see the two high-powered lights shining up the bars, hovering overhead like two huge beacons. He made every effort to reach the street and he deliberately resisted the urge to look back. Perhaps that was when they would get him. The moment he looked back, the Vorlons would paralyze him, drag him into the darkness and do whatever they wanted.

Still, that burning sensation, the knowing that he was being watched burned on the back of his neck. It was like a second set of eyes hidden in the back of his head, just wanting to spring open and see the creatures that were following him. He didn't want to turn his head, but wished he had eyes in the back of his head.

Then a hollow voice cracked his thoughts. "Sinclair, you must come with us. You must prevent a time paradox."

He didn't listen to the words, he couldn't. The ghostly voice was all he needed to get one last dose of adrenalin and he dashed out into the street.

Headlights blinded Sinclair as he stumbled into the main road. He heard an ear-piercing screech and the vehicle came to a halt just a few inches from his face. Sinclair sighed and struggled to the hood of the electric vehicle. A young woman with pink hair stepped out of the car; she was flabbergasted at her own driving and apologized profoundly, more than necessary. Sinclair wanted to leave this area.

"I am so sorry sir," she wailed. "I didn't mean to drive so fast, and I am so sorry I nearly ran you over. My mother always said I'd run over someone one of these days."

Sinclair got to his wobbly feet and leaned on the overtaken woman.

"My boyfriend always drove crazy and I left him because I feared for my life. But now I'm doing the same thing. Are you okay sir? Do you need to go to a hospital? I'm very sorry sir. I'm an idiot. I'll do *anything* to make up for my..."

Sinclair wanted to tell the woman to shut up, but his haunting thought about the Vorlons crept into mind again. He gazed towards the lit gates and into the darkness of the park. That one streetlight was still not working, and deep within its darkness, a small green light hovered in the air. He had to look closely, but it was there and frightfully menacing.

"What's your name, sir?" the woman asked.

Sinclair was still locked on that green light that faded with time. He wasn't listening to the commotion in the vehicle and it took several attempts on the woman's part before she caught his attention.

"Sir, what's your name?"

“Um, sorry, its Sin...” He paused. He’d better not give out his name, or this woman might get excited. In fact, he was surprised that she didn’t recognize him from the video footage. He gave a fake name and asked her to take him home.

The ten-minute journey home was more hassle then he ever experienced. She talked and talked and talked. It was similar to a moment he had the unfortunate encounter with one of life’s little surprises that loved to talk the entire journey on the public transport. Sinclair wanted to get to work on time and he wasn’t in the mood to speak to anyone. But that someone sat opposite and he talked and talked and talked all the way.

This woman was the same. When he eventually left the vehicle, with painful legs and back, he slammed the door and waved the woman past. She seemed so dull; he nearly fell asleep in the sudden silence of the outside space. Then the memories came flooding back. That pink haired woman had made him forget everything for a moment. But as the memories continued to flow back, he dashed inside to his home.

Half way through the night, a noise disturbed him from his slumber. Sinclair had been having a nice dream, about the pink-haired woman. Why, he didn’t understand, but he saw that green light again in the corner of his room. He rubbed his eyes thinking it was some kind of afterimage of a dream, but the moment he opened his eyes it stood in front of him.

*The Minbari need you*, the howling voice demanded. *You will come with us now!* Sinclair felt a wash of light come over him and then he vanished from his very bed.

The commander would never be seen again.

## Chapter 34

(Shaal Mayan)

**S**haal had never understood the concept of suicide. Until now.

She had been moved into this human’s private quarters and there, he continually ‘played’ with her. Night after night he would rape her like she was some kind of slave.

Shaal wanted it to end.

Her worst experience had come yesterday, when she was at the end of the bed and he deliberately wedged his food into her mouth and grinned like a mad man. It was a vile act, one that demanded revenge. The teachings of the religious caste forbade revenge. But he treated her as if she were some vicious animal and she had grown weak and frightened as time went on.

Normally she was tied to the bed in chains and left for the entire day. At first, she had looked around the brightly lit room and devised a plan to escape. Her strength had failed as her condition deteriorated.

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**T**oday, he’d neglected to chain her up and she was free to roam his room. The door was locked but she saw seven three-foot boomerangs hanging on the wall above some entertainment screen.

She lifted one of them off the wall. And the sleek shine and black color accompanied by a red styled finish made this device appear to be a deadly weapon.

Once she held the long device in her hand, it flipped open into a V shape and Shaal was surprised to discover it had extended itself into a total of six feet. How could she hide such a weapon? It was metal and felt light. She decided to hide the thing beside the door until he came back home.

His brightly lit apartment seemed clean and unsuited for a man of his taste. She was confused and in great pain. His vile touch and contamination continued to burn into her stomach and she felt every inch of his fluid inside. She was unable to remove it and felt her own body contaminated by his filth. She collapsed on the floor and curled into a small ball, waiting for some miracle, something to free her from this dreadful life.

Half naked in the dirty clothes she had worn for days since her capture, Shaal froze at the sudden unlocking of the door.

He was home.

Before she could reach the weapon, Zack spotted it and grinned "I see you found the boomerangs, Shaaaaal." He drooled over her name and picked up the six-foot device, sort of waving it in the air. "These were a gift from a special friend, before he was killed by your race."

He closed the boomerang and placed it back in its rightful place. Shaal curled up beside the foot of the bed. She knew he was angry and she was about to feel his pain again. Shaal wished he would kill her. But more worrying was what had happened to Delenn. Did he do the same thing?

"Where's my friend, Delenn?" she asked with a slight quiver.

The human placed a glass on the table and grabbed a bottle. She assumed it was an alcoholic beverage humans liked to drink.

"Don't worry, Shaaaaal, she's fine. I have no interest in that person. You are my fascination now." He poured another glass. She assumed it was for her.

"Minbari can't drink alcohol. It makes us extremely violent."

The human smiled and walked over to her. "That's interesting."

He handed her the glass and forced her to drink the bitter water. It burned as it was forced down her throat and made her stomach churn with hate. She felt the sizzling poison take its effect on the back of her throat and she grew weak at the knees. He continued to force more into her. *Is this human crazy? Perhaps this is the moment I'm going to die.*

She was forced to drink three glasses of the potent water. Shaal was very weak and sick. The alcohol had not taken its effect yet, but the burning sensation of that drink had overtaken the evil contamination that filtered into her body from the relentless rape. She could feel her blood begin to boil, wiping out her rational thought.

Shaal felt her breathing escalate and she could not control her emotions. She slowly turned into a wild animal, filled with hate.

Before long, she could no longer hold back her anger. All pain had vanished and she felt lightheaded. Rage filled every part of her body and she wanted to kill the human sitting on the bed waiting for her. She stood up and her half worn clothes only needed a small jolt for them to fall from her shoulders. She felt her chest heave to and fro and her heart raced out of control. Her own body was superheated with hate. As a poet, she had been trained to control rage, but she could not control this. With her hands held out in a fighting position she lunged towards the human, intent on murder. She dug her nails into his skin and bit down on any piece of flesh she could find. He screamed and roared but she continued. She tore at the flesh and kicked anywhere. Shaal let loose with all her strength...

But...she was badly outmatched. She was badly out-matched and it only heightened his excitement. She had no choice but endure the roughest, most contaminated method of rape any creature alive should never endure.

## Chapter 35

(Vanguard, Alice Jones)

Alice was informed she would see the facility's commander within the hour. This had been three hours ago. The commander was working on a huge project to build two massive cities for the human race and his time was limited, delay was to be expected. When she looked through the panoramic windows in the observation deck, she could understand his delay. Anyone with this much responsibility would need all the time they could get. She wasn't worried because this task would be the easiest and shortest of them all.

It would require a few days for the others to return to the finish line but she felt confident her mission would only take one day at the most. She continued to stare at the cities as she dreamed about the prize money she would win. Both cities were magnificent; she had always lived on one city and never seen a bird's-eye view of two cities being constructed side by side, especially in space.

One of the cities had managed to activate its shield, and teams of botanists and planters had already begun to construct parks and open land. Most of the natural soil was hauled in by huge starships that scooped up vast lands of processed dirt from planets in the nearby sector. Once the starships returned to the city, the soil was dumped over the metallic base that surrounded the city. She watched for hours as rapid work soon turned the dull and barren land into agricultural plantations and parks. The city was growing and she saw hordes of people moving in from the main access gates that connected the two cities together by a huge passageway arm.

She then moved her gaze towards the shieldless city and watched the final bits of construction on the skyscrapers and roads. Alice suspected the city would have its shield online soon. She knew the workers wanted to use the unshielded time to dump supplies and materials in the center of the city before they had to dock with docking ports and haul the goods through the passageways. It was a good strategy and she marveled at the efficient work everyone was doing.

She was interrupted by a call. "Alice, are you there?"

She recognized that dreary voice and answered, after exhaling her disapproval. "Yes. What do you want, Samuel?"

"We might have an extra job later before we leave. Can you come down to the *Privilege* bar in the main asteroid complex? It should be fairly safe to talk there."

*Another job?* Alice thought to herself. She scanned the observation deck to catch any eavesdroppers that might have been in the area. She was supposed to see Elvis, but she had discovered the interview was not going to take place today. Still, the opportunity for another job would see extra credit go into their account and Alice jumped at any chance to earn that much more. It could also boost her profile when she reported doing a job while performing the graduation race. However, she grunted her disapproval as she remembered the location of where she needed to be. The *Privilege* bar!

Alice knew all too well what that young man would be doing in an establishment like that. But a job was a job and she slowly made her way there, asking the computer for directions.

It did not take too long for Alice to find the bar. Loud noises and the excited hordes of people who left and entered the place made it pretty obvious – apart from the sign on the entrance saying *Privilege* bar – and she walked in and tried to remain unobtrusive. However, the moment she sat down at the bar and ordered a drink, she was pounced upon by a group of greasy female workers who appeared to prey on the weak.

“Look what we have here,” a woman sneered. She tilted her head and gave cheesy looks to her friends. They grinned, laughing in the background.

The woman, who’d started the conversation, seemed well built and was obviously the leader of the pack. They looked like construction workers who had worked a long day in one of the cities. Alice had no idea why they decided to pick on her but her silence only made matters worse. The female moved closer.

“I asked you a question, bitch. What’s your name, and why are you here?” She looked straight into her eyes and Alice twitched as the oily aroma rose up from her breasts.

“My name’s Al...”

“Shut up!” the woman demanded. She pressed her face deeper into Alice’s personal space, like she deliberately wanted to invoke some kind of response. “Did I ask you to speak to *me*?”

Alice backed away from her stool; she did not know what to do. Then to make matters worse, the greasy woman’s friends joined the crowd of people that were building up around the area.

“Little girls like you should not be here. Methinks we need to teach some newbies a lesson,” the greasy leader announced. She pulled a small device from her deep pockets and waved it around.

Alice was sure that it was some kind of high voltage stun weapon and she began to realize the depth of her own predicament. She knew that she was going to be harmed. She was surprised to hear a familiar voice, strong and loud. “Leave her alone!”

Samuel barged through the angry crowd and grabbed Alice by her hand. “I’m sorry, Alice, I didn’t know this was going to happen.” He looked at the greasy woman and Alice knew that he was slowly making the situation worse, like he always did.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, we’re all human. You should save that attitude for the Minbari. What’s wrong with you?” Samuel snapped.

“There is nothing wrong with these women.” Alice heard more voices boom over the already chaotic atmosphere. Three burly men stepped out from the shadows and slithered past the crowd of workers. She knew they wanted to join the fun. “You’re in the wrong place doll. Little virgins like you shouldn’t be here, and little cherry boys shouldn’t get involved. We’ve tolerated your kind for far too long. I think its time we send a small example to the rest of the facility...”

“Yeah, men!” others sneered, cheering in the background.

The crowd yelled in an uproar and the largest man grabbed Samuel by the arm and tossed him around like a rag doll. Samuel was no match for the huge heavyweight. Before Alice could do anything, she was stunned to the floor by the woman who had the taser and felt a sharp pain rip through her body. She felt completely defenseless and open for abuse. She felt her mousy blond hair entangled with the stool and the beefy men stood around her like hungry predators. Then to

her horror, the men began to beat Samuel to the ground. Alice could do nothing but watch as Samuel received devastating blows to his abdomen and chest. His cries for help only went unnoticed and before long, Alice felt someone grab her feet. She cried out, but it was no use. Oily hands crept up her legs and someone ripped open her blouse, exposing her white patterned bra...

Then the attack stopped!

The crowd had *stopped* moving and the music, which had been bellowing out in the background, suddenly ceased.

Alice heard the sound of glasses hit the floor. Then an insulating blanket of silence crashed down upon them. Alice had never heard such silence before. It was so quiet; she could even hear her own heartbeat. She looked around and saw the oily workers frozen in complete fear. No human had ever looked so terrified, or guilty.

Suddenly she heard murmurs fly around the room from one end to the other. She pulled herself from floor and covered her exposed bra, puzzled at what just happened.

## Chapter 36

(Zack Allan)

**A**fter Zack finished abusing the Minbari prisoner, he left his quarters to stretch his legs. One of his favorite stops was a place called the Privilege bar. It had a homey atmosphere, which often made him forget he was on a lump of rock floating in space. He enjoyed visiting this establishment after a long day's work.

He figured his pleasure time, back at his flat, constituted a day's work and he decided to have a drink and savor the sweet young Minbari he had penetrated. He loved playing with that woman but he needed to perform some house keeping to look after her. The only place he could gather some Minbari food was from his friendly bar tender, who often kept a stock of exotic foods and drugs.

He could not help but feel attached to the Minbari. For some reason, as the days passed he'd been more interested in her than normal, even sleeping with her on the same bed all through the night. Normally he would keep her locked up in the closet, but something had begun to change inside him. Of course, Zack was not stupid enough to leave her unchained to the bed. He would be a fool to think she would not escape, or worse, murder him. But as time went on and Zack felt his attachment to her growing, he knew he had to get away from Shaan because he was starting to sympathize with her too much. He felt some kind of attachment growing and this was a big no no. She was a Minbari after all and Zack knew all too well the effects of sympathy towards a prisoner. A simple lack of concentration could jeopardize his role as a security officer, and Zack did not want anything to happen.

No. To limit that kind of risk, Zack decided to leave his quarters – after tying his prisoner – and to stop by the bar he liked so much.

The time was 23:45 and the area was still abustle with activity. People from all walks of life slithered in and out of establishments, trading in food and exotic materials. The Minbari war cruiser, which was nearly gutted to its support beams, had provided a lot of raw material and much of the foreign materials were sold on the black market as trinkets for people to buy. Zack recognized several items on the stools and even took the opportunity to examine some of them to see if they would prove useful.

He watched as one man played with some rings and then appeared completely stoned, as if he'd taken a dose of some kind of exotic drug. The effect rippled throughout the crowd and they began to fight over the objects. Zack ignored the spectacle and went on his way.

The Privilege bar was down the passageway and around the corner. The prominent black and neon-lit sign had the words 'Privilege' written in capital letters, as if the words themselves heightened the importance of this place. Sure, there were other bars that boasted the same atmosphere and fights that might spring up at any moment, but it all seemed to draw in the crowd. However, this one had his favorite bartender who could get him the supplies he needed.

But as he approached the establishment he noticed a shallow disturbance inside. He pushed the double doors to one side and went in, eager to find out what was going on.

*Surely there can't be a fight already? I haven't even entered the bar yet.*

He looked towards the front of the crowd and noticed a greasy, well-built woman and a smaller, younger individual at the bar. This prompted Zack to take the nearest stool as he ordered his favorite drink. He kept one eye on the crowd as he began to recognize the beginnings of a fight.

"So, do you have the supplies I requested?" Zack asked the bartender, who approached him immediately.

The man tilted his neck and Zack heard a click, then he began wiping the glass he was holding. "Yeah, I got the supplies you asked for. Pretty rare stuff if you ask me."

Zack caught a spit of laughter that sneaked up on him. "I could imagine, *very rare*, since we had a Minbari cruiser parked outside the facility for several days."

He saw that his sarcastic comment did not go unnoticed and he could only imagine the price the bartender would add for something so common. He wished he had pinched the items when he searched the vessel for survivors. But he had not anticipated having a prisoner to look after.

"Business is business, Zack. Now do you want the stuff or not?" The bartender placed the glass under the metallic bar and placed both hands on the counter, waiting for a reply.

Zack reluctantly pulled out his payment card and was instantly interrupted by the ruckus that developed. He handed over his card. "What's up with that?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the developing ruckus.

"Looks like some new visitors to this complex decided to rest in the wrong place. The locals are teaching them a lesson. You shouldn't worry about it, Zack. After all, you're off duty, yes?" Zack heard a mischievous tone in the bartender's comment. He knew what this man wanted; no trouble with the law and wanted confirmation that he was off duty.

Zack placed the glass of alcohol to his lips, smiled, and nodded. It was all the bartender needed and he took his time in collecting his supplies. Still, the commotion was the only entertainment in the whole bar and Zack decided to move to the front and find out what was really going on. He jostled some of the crowd to one side and slithered towards the front.

Zack watched some of the local thugs run out of the bar as soon as they spotted him. Others knew he was off duty and watched from a distance. The cloud of smoke seeping from the filtration system dimmed the lights and made the metallic room—cluttered with patches of asteroid rock—appear smaller than it actually was. That did not include the horde of people already in the room. He stood and watched the incident take hold and clearly noticed the idle hum of all the thugs created as

they circled around the two innocent individuals, like it was some crazed gladiator show in the old Roman era.

The dirty individual moved his hands in to tear open the woman's blouse and expose her breasts. The tearing sound of the fabric reminded Zack of his own involvement with the Minbari, but then the hum of the crowd fell into a terrible silence.

The burly man stared at the woman, eyes blazing. His hand trembled and his skin turned a sickly pale color. Sweat began to bubble around his face and his breathing increased.

Interested in what had spooked the man so much, Zack followed the man's ghostly stare to an emblem that was hanging around the woman's neck. It only took a second to register, but the common symbol of two humans holding an old Earth sextant was a clear indication this person was a Vanguard. The sudden uproar of a few people confirmed his worst suspicions.

"Y-Y-You Idiot... W-W-hat have you done..." the man's colleague stuttered. His hand covered part of his mouth, muffling his words, but Zack could still hear. "Y-Y-You attacked a Vanguard!"

Another man yelled from across the bar. "Did you just say Vanguard?"

Zack heard the sound of glasses dropping to the floor and the frantic movements of feet. He looked around and saw even more people dash into the establishment after hearing about the attack of a Vanguard.

"My god, man! What have you done?" another individual within the crowd shouted.

Zack began to lose track of the lightning fast murmurs that spread throughout the crowd. From behind someone else spoke. "Attacking a Vanguard is unacceptable. Do you know how important those people are..."

Zack looked around. People began to stare at him as if he should rectify this whole situation. Zack knew something must be done. The offender must be arrested and the vanguards treated for the injuries they had received. But he did not have to fight or wrestle with the criminal. In the time it took Zack to plan his next move, the culprit knelt down beside him and begged to be arrested. It was a sight he'd never seen before. Criminals normally fled, but no one had ever even thought about attacking a Vanguard.

Another call erupted from behind. "L-Look at her rank...the b-b-band is green... She's still a basic trainee..."

"G-Green band... You —" Another crowd member stuttered from his left. His voice almost boomed throughout the establishment, "This person is still a trainee, she's learning... Do you know what this means... She'll remember everything you did to her. You..."

"Oh my God! This is her partner... He's a Vanguard too..." cried the tall greasy woman. "This one's the same..."

Zack watched as the thug released the gold object, as if the object itself cursed the person's very existence. She stood up, wobbled on her feet and fell back into the crowd. "Please...forgive me...I didn't know!"

But the male Vanguard stared right back. Zack knew that he was burning the woman's image in his mind. It might take days or years, but his memory of that woman would come back to haunt her. All he needed was to wait and find the right time to...Escort her, or come to her rescue, then leave her floating in hyperspace. It had happened before and it would happen again. This was the fear everyone had and it only added to the respect of the Vanguards. But the bottom line was this; no

one would even dream of laying a hand on them, they were more sacred than priests.

“Please...arrest me. I’ve...I didn’t know... please forgive me.” The greasy man begged at Zack’s feet, then Zack watched him grovel at the feet of the young woman. He thought it was a little excessive but Zack couldn’t stand around and do nothing.

As if fate knew what he wanted, teams of security personnel raced into the establishment and disbanded the crowd. It took a few minutes to clear up the mess, but Zack instantly took charge and restored order.

The guilty groups were led away in handcuffs. It turned out to be the easiest arrest Zack had done in a long time. His next duty was to attend to the injured Vanguard. This was a sensitive matter and one he had no idea how to deal with. Zack had never dealt with something so complex as a Vanguard attack. He would be treading on very thin ice.

He shelved his doubts and acted the professional. “The group will be taken away to the holding cells and charged for this crime. I can’t stress how sorry we are and hope that the rest of your stay is uneventful.”

There, that was the best he could come up with. Zack was sure that his comment should calm any ill will the two Vanguards had. Now with protocol leading the way, Zack continued. “I will need to take a report from you about what had happened here and then we can prosecute the culprits involved. Can I take your names?”

“I’m Alice Jones and this is my partner Samuel.” Alice looked shy and timid. She held onto her broken blouse and attempted to cover her white bra that was partly showing through. Zack saw the embarrassing moment and decided to take action.

“If you want, we can do this later back at the security office. My officers will be happy to help you back to your quarters so you can change. If you send me the damage cost, I will see to it personally.” Zack made sure to behave like a gentleman, almost like a king’s servant. But he also made sure not to make his over-enthusiastic gestures too obvious.

She responded with a light nod and went with the officers to the security deck. The culprits were all lined up and registered. Unfortunately this incident would have to be reported to Elvis. Zack wondered what kind of action that man would take on the poor culprits. He wouldn’t want to be in their shoes. But then again, Zack knew the men deserved everything they got, attacking a Vanguard was damn right outrageous.

## **Chapter 37**

(G’Kar)

G’Kar leaned back in his chair and licked his battle wounds. It was a fight he did not expect to escape from. The invaders swooped down from the heavens and laid untold waste to the lands below. There was nothing he or his fleet could do to stop them.

Within seconds of hearing the call, his ships in orbit began dropping out of the sky like insects back on his own barren world. He looked up from the courtroom door and saw bright lights ricochet throughout the sky.

Each call that came through his wrist-com was one of his own battleships falling out of the sky.

No one knew the enemy!

He listened intently to learn who the adversary was, but each call was met by raging decompression. Then moments later, huge shadows—which looked like spiders—began to block out the sun and hover over the small settlement.

The ships did nothing at first; only hovered over the settlement, stirring up the air with their screeching engines while their shadows deprived the land of life.

Then, as if they had swiftly reached a conclusion, the aliens unleashed a torrent of beams that tore open buildings and incinerated Narn's in all directions.

Fleeing for their lives, Narns scattered while others bolted towards G'Kar, only to be sizzled by the incinerating beam. Others tried their luck inside sturdy buildings, but they too were met by incinerating beams. G'Kar could do nothing but watch as he saw a female warrior crushed by falling rubble.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder as someone pulled him away from the massacre to join a group of other Narn fleeing the attack. He clenched his fists at the unknown enemy and vowed to get his revenge. He knew there wasn't anything he could do. He wished it was the Centauri who invaded, at least Narn firepower was equal to theirs, but this new enemy—and somehow G'Kar thought this might be an old adversary—was more powerful and intent on destruction.

G'Kar followed the Narn through the underground passageways and away from the slaughter. He could only imagine the pain and suffering of those who had not been fortunate enough to be killed in the attack. At least he had watched his friends die outright. But G'Kar knew that a great many of his people had been able to escape underground.

"G'Kar, one of our battleships is docked in the underground space port. It was under repair before the attack began. If we can get most of the survivors to the ship, we might have a chance. A battle cruiser is standing by to sacrifice itself in order to allow us to escape. But the window is small. They're hiding inside the mountains to the west of this camp. They will engage the enemy once you give the order." A tall Narn with a blood-stained tunic announced from behind.

"I don't understand how these invaders could take us so easily. There was a whole battle fleet in orbit. Do you think the Centauri had anything to do with this?" G'Kar said. It was the only thing he could think of. One minute he'd been having his fun in court and the next a message had been beamed over his communicator about strange vessels emerging from hyperspace.

"I don't know. I have my orders to get you to safety. Give the word, G'Kar, and the cruiser will attempt an attack."

G'Kar stopped in his tracks and placed his hand on his comrade's shoulder. "Yes, you are right, but wait for my signal. We have to time this right. Otherwise we'll be exposed."

A blast from overhead dislodged a boulder from the ceiling and it came down on the small group. G'Kar felt the crushing weight of the rock and saw one of his comrades perish under the deadly avalanche. He struggled and wiggled out of the small hole only to find his own blood seeping from his clothes. Once he looked back towards his comrades, he could only think about how weak the Narn people were against this terrible enemy. He looked to the smoky ceiling and continued to hear more cries for help. Unable to offer assistance, he continued on.

Getting through the collapsed tunnel was the difficult part. Before he was moving easily through the winding passageway. Now they had to move boulders

and crawl through small holes on the way to the Narn cruiser. He hoped the vessel was in one piece and not damaged in the collapse.

The Narn who'd rescued him earlier moved forward in the tunnel and signaled his urgency. "G'Kar, the ship should be through there. We must hurry before the enemy detects our decoy ship in the mountains."

And hurry he did. With seconds to spare, G'Kar managed to help his team into the loading bay of the great Narn cruiser just before the passageway was struck by another blast that saw many of his own comrades trapped on the other side. After the chaos settled down, the Narn leader rushed to the opening and tried to remove the rocks to allow the rest of his team through. But no matter how hard he pulled, the huge boulder did not move.

I have to do something. I can't just sit here and let my comrades perish on this miserable planet.

"G'Kar, you must forget about us... Go, Go now and leave us." Someone shouted. "You must go back to Narn and warn the people about this new threat. I believe they are the ancient enemy from one thousand years ago. They've come back!"

G'Kar was taken aback. He remembered the tale about an ancient enemy and had even read about them in the Book of G'Quan and recognized the shape of their vessels. He remembered the image well and it fit the ship he saw in the sky. It must be that ancient race known as the Shadows. *They have come to invade us.*

"Go, G'Kar, there is nothing you can do...warn the others...GO!" G'Kar felt the rage build up inside. He held onto his comrade's hand and refused to let go, but the sudden shaking of his hand informed him that his fight with a piece of rock was useless. He had something bigger to do; he had to warn his people.

G'Kar fought to hide his tears. He wanted to give his comrade a respectable death...

"We will be around...always...go..." G'Kar felt the final words of his comrade strike hard. But he had to fulfill their wishes; he had to leave them behind.

After he entered the loading bay of the cruiser, the doors closed and he gazed after them respectfully until a steel door covered the view. G'Kar felt a pain in his leg and realized he had been wounded, but nothing could compare to the pain in his heart. This should have been a moment of victory, but it had turned out to be a moment of terror.

## Chapter 38

(John Sheridan)

The atmosphere on the loading dock was so tense Sheridan could have cut through it with a knife. Standing right next to him, and using up his personal space, stood the very man that had started this mess with the Minbari. He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists as he held back the unrelenting hate he had for the man. He had a job to do and his entire livelihood depended on it. His mission was to drop one warrior on a Minbari colony and survey the results.

*Surely I can perform such an easy task with a squirming little weasel called Jankowski.*

Sheridan was apprehensive about the effectiveness of such a warrior, but he knew the human military had to go on the offensive and take their revenge on the

people who had destroyed his world. But at the forefront of this, one question still remained on his mind.

*Why did they have to partner me up with this asshole?*

"I never got the chance to thank you," Sheridan sarcastically began, deliberately avoiding eye contact with Jankowski.

"Thank me for what?"

"The mess you got the human race into."

"That...was not my fault-"

"Just like the Omega incident?" Sheridan barked, anger layered over his spitting words. "I warned general Lefcourt about your inability to handle first contact situations effectively. Now look at the shit you got us into. My whole family died on Earth thanks to you!"

As expected, Sheridan knew there was not much Jankowski could say. After all, it was his decisions back on his own command that had started the war. If he had only waited, kept his main fleet away from the Minbari ships, or even kept his distance instead of insisting on scanning their cruisers from close range, this war might not have started.

But as Jankowski began to speak Sheridan gave him a dismissive wave of his hand and looked directly into his eyes. He wanted to get one thing straight in Jankowski's mind and no amount of grovelling would change that. "Now you listen to me. I'm in command of this mission and I expect no insubordination. You take your orders from me and me alone. You lost your chance to command and personally, in my eyes, you're not fit to wear that uniform. I won't have a problem throwing you out the airlock and giving you to the Minbari."

Something within that sentence must have angered the man because, with a noncommittal glare, Jankowski spun in place and left the loading dock, heading towards a dark corner that faded into the warehouse. Even as he watched the back of the man, Sheridan could not help but wonder what would happen if he had a weapon in his hand. *Could I really kill a man in cold blood?*

Luckily for Sheridan, that theory was nothing more than idle speculation. He glanced back at his vessel, *The Agamemnon* and wondered how much more punishment his ship could take.

Battle scars lined the hull and what had once been fine metallic paint, now chipped and bearing the scars of timeless battles and patch-up work. Even glancing down the far side, Sheridan could see an army of greasy men welding plates to the side of the hull that had been ripped open by Minbari energy beams. More patches, more scars.

"You must be Sheridan!" Suddenly a brisk man grabbed Sheridan's hand and began to shake it vigorously. With no identification on his person, Sheridan assumed it was a crew member overwhelmed with excitement.

"Sorry, who are you?"

"Oh, forgive me, I'm Marcus, Marcus Cole. I'll be your Vanguard for this mission. I've been instructed to guide your vessel to Sector 119 and bring you back once your mission is complete. I must say, this is an impressive vessel you have here."

Sheridan watched Marcus glance at the huge front of the *Agamemnon*, which dwarfed their entire platform. Star Furies, hauled by monstrous cranes, hovered impeccably close overhead and crates of food rolled in off the platforms and into storage decks below. It was common to see such a bustling dock and this new Vanguard seemed accustomed to the whole spectacle. At least Sheridan could rest in

the knowledge that the President opted to send a Vanguard showing that she fully understood the importance of their mission.

The assignment the President had sent them on should take one day at best and involved no combat, but Sheridan was still nervous because all commanders knew that when you dealt with the Minbari, there was no such thing as *involved no combat*. But the thought of jumping into a planet's atmosphere also had its dangers and he weighed *them* up accordingly. No one had performed a stunt like that and the chances of disaster were great.

Marcus continued with his great speech, giving no time for Sheridan to answer. "Yes, I head about the president's daring plan. But I must confess, an atmospheric jump is a new one even by my standards. It gives me the jitters just thinking about it."

Sheridan glanced awkwardly at Marcus and tried to swallow that hard knot that had formed in his throat. *I hope it will all go well...*

## Chapter 39

(Susan Ivanova)

**W**ith each passing second, Susan found it that much harder to control her anger. After being ordered to transport that scruffy Vanguard, Marcus Cole, to the capital city of Casabianca, she remained on the control deck of her vessel, simmering at the lack of time to offload her valuable cargo. She fought back the fatigue that threatened to cloud her judgement and reached down to scratch an itch that had annoyed her for a few minutes.

"Damn that President...she should be shot. She may look all professional in her business suit and fuzzy hair, but why did she have my only contact arrested just to transport a scruffy individual like you?" Susan glanced at Marcus as the capital city came into view through the haze of red mist and endless expanse of hyperspace.

"I must say, The President is a very smart lady. If your contact was not arrested and she *had* asked you to embark on this journey out of the kindness of your heart, would you do it?"

"No."

"Exactly." Marcus strolled over to Susan's location and leaned unreasonably close, "The name's Marcus. I thought we resolved this hostility back on Tyrone?"

"Didn't I tell you I am Russian?"

"No you didn't." Marcus stopped in front of her, energised, excited.

"Didn't I tell you I have a bad temper?"

"Oh, now you're talking my language. But tell me, Susan, what will it take to crack that hard exterior of yours?"

Susan watched Marcus stroll around her chair like an over-excited teenager who was confident about his luck. Although Marcus did have a humorous side, she knew he was damaging her image and she had to assert her authority towards her crew. She could hear them snickering at their stations.

"Pull yourselves together. We have a job to do. Any more insubordination will result in discipline, do I make myself clear?"

Sudden silence filled the deck after everyone shuffled back to their stations. Once order was restored Susan turned her focus back to Marcus, who by this stage

was eyeing the city through the front windows. "It is a marvellous city, isn't it, Susan?"

All revved up to hammer Marcus and his appalling behaviour, Susan sighed heartily to restore her composure. "It is an impressive city."

Susan stood up from her comfortable chair and walked over to him. She knew this man was interested in her. Why, she did not know, but she was not interested in pursuing a relationship at this time. She had to get her message across and now was as good a time as any. "I'm here to deliver you to the Casabianca authorities and depart as soon as I offload my cargo. I am not interested in socialising or..."

Susan paused for a moment. As if it was some twist of fate, she did feel some hint of sexual attraction to this man, if somewhat subtle. Susan did not question the sudden revelation, but she knew it was not love, more like lust. Perhaps she could have some fun before she finally left. Yes, she felt herself grin slightly at the thought. But of course, these were just her thoughts; but by Marcus's body language, it was obvious he wanted the same thing. Still, Susan knew she'd resisted his charms in the past and knew a sudden change in her behaviour would seem odd. She knew playing hard to get was the only sure way for a smooth transition. She had been due some fun for months now and this man seemed a likely candidate.

Beefing up her chest and changing the subject, she moved forward with her plan. "If you think our relationship is anything more than business, then you're sadly mistaken. I have no time for men and you are nowhere near my type. Just do what you were sent here to do and get out of my sight."

"Why, Susan, at least you confessed that we have some kind of relationship!" Marcus replied, deliberately staring into the abyss of hyperspace, avoiding eye contact. Susan hated that. His boyish charm might have won over many women in the past and his status at being a Vanguard would help considerably, but she was not going to fall into his bed that fast. She decided to resist more.

But as the view of the towering buildings came into view behind the shielded dome of the city, Susan knew this mission needed her full attention and she could not rock the boat just yet. The message from the president's advisers ordered her and her crew to the capital city to deliver one Marcus Cole to the starship *Agamemnon*. She had no idea what she would find or how to offload her precious cargo of Centauri loot. But she always found a way to make friends and get the dealings she wanted.

But trading in the capital city was risky business. Security was tight and officials at the docks would certainly want to see the loot and levy tax on what she had managed to capture. Any opportunity to gather resources or goods to trade with other cities was paramount and her haul was perfect. Susan expected to lose over sixty percent of her goods. Completely unacceptable!

Susan racked her mind to find ways to skip this tax. Perhaps a disused spaceport or landing pad might do the trick. So far, from the communication scans from the console beneath her hand, no one had detected their little ship. Her vessel had been entering from an oblique angle, behind one of the cargo vessels making their rounds. A standard tactic she used to enter this city unannounced and one that had paid off time and time again.

But as the cargo vessel turned in the opposite direction from where they intended to go, Susan rushed to her station, "Quick, follow that farming tanker at a parallel angle. Watch the exhaust wash. If any of the paint peels off my hull, I'll personally have the entire bridge crew out there re-painting this ship from top to bottom."

With the pilots manoeuvring the vessel with nervous movements, Susan watched the pilots manoeuvre her vessel behind one of the farm tankers used to transport water from habitable worlds. She knew they would be stopping on the outskirts of the city, a place that was difficult to regulate. Perhaps she could find new contacts that could exchange her loot. She also knew a few places her crew could rest and perhaps Marcus might make his move before he travelled into the city.

Perfect. Susan could finally relax as a plan formed in her mind.

The tanker was impressive to watch. Its long sleek hull and chrome finish indicated a wealthy corporation that looked after its ships and the hull provided trillions of litres of water sucked from a habitable world. She could only imagine how much water was stored on one of the tanks that were twenty times the size of her ship. Gliding back towards the engine compartment of the tanker, she saw four cones burning profoundly. The light glowed through the canopy, blinding Susan until her vessel came to a rest between all four engine-cones.

Susan lounged back into her warm chair. "Excellent, that's the type of flying I pay you lot for. Now, Marcus," Susan turned her head, "since you're a Vanguard with many years of experience and a desire to explore any facility or planet you set foot on, you must know some people I can trade my cargo to without the local government getting involved."

Marcus appeared to have an idea of his own and Susan felt that she'd just backed herself into a corner, at the mercy of whatever Marcus wanted. She knew he would exploit that moment.

"Well, I might know of a few places that could take the load off you and pay what you deserve, but there is one condition." Susan was right and perhaps that night of passion might come faster than she expected, although the whole situation had come on rather abruptly and unexpectedly. Perhaps she'd caught something while examining that Centauri loot. Perhaps some container containing some potent sex drug had been released and she'd been exposed.

Susan shook her head at the thought and decided to fall into Marcus's trap. She might as well get it over and done with. With a low clipped tone she surrendered to his terms. "What is it?"

"Go out with me!"

The command deck erupted in a flurry of shocked murmurs and gasps and Susan battled the blush that was threatening to give her thoughts away. She'd expected as much, but to hear it was just as shocking as the sudden revelation of sexual need.

"That's out of the question," she barked automatically.

"Really Susan." Marcus leaned on the metallic support beam beside the exit door. "And how much do you want that money?"

Susan refused to comment. She did not trust her mouth and knew it would only run away with insults and denial, denial that her own body yearned for that sexual embrace. The thought alone was rather riveting, but she was not an easy woman. All this time she'd resisted, held back, and now her own body wanted him. *What's wrong with me?*

Susan felt like her head was in a war with her own body that yearned for sexual contact. She shuffled her firm butt around in the chair and placed her right hand between her legs. She had no choice; she had to give in to his demands.

"Okay, I will..." She could not force the words; they filled her mind, which ravaged her body with excitement. She could not show her desire, or need. It was the perfect moment. She appeared to have no choice in the matter in the eyes of her

crew, while deep down, she could satisfy one of nature's primordial instincts. "...I will go out with you."

Grinning from cheek to cheek, Marcus strolled over to the navigation officer with a slight skip in his step and input the coordinates. Overhearing her ensign mutter words like, "Are you sure you want to do this, Marcus? She's one volatile woman." Susan quickly made her escape and left the command deck, besieged with thoughts.

## Chapter 40

(Delenn)

Delenn had no idea what the humans planned to do with her. She ran scenarios about executions through her mind and felt the cold dampness of the room soak into her skin, from the unsuitable conditions she'd been thrust into. The metal-walled room felt cramped and claustrophobic.

She had seen the towering cities through the windows on her way to the cell and thought the room could have done with a window. There was plenty of scenery to go around. Then she thought about her friend, Shaal. The last moment she'd seen her old friend had been back in the human office, as the one called Zack hauled her away with malicious pleasure in his mind. Delenn was partly telepathic, as were all Minbari, the thoughts she picked up from this human were pure evil.

She once caught a hint of her friend's pain from some location deep within the facility. But when she woke up from that nightmare, the connection was broken. There was only one thing she could do, sit and wait. Perhaps Shaal would be returned to her. But it had been days and worry began to overwhelm her fear.

Hunger was the next obstacle she had to overcome. For days she had not been fed or given water. She had to hold back her waste and her clothes began to stink from neglect. It would not be long before she collapsed under her failing body. From time to time she could hear humans sneer and laugh on the other side of the metallic door and she found it hard to hold onto her dignity amongst all the chaos.

She had thoughts about the war; in her studies during the early stages of the human war she had found horrors and wonders about the human race. During the years they had begun to explore space, the humans had helped other races resolve their problems and gather a better understanding of the universe. Even her master, who had been accidentally killed during the first contact, saw the humans as an ally in the fight with the shadows. But all that had been lost once Earth was completely destroyed. The Warrior Caste's relentless pursuit for war had driven the humans into hiding. She feared the humans were ghosts, lurking in the very edges of the galaxy, intent on destruction of the Minbari race. They had even managed to build cities that were larger than any space station she had encountered and she wondered what else they could do.

The lock on the metallic door clicked open and she immediately jumped to her feet. Expecting the worst, Delenn watched the human enter the room. He looked like the same person who tormented her and Shaal. Upon closer inspection Delenn could even feel Shaal's presence upon him, a presence only a mate should have. *In Valen's name, what has he done to you, Shaal!*

"I've brought you some new clothes and provisions. I'm moving you out of this cell into better accommodations."

Startled by the sudden change in attitude, Delenn had to know the reason. “W-Why...why are you doing this?”

The human stopped in his tracks, turned towards her, and spoke, after a moment of deliberation. “You’re no good to us dead. We need to know what the Minbari intend to do. You’ll give us the information if you know what’s good for you.”

Delenn was not happy with that answer, but it was not the question she was interested in. “What have you done with my friend, Shaal?”

The human stepped out of the room without so much as an answer. As she was analysing the clothing the human brought for her, two men rushed in and began to escort her out of the dreadful cell. She did not know where she was going, but any place was better than here.

The human escorted her through a few passageways and some lift transportations to what looked like a holding area for human prisoners. The facilities were much better than before and she could finally pull herself together and rebuild her defences. What had just happened seemed strange and Delenn could not quite understand what was going on. *Why would this human improve my conditions if he was supposed to gather information?*

She pleaded with him again, “Please, tell me that’s she’s alive?”

The human finally looked into her eyes. Delenn could see a wall of confusion and emotional turmoil inside his soul. “Your friend is still alive. She’s proving to be quite useful.”

Then human grinned, blasting all hope away with it.

“I’m sure that once she’s finished satisfying me, you’ll provide just as much entertainment as she did. But first, you must tell us everything you know about your people and their plans.” The human shoved his face so close to hers that Delenn could smell Shaal’s body sweat on his skin. “Then we might let you both return to your people as a warning!”

As the human slammed the door behind himself, the room fell into darkness, partly illuminated by a small window that allowed the radiant sun of the facility to beam through. Stepping onto the end of the metallic bed, Delenn peeked towards the high window and looked out at the awe-inspiring facility and the two cities that rested below. With such creativity, Delenn could only wonder what the humans would do to her.

## Chapter 41

(Elizabeth Lochley)

**E**lizabeth gazed through the window in her quarters at what was left of the Minbari cruiser. It was almost gone, just a few major support beams and the engine unit, which housed the singularity thought to power this monster.

She surmised that the technicians on the platform had little knowledge of such technology, and the engine core—what looked like several bricks bound together by cables and pipes—would be the last thing to be dismantled and disposed off. But as she studied the cruiser, her thoughts were elsewhere.

A few hours ago Elizabeth had been told by her superiors that she would be in command of the city that was damaged by battle. Several buildings in the city core

had been partially destroyed and, despite reassurances that repairs were well under way, she really wanted to see how badly her city had been injured.

A call came through her personal communicator, prompting Elizabeth to move away from the window and answer it. "Yes?"

"Elizabeth, this is Chief Engineer Dovich Hekenovich from the city Euria."

Elizabeth had burned the city's name into her mind last night and researched everything she could about her new responsibility. From the moment she'd received the reports about her command, she had downloaded all the data necessary and begun to study the intricate design and layout of her own personal city. She'd always wanted to command a city, ever since the metropolises first began to drift into the endless depths of hyperspace. It was a soul changing experience, something she could relate to.

After her family had been murdered, along with the human race, Elizabeth had been drifting through social circles, looking for purpose. Once the President approved building the cities, she'd begun studying to join appropriate Academies and rise up the command chain.

But in order to achieve her goal, she had decided to lay down some ground rules and follow them to the letter. She did not get along with her fellow classmates in her academy; she became first in her class and graduated with honours. From that moment, she'd joined the military and rose up the ranks much the same way. Now, as she stared at the communicator screen, she sympathised with the man who had to organise all the repairs.

It was not the city she would have to respect, but the people who lived there. They were all her responsibility and, despite the fairy tale rumours about how easy the city commanders had it, she knew all too well the responsibilities she would have to take on. This was her first port of call and she had to do it right, not just to prove to herself that she could, but also to lay the foundation of a strong and reliable commander.

Dovich's voice rose slightly over the COM channel and brought Elizabeth back from her deep thoughts, "Are you there Ma'am?"

"Oh. Sorry, you lost me for a moment...go on..." Elizabeth was just about to make excuses about the COM channel breaking when she decided just to let the man speak.

"Construction bots have almost repaired the foundation damage done to sector 375 and repaired the transportation paths on the streets, but the high-rise buildings that have collapsed will take longer to repair."

Elizabeth continued to stare at the blank screen that showed the text *Audio Only* on it. She preferred her privacy and she was only wearing her nightgown; she did not want strangers seeing her at her most vulnerable. But this incident demanded her full attention, and talking over the intercom did not feel right. She wanted to solve this matter face to face. This act would demonstrate her determination to be a respected commander who would put the people first.

With that firm judgement in her mind, she interrupted the babbling engineer, "I'll tell you what. I was planning on seeing the extent of the damage myself tomorrow morning, but since the construction teams are already on site I can't think of a better time to look over the wreckage and listen to all the recommendations in person."

"But ma'am, that's not necessary. We're already working to restore the structures and it's way past midnight."

Elizabeth removed her cotton nightgown and slid into her uniform top and pants, replying as she went. "It's no trouble at all. I've taken a greater liking to this city and its wounds are my wounds. Expect me in one hour."

Elizabeth glanced back at her city shimmering in the distance through the window. It might be a huge raging metropolis, but it was a living home, a place that demanded respect. With her at the helm she knew she would do good.

Elizabeth buttoned up her uniform and embarked on her quest to restore her city to its former glory.

## Chapter 42

(Michael Garibaldi)

Garibaldi stood aside as teams of technicians jostled past him with explosives and cabling, intent on rigging the station to blow up in the event of an invasion. No one knew when or if the Minbari would ever show up, but having that huge Minbari warship gutted outside was proof that they were vulnerable.

Next came the workers, and their wives and children, who were uprooted from their cramped living conditions and moved into housing accommodation within the city. Garibaldi knew that most of the workers would have been forced to stay within the facility to begin work on new cities once these two left, but with the attack, Elvis was not taking any chances.

*Perfect!* Garibaldi thought.

He could use this moment and smuggle that data crystal to the Vanguard, who were in their private quarters. But every footstep he heard along the corridors was a signal that he had to be careful. It was impossible for Elvis to know what he was up to, but he wouldn't put it past him to have spies looking for any opportunity. Then again, Elvis was so content in his own power that his stupidity blinded him to the hate his crew had.

Garibaldi clutched his head as ideas raced through his mind, *I gotta get control. Elvis will not be watching. I am but a man walking down the corridor.*

The red high-security decks held moderate accommodations for visitors and esteemed guests alike. As expected, Elvis had his luxury suite, and the other rooms were allocated to his most trusted staff. It would stand to reason the Vanguard would be in such a place; the only problem was finding them.

Garibaldi reached over to the control panel and entered his commands. He already had a pre-programmed patch that would gain him anonymous access to the system and find the two Vanguard. He wanted to make sure no one could track his whereabouts. That same program should disable the security cameras throughout the hallways. But that red LED light on the face of the camera instilled Garibaldi with doubt. As an extra precaution, he doubled-checked the program and kept his face away from the camera lens.

Further down the hall, he heard running footsteps and muffled sounds. More staff were on the move.

"That's it, fellas, nothing to see here. Just a plain old person doing his rounds." He whispered to himself.

Despite being the facility's second in command, with the authority to go anywhere he saw fit, it would only take one person to run a check, or ask that simple, *What are you doing here?* Garibaldi did not know who to trust and it stood to reason Elvis's most loyal guards would ask even him the simplest of questions.

Still, Garibaldi always planned ahead and he always kept a free hand on his sidearm just in case he needed to stun someone. The setting was low, but with a modified conductor coil, it would render the victim unconscious with short-term memory loss.

After discovering the Vanguard's whereabouts, Garibaldi pressed his hand to the doorplate and it chimed. Whoever was on the other side should have heard the doorbell!

As expected, the door slid slightly to the side to allow a pink haze to appear around the gap.

"Are you Garibaldi?" asked a low clipped voice.

"Yes, I've come to give you something."

The door slid shut for a moment and Garibaldi heard the sound of footsteps walking away. After one minute of standing outside, appearing like a lemming with nowhere to go, the door finally opened and the fresh scent of women's flowery perfume blew past his nose.

Garibaldi entered the dark room with caution, hand still on his sidearm. "I'm here to see some Vanguard's about a message I want to send."

The silence hung in the room for a moment. Sounds of splashing water came from what Garibaldi thought was the bathroom. All these rooms were the same layout as his own quarters.

"Take a seat, Garibaldi. I'll be with you in just a moment. If you want, my partner can get you something. Tea?"

Garibaldi picked the most comfortable chair in the room and sat down. Glancing around he suddenly spotted someone sitting in the chair opposite. He hadn't been there on his first scan of the room.

Shocked, he jerked in his chair.

"My name's Samuel. Sorry to startle you. I love to do that to unsuspecting clients, makes the day worth it," the mischievous character said. "Now, what can we do for you, Mr Garibaldi?"

## Chapter 43

(Elvis Vaghoon)

**T**he one thing Elvis hated most was a traitor. Recent computer activity had indicated files and video footage had been copied and downloaded onto a data crystal. He had managed to force his workers to track down the source of the hacking and report back and, of course, it didn't take long for them to find the source of the illegal activity. Elvis grinned at the results.

As he scanned the CCTV footage in the main control room, he became aware of Talia Winters' involvement. There was nothing wrong with that, he could use that information to force her to perform more sexual acts and he'd had a thing for that blond woman since the moment she stepped foot on the station. Her scent was so alluring; he would end up with a hard-on just by the way she walked on the view screen. Even the vivid memories of him penetrating that lily-white ass when she first walked into his office turned him on.

But still, he had work to do and the idle fantasies would not help. The second character in the image represented a far more serious issue, and one he had to deal with carefully.

That in itself begged the question; *how do I deal with Michael Garibaldi?*

Studying the facts some more, he began to understand their plan. Talia and Garibaldi had gathered video footage of his past actions with female staff and stored them on a data crystal, with detailed documents and letters to send to the higher-ups in Casabianca. Elvis could not allow that data to leave the facility. He began making preparations to capture the ones involved.

But he had a problem. It would look too suspicious to hurl Garibaldi into the brig and he might lose more support than he already had. He also had another problem; someone else might just gather more information and leak that to the authorities too. Elvis knew he was dealing with a growing problem and it needed to be dealt with swiftly. He needed to make an example and stop this dead in its tracks. But what could he do? He was dealing with a thorny issue and if he pruned the wrong branch, he would get pricked.

Elvis glanced down at the reports that had been delivered to him by the Vanguardians a few hours ago. They were supposed to have left straight away, but the fight down at the *Privilege Bar* had delayed their departure, something Zack insisted on doing. Elvis now wished he'd just signed their papers and sent them on their way; at least then Garibaldi wouldn't have the means of getting his reports to the authorities. He could have even sent in some of his goons to remove the footage and show Talia the error of her ways.

*I trusted Garibaldi! How could he betray me?*

Elvis should have known Garibaldi was playing around with Talia Winters and that his involvement would herald his betrayal. But the main question still stood, *what do I do about this situation?*

Elvis knew he could not allow the Vanguardians to leave with the information in their hands. He had co-overtly installed surveillance cameras into important quarters and was now staring at the group through the computer monitor on his desk.

He glanced down at the glossy table and saw his own reflection looking back at him. He had been endlessly weary and agitated, struggling with so many burdens, trying to solve each issue faster than a new one could occur.

Despite all of this, he still had one more plan up his sleeve. It was a dangerous one and if anything backfired, it would have serious repercussions not only for him, but the entire facility.

Elvis reached forward and activated his internal communications device, "Zack Allan, please report to my office immediately."

"Yes sir," replied Zack after a moment's pause. Elvis leaned back in his chair and watched the video footage unfold. He felt his anger boil out of control, but fought to control his outrage and the urge to hit the desk. Garibaldi's betrayal and Talia's interference must be accounted for. He could not let them get away with their insubordination.

The definite proof was playing out for him to see, Garibaldi handing over the red data crystal and telling the blond haired Vanguardian the importance of the trip. He activated the sound as his curiosity got the better of him.

"I've got a very important package I need you to send to the authorities back on Casabianca. Don't worry about your status within the race, this data crystal holds my personal recommendations, which the generals back at home will approve."

Elvis watched Garibaldi place a comradely hand on the female Vanguardian's hand and hold it tight before continuing. "Our commander has been abusing a lot of people. It's time for a change. I hope you can help."

"Don't worry Garibaldi, with the credits and the importance rating for this mission, we will leave as soon as our vessel is ready to depart. Samuel, please inform the launch bay we'll be leaving in one hour."

Once Samuel sent his message to the launch bay, Elvis turned to his communication device and activated a channel, "Launch bay, this is Elvis Vaghoon, cancel that order to prepare the Vanguard ship. Under no circumstances is that vessel to leave the dock. Do I make my self clear?"

"But, sir, that's...a...Vanguard ship...we can't inter-"

Elvis interjected angrily, his voice booming throughout the room, "That's an order from your commanding officer and if you contradict me again I will have you and your entire family jettisoned into space."

"Y-Yes sir."

The communication display suddenly changed to that of his secretary, "Zack Allan is waiting to see you sir."

"Good, send him in." Elvis knew he had to tread carefully with Zack. He was Garibaldi's friend after all, and having him arrested out of the blue would alienate Zack, and most likely turn him against his cause. Elvis did not want to lose his security team as well. After all, Zack owed him for his willingness to allow the two Minbari prisoners to stay. Elvis liked Zack, and his need for...relaxation. He wondered how the Minbari prisoners were faring against his manly needs.

When Zack entered the room, Elvis shelved those thoughts and got to business.

"You called for me Sir." Zack began, standing to attention beside the glass-covered desk.

"I have a job for you. Its something I prefer not to do, but recent activities by one individual have entered my hands and I have no choice but to proceed."

"You can count on me sir." Zack replied, but Elvis knew that what he was about to ask was nothing short of a miracle. This order would test Zack's loyalty and probably cost him his job if news about it ever got out.

"What I am about to order you to do must not leave this room. No one must know, do you understand?" Zack stepped back a little, and Elvis knew that his last words had been received without any misunderstanding.

"Of course sir, you have my silence."

"Good," Elvis clasped his hands behind his back as he walked behind the glass-covered desk. He tapped the control panel with his index finger and the security feed came up on the main screen on the far side of the room. It showed a still image of the two Vanguards and Garibaldi passing a data crystal over to them. Despite Zack's ability to hide his emotions, he stared with disbelief. Elvis wondered what Zack was thinking. Was his friend trading in secrets that could threaten the livelihood of everyone in the station?

As expected, and not a moment too soon, Zack spoke up. "I don't understand sir, what am I seeing?"

Elvis sat down on his leather chair and manoeuvred himself into a comfortable position. He looked up; he did not like doing that.

"Sit..." Elvis made sure his tone bordered on an order.

Elvis let out a long, disappointing sigh. "In all my years working for this facility, it pains me to deal with traitors who would want to harm the fragile alliance we have with the workforce and its management. It only takes some misjudgement to tip the balance."

Zack looked confused, so Elvis continued. "Garibaldi has disappointed me in his recent activities. As the footage shows, he is currently giving classified

information to the two Vanguard. They must not be allowed to leave and I am stuck with a very difficult scenario."

"I'm sure it's just a mistake sir. Garibaldi could be giving them a personal message that does not concern the operation of this facility."

"It's only recently that I've noticed some unusual behaviours in Garibaldi's attitude. So with that in mind, I watched his movements and discovered this."

Elvis knew his explanation for spying on Garibaldi was rubbish. He knew that since he'd raped Talia Winters and countless female employees in his care, Garibaldi had been collecting evidence that would harm his position. With the support from other workers in the facility, he had managed to acquire quite a collection of images and data to be shared with the authorities. He could not let the data leave the facility.

"So, what do you want me to do?"

Zack had hit the nail on the head and Elvis felt a grin coming. But he resisted the urge and weighed up his options: He could do nothing and hope the Vanguard got lost or captured on their way to Casabianca -a scenario that seemed unrealistic. The second plan would be to have Garibaldi arrested and the data crystal seized. But in doing that, he risked a revolt within the ranks and possible mutiny. The last and most feasible option would be to have the Vanguard arrested or held until he could get the data crystal and decide what to do with them. It was one hell of a risk, but he had to juggle two dangers in one hand.

Elvis stood up from his chair and walked around the table to look down at Zack. "I want you to prevent the two Vanguard from leaving this facility. Arrest them for treason and have them in a holding cell as soon as possible."

Zack stood and stumbled back in utter shock, his skin turned to a shade of white he'd never seen before and words stuttered from his mouth. "B-B-But Sir, those are Vanguard, you can't-"

"I am the facilities commander here!" Elvis roared, "and I'm in charge! Do I make myself clear? I am fed up with all this insubordination."

Elvis backed away and released a long groan before continuing, "It's either that or have Garibaldi arrested. The disappearance of two Vanguard won't arouse suspicion. Have two of your loyal men detain them in secrecy. I will have no more of your rejections."

Elvis could tell that Zack had a flood of questions, but he made sure to stand to attention and make himself look intimidating. His pose normally silenced even the most talkative of types.

Sweat appeared on Zack's face and Elvis knew it would require very little to push him over the edge. He knew Zack was in his hands.

Elvis looked scoldingly at Zack, sniffing as his sweat dissolved into his uniform, a disgusting smell. "I don't like this any more than you do but my second in command has pushed me over the edge. I have no choice. Don't worry about the Vanguard, I don't plan on hurting them, only obtaining the data crystal. Once I have it in my possession, I will release them at a later date."

Zack still appeared dismayed and frozen to the spot. He needed nudging, "Do your job Zack, otherwise I'll have you demoted to garbage disposal and have Larry take your place!"

By the time Elvis had finished his sentence, he had already walked around his table and sat down at his desk. With one final look of authority he dismissed Zack and continued with more pressing matters. A new red head girl had just arrived at the facility and he needed some method of relaxation. He hoped that she

was as pure and clean as her image depicted. He preferred a change of colour, blonde and black haired women were so...common.

## Chapter 44

(Shai Alit Neroon)

It was a sad day for the warrior caste and a bad day for Neroon. Standing over the casket of his commanding officer Branmer, Neroon resented the way he had died and felt anger at how the humans had killed him.

It had been on a routine mission to an abandoned mining outpost when the commander met his doom, from the actions of some mechanical device the humans had left for the Minbari. After receiving some intelligence about a human settlement and a possible route to their hyperspace cities, Branmer had assumed it would be beneficial to track the humans to their city and capture it. Neroon did not know his exact reason for capturing a city, or what he'd intended to do with it, but that secret had died along with the famous war hero.

Now, as his commander lay in state for the ceremony the next day, he wondered what secrets Branmer had.

Moving through the warm air, he felt the spirit of Branmer linger near and wondered what he'd thought about this whole war with the humans. After all, the humans had attacked and killed Ducat and declared war on them, so it was only right that they adhered to that invitation and fulfilled the human request. Also Delenn, a member of the Grey Council, had voted in favour.

There was still talk about the war being an entity of its own and the possibility of it leading the warrior caste to ruin. It was a war without end and despite the obvious destruction of the human home world, they still popped out from the depths of hyperspace and mocked the Minbari with their presence, spreading propaganda and hate.

Neroon hated the humans, just as much as Branmer, who had showed his resolve on the line and fought brilliantly. But to be killed by some simple machine left as a booby trap...Neroon clenched his fists and vowed to find the humans who had made it.

"It's a tall order for the second in command." A voice broke silence.

Neroon slowly turned and faced Hedronn, member of the Grey Council, warrior caste; it was good to have a fellow comrade in the same room.

"Indeed, Branmer fulfilled his command admirably. It will be difficult to follow in his footsteps."

"The Grey Council has every confidence in your ability to command the *Ingata* on her long voyage of service."

"It is an honour to have the Grey Council presence on my vessel." Neroon bowed down and accepted the grace with open arms. He knew the tall order the Grey Council had placed upon his ship and crew. The former ship had fallen in battle at Earth, when it mysteriously exploded. During the final moments of the disaster, he had supervised the transfer of crew to a rescue vessel while Branmer was in command.

Now as he watched the stars through his port window, he only wondered what lay ahead.

Hedronn walked up to the casket and paid his respects in the form of bows and silent prayers. It only took a moment, but after he had completed his ritual, he turned to Neroon with a pressing matter clearly on his mind. Recognizing his body language, Neroon sensed a long and difficult mission ahead.

"I know this is not the time or place for such discussions, but there is a matter of utmost importance I must press upon you."

Neroon turned and met Hedronn's gaze head on. "Go on, you know the Grey Council has my full attention."

"One of our cruisers, transporting Delenn and the famous Shaal Mayan has not checked in for some time. The Council is getting nervous and would like you to go and investigate the disappearance."

"Are they sure it's a disappearance? They could just be unavailable." Neroon replied, spreading his arms. "It's hardly anything to worry about, nor urgent enough to trouble this Council."

"True," Hedronn said, "but I have a vested interest to see all members of the Grey Council returned safely. It's standard procedure to check in, and she did not."

Neroon could tell by his body language that he had more than just a passing interest in the Minbari female. It was true that members of the council cared for each other, but Neroon had watched closely these past years and noticed a subtle change in Hedronn's behaviour.

"You've been getting unusually close to Delenn, Hedronn. I did not know Council members fraternised with each other."

Hedronn seemed to lose his composure for a second, but had the skill and will to re-freeze it.

"Delenn is a friend as well as one of the nine. Nothing more, nothing less." Hedronn walked over to Neroon and handed him a data crystal. "This is the last known location of her cruiser before we lost contact. And let me remind you, losing Shaal Mayan is an affront to the entire Minbari Religious Caste. If anything were to happen to her, the warrior caste will have a dark shadow cast over it."

Neroon gritted his teeth. He did not like being threatened. He found it confusing how a friendly conversation had suddenly changed; perhaps he should not have pried too much into the relationship between Hedronn and Delenn. Perhaps he should have concentrated on the matter at hand; after all, he would have to live with the Grey Council on his ship, and any friction would cause problems.

"I've monitored the cruiser's last known coordinates and it will take a few days to reach its current location. I can't guarantee our success, but you have the full co-operation of my ship and its crew."

"That is all the Grey Council asks of you, Neroon. I have important matters to attend to. Keep me updated. Here's all the information you need on the last reported sighting."

Neroon accepted the data crystal and watched as Hedronn left the chambers. Delenn was a member of the Grey Council and it would be his duty and mission to make sure she and her friend were returned safely. But one thing was now on his mind. Where was the cruiser?

## Chapter 45

(Catherine Sakai)

**S**afe in orbit high above her latest exploratory mission to the Class-2 Planetoid in the Grid Epsilon system, Catherine studied the mineral readouts on her control board. She wondered how much money she could gain from such a find and what she would discover once she set foot on the planet.

Her main goal was to find a planet rich in Quantum 40 that could be used in the construction of Jump gates and to fuel the generators while hyperspace cities were built in the asteroid complexes. It was a rare material and contracts to find the richest sources were given a Priority One reading for transport and Vanguard support.

The planet wasn't much to look at; she stared through the windows in her canopy. Its dusty, thin clouds rolled around the globe with huge disturbances of volcanic activity and earthquakes. Its iron-laced ground had proved to be anything but habitable. It had a minimal atmosphere and she assumed the mining team would have to build domed structures just to live.

The Minbari would often attack mining colonies such as these and it made the job of living in safety difficult. Attacks happened all the time with mining facilities and she knew all too well the risks of staying in orbit for too long. Minbari had a knack for detecting Earth ships. It was not the main cruisers she was worried about, it was the smaller fighters that would spring out of nowhere and begin attacking with deadly weapons. Her small vessel could not withstand a direct assault and she often ended up in a cat and mouse race with the Minbari. So far she had developed the skill to stay one step ahead. She always had her picture of Sinclair to give her good luck.

Glued to the frame above the control readouts, a printed image of Sinclair always reminded her of how strong she would have to be to return to the man she loved. They might have split up after the destruction of Earth all those years ago, but recent events and loneliness had begun to change her views. Her latest quest would be a quick one and she could finally allocate her time to find the man and hopefully rekindle any flame he might still have.

She had received some up-to-date information from a passing Vanguard that Sinclair was now in charge of a Hyperspace city, a fact that surprised her profoundly. She vowed to finish up her exploration and finally see the man.

As readouts continued to download from the probes on the surface of the planet, proximity alarms began to screech throughout her cockpit to indicate the presence of an incoming ship.

Activating her engines to the max and heading to the nearest safe zone, a technique she used in dire situations like this, she surmised the incoming vessel to be Minbari and knew the asteroid belt near the outer fringes of the planet's orbit would be an ideal hiding place for her small craft. But there was a risk.

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, she manoeuvred her vessel in and around house-sized rocks and spinning debris. She knew one hit would rupture her hull and her body would explode in decompression. The thought sent a shiver up her spine.

Ice crystals spun perilously close to her ship and a few small fragments ricocheted on her canopy, causing Catherine to jump back in her chair, "Wow, that was close. Hold it together, baby, we're almost at the safe zone."

The safe zone was a marked location the Vanguards had discovered while they escorted Catherine to this system. As with all exploratory craft, the Vanguards would calculate the most secure place for a small craft of her design to hide in the event of an emergency. A small communicator could then be used to signal for help

in the event of something going wrong. Catherine knew the enemy vessel was out there and the random trajectories of the asteroids and reflective properties of the frozen ice would make it that much harder to find her.

"I only hope those bastards don't discover the raw material on that plant. It would be such a shame to lose the score of a lifetime."

After reaching the safe zone, she looked through the cloudy window and watched, as the unknown vessel, a shiny dot of quartz crystal, grew larger as it came closer.

What looked like a small dot slowly turned into mix of green-brown, a cylindrical object marked out by indentations, nothing like a Minbari craft.

Intrigued, Catherine activated her scanners and attempted to scan the mysterious object coming within range of the planet. But as expected, if the Vanguard's found a place to hide her ship, it would make sense that she could not scan out. The age-old saying still stood: If you can see the enemy, the enemy can see you.

Unable to obtain a readout of the ship, or to penetrate the dense rock formation of the asteroids, Catherine had to rely on recording cameras and her own eyes. It was old school, but she felt confident the unknown vessel had not seen her, despite the obvious fact she could still see it.

"What are you? What are you up to?" were the only words she could think. Then she had an idea.

Reaching to her wrist COM, she activated its recording function and began logging her latest discovery. "Approximately 14:25 an unidentified vessel entered the Grid Epsilon system and is currently in orbit around a Class-2 Planetoid at coordinates 471-18-25. It doesn't seem to be doing anything at the moment, just hovering, waiting. I'll continue to record and document everything as it happens."

As if the unknown vessel heard her commands, it began to open up and point in her general direction. "Umm, something's happening. The alien vessel is now facing me. It's opening up, it's...Beautiful, like a flower..."

Completely transfixed and in a trancelike state, Catherine stared at the front of the vessel as it began to glow with energy. It only took a second for it to register, but after the awe wore off, she realised that her ship was now staring down the barrel of a huge weapon.

*Shit! How could I have been so foolish, typical woman, mesmerised by flowers!* She cursed herself. With her hands on the controls, she attempted to move her vessel.

Too late.

A radiant stream of hot fire careened towards her vessel. There was little she could do but steer her vessel behind the nearest rock. The large asteroid filled her canopy and blocked the beams path. With a blinding roar, the asteroid shattered into bits and blew past her vessel, segments shattering all around her ship's framework and causing a rain of rock all around her.

Mouth agape in shock, she could not comprehend the luck needed to save her from that monstrous energy beam. But before she could breathe a sigh of relief, the gap between her vessel and the alien craft was completely cleared of all asteroids and she was now exposed.

Catherine clutched the uniform of the company she was working for and leaned back in the chair. She knew the alien vessel had a clear line of fire and the shrapnel from the asteroid had disabled her engines and shut down her main power. Alarms sounded and a crack in her canopy grew longer by the second. Catherine knew she was moments away from death and looked up at the only image of the

only man she really loved. Perhaps her vow to see Jeffrey Sinclair was too much to keep.

A voice billowed out through her mind, a telepathic link; *Catherine Sakai, your destiny with Jeffrey Sinclair waits, you must return with him to keep the timeline stable. Your destiny awaits.*

## Chapter 46

(Zack Allen)

Trying to forget the order he'd been forced to carry out, Zack took a long jog along his favourite trail, which snaked its way along the west side park and through his local sector before winding back to his home. Each residential block was allocated its own green wooded area for recreation. But in reality, the sectors were all interconnected to create a mixture of dazzling Reservations. In the centre of each city a lake, half a mile long, provided humidity for the air and a good source of water.

But Zack was not interested in the park's design. In fact, he was not interested in anything at the moment. The penetrating memories continued to haunt his waking state, reminding him of what he'd done.

A steady cloud of mist rolled up from the lake and began accumulating around Zack's feet. He stopped to catch his breath and sat on a park bench, he'd lost track of time and the asteroid complex had orbited an asteroid and the light from the sun diminished.

"Zack? Zack." A call came from his communicator. He looked down at the small device and sighed. He wanted more time to think.

"This is Zack, go ahead," he finally replied in a low voice.

"The city's management is about to perform a movement test on the city shield. You should get to a safe location or return to your home."

He acknowledged the warning and made his way back home. The test was advertised through all the notice boards, but Zack had been so preoccupied about the Vanguard arrest, he'd missed every single one.

As he marched himself to his apartment, images of that Minbari's fine body flashed through his mind and he became aroused by the sheer joy of having fun.

Of course, he should not be thinking such thoughts. He had just arrested two vanguards and celebrating like this was not the way he should behave.

He did not understand the feelings that raged through his body. He wanted to escape from it all. The insanity of the day, versus the feeling of holding a warm woman next to his skin. He smiled with ravenous lust and made his way to his apartment.

The walk up the stairs took much longer than it used to. He could have taken the lift, it would cover floors faster than on foot, but he would lose the time to think. He had to think about what he would do about Garibaldi and his traitorous habits. He could not blame the man. Elvis had raped Talia Winters and he knew Garibaldi was close to her. But he was confused on what to do.

When Zack reached the desired floor, he opened the stairwell door and walked down the tiled hallway to his apartment, located at the end. He felt a touch of excitement, knowing that his slave was waiting for him in all her glory.

Zack quickly shelved all thoughts about Garibaldi as his mind became preoccupied with his conquest. The thought of enjoying another night with the Minbari female sent shivers up his spine. It was probably not a good idea. He should

be solving the problem with Garibaldi. But Zack knew that he could only tackle that problem at work, and when his mind was clear. All he had to do now was get rid of his hard-on and sexual fantasies he'd been having since he began walking up the fifteenth flight of stairs.

Zack entered his PIN code into the lock and his apartment door opened to the view that would be his home for now. Since the asteroid complex was on high alert and ready to be abandoned, Zack decided he would petition a transfer to Euria once he had finished playing with his little slave.

However, upon entering his room, he saw her flat out on the floor in her silky Minbari gown. He leapt over to her, cradled her in his hands. Her skin appeared drained of life.

On the outside, he shouldn't care about his prisoner. He could just dispose of her like some used garbage and then move on to the next, Delenn. He wanted to try a fresh new toy, but no matter how hard he tried, looking down at her still form and blue lips, he could not help but feel a deep sense of pity and emotional connection.

He looked up towards the centre of the room and issued orders. "Communications."

A voice replied through the sound system Zack had in his room, a standard set-up for all apartments.

*Communication system online. Ready for instructions.*

*"Emergency call, Contact Doctor Zimmerman."*

*Please wait; your call is being processed.*

After a few beeps, then a muffled voice spoke out, as if Zack had just interrupted the man's deep nap. "What is it, Zack? I was trying to get some sleep."

"I-I have an emergency, Doc. Come to my apartment immediately. I need your help."

The doctor acknowledged his request and the channel was closed. Zack looked down at his Minbari woman, Shaal was her name, and felt her breathe, which gave him some level of relief.

Drained of energy, he could see the warmth in her skin vanish with every heartbeat. He didn't know what was going on, but he did not want her to die.

After ten minutes, there was a chime at the door and Zack let the doctor in. He was a tall, dark skinned man with a large chest and stomach. He had a small moustache and wore a medical uniform. Zack had no neighbours at the moment, but if this were a house call, everyone would have been peeking out of their doors, curious to know what was going on.

Doctor Zimmerman took the Minbari to the bed and placed her down. "You do know she's Minbari?"

Zack shot a sarcastic look towards the doctor. "Really, I hadn't noticed."

"So why are you bothering saving her life?"

"She may have information on the whereabouts of her people."

"Don't you mean she has one hell of a body you can abuse?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Doc?"

"It means that perhaps you should let this one rest in peace. I may not have a lot of love for the Minbari, but I wouldn't torture a living thing like this."

"Your point being?" Zack asked angrily.

"You shouldn't treat life forms as if they are pure objects to abuse. I find it hard that I'll have to treat this Minbari only to know that you will bring her to the edge of death again. I can't condone this kind of treatment."

"Do I need to remind you of the terror they have caused ten years ago? Have you forgotten our world that they destroyed...Earth?" Zack pointed to Shaal on the

bed, as if she was some morbid nightmare. He felt the heat well up around his temples and he wanted to throttle Zimmerman. But he knew that mentioning one man would make him obey. "I need her to answer my questions. Now, do your job or I'll report your insubordination to Elvis."

The doctor backed down; and so he should. Zack was not in the mood for a philosophical debate and he wanted Shaal back good health again. Not just so he could abuse her some more. No, he wanted her back to health again.

It took one whole day for Doctor Zimmerman to perform his magic. After Zack returned home from work, still debating what he should do about the Vanguard prisoners, he was relieved to see Shaal on her feet again.

He walked into the living room and saw Shaal back to consciousness with the doctor performing some final tests.

"She should be okay. Her body's metabolism is currently in overdrive and using up a lot of her energy. I had to give her several protein shots to compensate, but since my knowledge on Minbari physiology is limited, there's little I can do."

Zack leered at Shaal's well-built and sexy body. He wanted to penetrate it badly. "That's good, doctor. Don't worry, I'll give her plenty of *protein*."

Doctor Zimmerman did not notice Zack's sexual remark.

The doctor stood up, then headed towards the door and made some final comments. "I've taken some blood and tissue samples and will return with the results later." Zimmerman looked at Zack compassionately. "Please, don't abuse her any more. She's been through enough."

"That's enough," Zack frowned. He tried to remain calm. "You can go now doctor."

The doctor picked up his bag of medical equipment, closed his sample box and headed for the door. He took one final glance before leaving the Minbari at the mercy of Zack.

Once the doctor had left, Zack gazed back to the Minbari, smiled sadistically and moved in for his much desired pleasure. Climbing back onto the bed, and fearing for her life, Shaal clutched her stomach with her right hand and pleaded with him.

"Stop, please..."

Zack did not listen. He was filled with lustful desire, a pure desire that he completely gave in to. He wanted to see that Minbari on the bed, legs spread wide open, ready for him to take her completely.

He ignored her plea and moved closer. She shivered and waved her hands.

"Please don't do this... I can't have you rape me again," she begged.

Zack unbuttoned his uniform and moved closer.

Shaal backed up in complete terror. "Please. I'm pregnant with your baby!"

Zack froze on the spot, cold as a statue. His hands fell to the sides and he could not think past those words. Then blunt anger welled up from within and he exploded with fury.

"How dare you say that...there's no way I can get you pregnant! It's impossible!" He grabbed Shaal by her head bone, forced her onto the floor and dragged her over to the door. "To think I was developing some hint of compassion for you, and you repay me like this! You're the worst excuse for a living being I have ever met!"

Zack spat words as his rage boiled him from within. He could not stand the sight of the woman any more. He knew it would only be a matter of time before he killed her. After all the good he'd tried to do for her, the new clothes, food, how could she trick him? It was obvious that somehow she'd learned about his inability

to make children and decided to mock him that way. He decided that his kind gestures would stop.

Dragging her out of his apartment, he called several security personnel over and they escorted her to the holding cells. Zack asked her to be placed with the other Minbari and he followed along, just so he could speak his mind to Delenn.

Once they reached the security headquarters near the main gate to the asteroid complex; Zack un-cuffed Shaal, then tossed her into the holding room and turned to Delenn. "I never thought the Minbari would be dishonest, devious and damn right evil. I was going to spare you two the torture of meeting Bester, but after what Shaal did, you two can go to hell."

Zack shut the door and left the two prisoners alone to ponder over their fate.

## Chapter 47

(Shaal Mayan)

**S**haal had been around friends who began their child-bearing cycle. But she had never considered what it would be like to go through one herself.

Of course she wanted to have children in the near future, but not like this, not with a human. The concept itself was unthinkable. Even with what he'd done to her time and time again, such a result was unimaginable.

She stepped into the only light in the room and touched her flat stomach. She could see Delenn out of the corner of her tearful eye.

"Shaal?" she asked, voice layered with deep concern. "What's wrong? What did he do to you?"

She could not hold back the tears, and she wept out her words. "The human...he...he made me pregnant."

"What!" Delenn exclaimed, immediately rushing over to her aid. "T...That human! How was this possible?"

"He raped me over and over. When he was trying to do it again I told him."

"Shaal..." Delenn bowed her head and gazed into the shadows of the room. She appeared lost for words, but managed to pick some from the darkness. "This is all my fault. If I hadn't forced you to come on the trip, then you might not be in this situation."

"What am I to do, Delenn? I'm not married, I'm not ready for the child-bearing cycle and no one on our world would accept my baby." Shaal clutched her stomach as thoughts about rejection and torment rolled through her mind. The more Shaal thought about her problem, the deeper she fell into despair.

"I don't want to have a baby...I don't want to have a baby. T-That man, he-he's an animal... Please, Delenn..."

Shaal held on to Delenn's hand. She did not know why. What could she possibly do in a situation like this? They were both prisoners and powerless to stop the pregnancy even if they wanted to.

"I'm sorry Shaal," Delenn looked into her eyes and held her close and embraced her with both arms. "Are you sure you're pregnant?"

Shaal looked down at her stomach and knew for certain. "I'm sure. I can feel the changes, I can feel *it* growing inside of me and I feel a connection with its mind. It's growing very fast; I've never known a Minbari child to grow so fast. I never felt more confident in my answer, Delenn."

Shaal felt dizzy and sat on the hard shelf she found in the room. Shaal felt a tremendous strain on her body and she felt all her energy transferring towards her developing child. She knew it was not normal, and thoughts about what might be growing inside her frightened her. Delenn must have picked up on her thoughts because she walked over and hugged her tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Shaal. In Valen's name, we will find a way out of this."

## Chapter 48

(John Sheridan)

"Are you sure it will work?" John asked, trying to get across the gravity of the situation to the young technician.

"It will work. The technicians back on Casabianca have worked around the clock to install the new shield emitters and initialise the main cannons."

"I hope you are right. We're about to enter the heart of Minbari territory and I don't plan on engagement."

"You have nothing to worry about. Just remember, Captain, the shields are estimated to be able to withstand three direct hits before they're drained. It will take ten minutes to recharge the capacitors before the shields can be reactivated again. It's not like the shields on the cities, where the power plants can continually keep the field active."

John knew that power was a deciding factor on the shields. It was a relatively new technology that had been taken from another race when the main cities were built. They sucked huge amounts of energy to activate and if attacked, the emitters would drain unimaginable amounts of power from the capacitors.

Because the cities had hyperspace static converters, they had unlimited power to keep the shield up indefinitely. But smaller ships would have to build up a charge in order to put up a protective field around them.

Ship-bound shields had been tested to last hours with exposure to normal space elements, but once attacked, the power was drastically drained until the shield collapsed. But the *Agamemnon* shields had not been tested. The president was so determined to execute this mission that everyone had been tossed onboard and they'd departed immediately. He hadn't even had the time to grovel his wife's feet for forgiveness.

Still, what was done was done and there was nothing he could do about it now. He had to think about the future. "What about the cyborgs? I've heard stories about them going haywire. What assurances can you give me that they'll remain in their standby state?"

"Again captain," the technician said frustratedly. "What we're about to do has never been done before. You will just have to go on faith."

"Faith!" Sheridan replied sarcastically. "The last time I relied on faith, I was hurled out of my home and dragged into this mission."

Sheridan dismissed the useless technician and fixed his gaze on Susan, who was standing by one of the rear control panels. She gazed back, as if she knew he was about to ask a question.

"So, what's your story?" he asked.

Susan wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve and yawned. "I used to do trading in this area before the Minbari moved in and wiped out all the human

settlements. The president figured I could be useful if you guys got into trouble." Susan tapped a few keys on the control station and a bank of red lights turned green. "So, what are we transporting, Sheridan? The president told me nothing."

Sheridan wrestled with the question and ignored the fact that this new individual should have called him Captain. After some careful deliberation, he decided to fill her in on the top secret. After all, everyone on the ship was human and it would be too late for any traitors to warn the Minbari. Once they'd left the comfort of the city, all communication had been disabled and any means to leave the ship were also blocked. But none of that mattered; every human hated the Minbari.

"Very well, the president has asked me to transport a new super warrior to a Minbari colony. Find a suitable place to drop it off and then watch it cause complete chaos. She said it should be quite a show and it will be our first counter attack."

"Sounds simple enough," Susan replied, slight doubt in her tone. "But are you sure this will go according to plan? The last time I was in this sector, it was crawling with Minbari. How do you expect to get close to their world?"

Sheridan walked around the bridge and over to Susan. He was grinning like a scientist who had just invented the light bulb "We're going to jump right into their atmosphere, deploy the warrior and ride the ion storm currents that plague the planet."

Susan stepped back in shock, rejection plainly etched across her face, along with dismay. "You can't be serious. Do you know how many ships attempted a trick like that?"

"Last time a recall, over twenty ships."

"Yes. Now, do you know how many ships made it out alive?"

Sheridan thought for a moment and tried his best to remember any successful candidates. Coming up with a definitive answer he replied. "Nobody."

"Exactly my point. What makes you think you're any different?"

"You know Susan, you're very negative person."

"It's because I'm Russian."

"There's a first time for everything." Sheridan took his stand and allowed the words to flow from his heart. "I know my idea might not sound perfect, but it's time we took drastic action. The Minbari will never expect a surprise attack and we're the only ones capable of pulling off a stunt like this. My crew and I have escaped worse scrapes than this."

Susan backed down into her own corner, but not before she had the last word. "I suppose if I'm going to die, I might as well go out in a blaze of glory."

"That's the spirit." Sheridan smiled in victory and turned back towards his view screen that showed the swirling depths of hyperspace. With just a few days of travelling left to do, he decided that a break was in order.

The place smelt like burned flesh and it was dark. The lower parts of the ship held a weapon that would undoubtedly change the course of the war, but at what cost?

Sheridan weighed up all his options as he strolled down the metal-grated floor, inspecting the cargo as the swirling clouds of hyperspace glided past the dark film windows. No amount of light could brighten up this part of the ship.

Sheridan felt a tingle all the way to his bones as he stood in front of the mighty warrior. It had hard armour plastered all over its body and its face was encased in a helmet that was part of the man. Sheridan wondered what crime the poor man had committed to deserve such punishment, but when he looked at the

paper chart beside the still juggernaut, he learned that the human was no person, it was a clone. A pure man with no thoughts other than to follow orders.

He tossed the metal clipboard onto the floor and sighed with pity. It would have been good to have a data pad with the information, but paper was easy to burn and he just did not trust the hybrid machine that was hooked into everything.

Upon closer examination the creature breathed as normal. Its chest heaved to and fro as it stood there motionless. Sheridan stared at it, hand hovering over his sidearm, expecting the thing to move and attack.

It did not.

"It won't give you any problems." A voice spoke out from the entrance. "The prototype will not move or attack until we reach the planet."

"And why is that? This thing looks like it could wake up at any moment and tear this ship apart."

"It could," the scientist said. Sheridan recognised him from the command deck just a few hours ago. "This thing could cause chaos and there would be nothing we could do to stop it."

"So how do you have it under control?"

"We don't, Sheridan." The scientist said, pushing his luck with authority.

"You will call me Captain."

"Very well...Captain," the scientist slurred his words, deliberately. "The creature is only sedated. The tubes running into its neck feed it sedatives to keep it asleep. If I were to remove any of the tubes, it would wake up immediately and begin its attack."

Sheridan analysed the creature and the network of tubes that hung from the machines. Clear liquid was pumped into the creature and he knew that one jolt or nudge would spell disaster.

"So why do we have to transport something so dangerous, which is clearly unstable. I mean, come on, you have a bomb that needs to be kept asleep?" Sheridan complained, seeing no sense to this situation.

"These are desperate times, Sheridan, and with the Minbari cutting off all our supplies and hunting us down, it's time we take the fight to them." He moved closer. "You might feel unsafe with this thing in the belly of your ship, but it's my responsibility to keep it sedated until we can deliver it to the planet. After that it's none of our concern. It's been given free reign to run amuck on the surface and that's exactly what we intend to let it do."

"Do you really think this creature will do what you say it will?" Sheridan pointed to the half-human, half-robotic machine. Its huge cannon twitched as the creature fought to wake from its sleep-induced state.

"We tested the stability of the weapons and the organic system. It completely destroyed all life on a dying planet and after that, it took weeks of bombardment from orbit to finally take it out. We lost one orbital ship and it damaged three others once it gained enough power to shoot into orbit."

The scientist looked towards the semi-twitching warrior. "So, in answer to your question, this thing will do what it's designed for and more."

Sheridan took one final glance at the half-human monster and despite his better judgement; he left the subject alone and waited patiently to see the results.

## Chapter 49

(G'Kar)

No one knew how long a Narn could live on minimal life support but for G'Kar and his crew this was the only option left open for them.

After being attacked by the unrelenting enemy, they fled into the depths of hyperspace in some vain attempt to warn the Narn home world and the rest of the galaxy. But they had to get home first. With engines damaged, food supplies almost exhausted and air filters clogged, it would be days before everyone succumbed to their doom.

G'Kar did not like the prospect of failing to a silent killer. He wanted to get up and fight, see the enemy, kill the enemy with his bare hands, just like the Centauri! He hated the idea that his final moments would be to suffocate on his own ship with an empty belly with no one around to commemorate his victories. Instead he would be a long forgotten warrior floating in the depths of hyperspace.

"Do we have any reading on hyperspace beacons yet?" G'Kar asked, voice barely a whisper as he fought every word in the thin atmosphere.

"Nothing. There's nothing out there!"

G'Kar could tell by the tone in his second in command's voice that he was barely holding on. Most of the command staff was in the same state and only a few had the strength to fight on, steering the ship away from the armada of dark shadows.

"Those things...the shadows...they're the very essence of death. I can feel it."

On his flight from Ragesh 3, he barely escaped the invading force by the skin of his teeth. Most of the army he had sent to the planet to liberate it from the Centauri had been wiped out completely. The survivors sacrificed themselves to ensure he and a number of his crew made it off world.

G'Kar saw them all as heroes and he would have loved to die with them on the battlefield. He had never seen a finer force. But the Shadows' relentless pursuit chased them into hyperspace and he was left with two choices: he could stay in orbit and fight them alone, but one blast from their cutting weapons would have vaporised them instantly; or he could run and fight another day...he chose the latter.

But it turned out to be a game of cat and mouse (as the humans called it.) While their vessel had gained distance, it did not stop the enemy from firing their weapons indiscriminately into the void of hyperspace. He had hoped the hyperspace streams and thick clouds of particles would block their sensors. But a stray energy beam had struck his vessel and caused serious damage. Now, several days later, G'kar and his crew glided helplessly through hyperspace on minimal power with food and air running out.

"We must find a beacon soon and land on a habitable world. We can't die like this." G'Kar stressed as he remained fixed to his command chair.

"G'Kar," a new voice broke out. It was energetic, as if the Narn spotted something.

"What is it? Don't tell me they've found us?"

"N-No, its of unknown configuration. It looks like a transport of some kind."

"A transport." G'Kar heaved himself up from his womb-like chair and ordered the image on the viewer. It fizzled to life and a small craft could be seen diving in and out of the hyperspace clouds, peeking at the Narn vessel.

"Do you have a reading on it?"

"No, G'Kar, it's unlike anything we've seen before."

G'Kar spotted the writing on the side of the hull and although the vessel appeared alien in appearance, he recognised the letters. But he had to be sure first.

"Can you zoom in on the writing at the stern of the vessel?"

As ordered, the viewer was magnified and the text was readable. It was rumoured that a team of humans had found a way to travel through hyperspace without the need for beacons. This was completely controversial of course and no one believed it, but once he saw the human text on the side of the hull, he immediately opened a channel to the *Merry Celesta*.

"This is the Narn vessel *Col'dicar*. We are in dire need of help and we would be eternally grateful for any assistance you could provide."

There was a silence as the small vessel stopped and appeared to consider the message. He knew humans controlled the ship and it was very rare for a human to refuse a distress call. That was what made them different than all the other species in the galaxy.

"This is the Vanguard vessel *Merry Celesta*. We've detected your distress signal and will be glad to help. Please send us your status; fuel readout and life support data immediately so we can plan the appropriate route. I guess you want to leave hyperspace without getting lost?"

"That would be most helpful. My crew greatly appreciates any assistance you can provide." G'Kar signalled his second to send the data, but the other Narn had second thoughts.

"G'Kar, are you sure you want to send them our data? It might be a trap."

The thin air must have been affecting his second. "Have the humans ever betrayed us? We helped them in their war, they can be trusted. The humans are honourable compared to other races in the galaxy. Besides, we have no choice."

With a wave of his hand, G'Kar's second in command sent the data and there was a silence for two minutes. Just when G'Kar was about to ask if everything was okay, the Vanguard spoke.

"Looks like you're in pretty bad shape. I've detected a small planet nearby in normal space that should provide you cover and the resources to repair your ship. Please set your navigation system to my vessel and follow closely behind. If you get lost, you won't have the resources to reach the planet alive."

G'Kar offered his sincere thanks and followed the small Vanguard vessel through the thick cloudbanks that swayed through hyperspace.

"G'Kar, are you sure you can trust these humans? We're using the last of our resources. It could be the enemy playing some game."

G'Kar remained in his chair and stared into the depths of space. It could have been a trap, but the attitude of the male human was too genuine. It was as if he'd just interrupted someone's nap. It could not be a trap. "You shouldn't question my judgement in front of others. It adds distrust to the whole crew. I know what I am doing so please follow orders."

His second apologised and the ship heaved forward as it jumped into normal space.

\*

**A**pprehension was high. Did the Vanguard lead them into the heart of an invading fleet? Would their suffering finally end?

No!

G'Kar looked ahead at the marble of a planet before them. Its ocean-covered surface had several small continents of landmass and white clouds hovered above the surface. Its enchanting glow reflected the sun's light in a blinding display that forced G'Kar to turn off the screen. Never before had he seen such a wonderful sight. The days of near death experience had finally ended. He could finally feel some level of hope.

A call came through from the Vanguard. "No enemy ships have been detected and there's primitive life on the continents. But if you land your ship on the Southeast Grid 44 you should have no problem. We have to depart now, my comrade and I wish you luck."

G'Kar gazed at the small vessel as it jumped into hyperspace. Before he could thank them, the vortex closed and the blue shimmering world awaited them. G'Kar knew many questions would follow. Would this planet be safe to stay on? Did the Vanguard lead them into a trap? Was the enemy on its way now?

Only time would tell.

## Chapter 50

(Vanguard, Alice Jones)

Over three days had passed and Alice had seen no sign of Elvis. She was told repeatedly he would be around to explain his actions, but as time went on, she began to think he'd forgotten about her.

"How long will we be forced to wait?" she sneered at the guard who was outside her door. Her sudden outburst must have woke him because he had not been chatting to anyone for a whole hour.

"I don't know, ma'am. I've been instructed to watch over you during the day until I am relieved by the night shift."

"This is ludicrous," Alice sniffed. "You have no right to detain us. We are Vanguards--"

A voice spoke up from the other side of the corridor. A tired Zack marched towards Alice with his hands in his pockets. Something was bothering him, Alice could tell by the puzzled look in his face. "You're quite right. We should not treat you like this, but it's Elvis's order. He believes you're in possession of a data crystal that Garibaldi gave you. If you hand it over to me, you will be free to go; he also said that he's willing to write a 'mission delivery job' for the help you provided. He's seen your insignias, he knows you're training and you're in a race." Zack moved closer, his hands still in his pockets. "I suggest you take the offer while you can."

Alice was stuck with a moral dilemma. She could take the offer and return to present the official document stating that her team had been removed from the race to participate in an official mission. This, by default, would promote them to the status of Intermediate level. But this would also go against the code of the Vanguards. They were sworn by oath that once they accepted a job, they'd make sure the letter was delivered even if it cost them their life. The content of such a message was always kept secret, so they could be carrying a message that could save or kill millions of people. Alice was not going to take the easy way out

"I will have to decline the offer. It would be disrespectful to the Vanguard guild if I did that."

Zack appeared regretful. "I'm sorry, if you are not willing to help yourselves, then there's nothing I can do. Elvis would like to see you soon, so be prepared."

With those final words, the security officer turned in the hallway and walked out of sight. Alice knew this day was about to get interesting.

\*

Alice was escorted to Elvis's office alone. She wondered why Samuel was left behind. Sure, he wanted to come and protect Alice, but the guard at the door had other ideas. So, with little choice, Alice walked through the offices and watched uneasily as everybody suddenly hid behind their desks and the rattle of computer keyboards suddenly stopped. The silence was uncanny. Alice did not like it one bit.

Elvis's office was on the other side of the room with his name bronzed on a plaque signalling he was the top dog.

With a cautious hand on the handle, she pressed down and the door creaked open.

"Alice Johns?" Replied the dark skinned man behind the desk. "Please, sit down."

Alice reluctantly walked past the threshold that split his office from the rest of the complex. She felt like a stranger in a foreign land, vulnerable. There was no one to protect her, no one to speak on her behalf. Anything could happen and the only thing she believed would protect her was her Vanguard status.

"Do you know why you're being detained?" he said, staring at his computer screen, avoiding eye contact.

"N-No, detaining me or detaining a Vanguard is unthinkable. I can't believe you've done something like that."

Elvis smiled and looked into Alice's eyes. "Believe me, Alice, when I say that I did not want any of this. I respect the Vanguards just as much as anyone, but someone," Elvis paused and appeared to re-evaluate a word he used. "Some traitor gave you a data crystal that must not leave this facility. If you hand it over, you and your partner can leave."

Elvis paused for a moment, as he appeared to think.

"As a token of my appreciation and an apology for all your troubles I'm willing to give you a class five mark of approval. Mission status." He leaned back in his chair and stretched his muscular body beneath his blue shirt.

"That's a very tempting offer, Elvis, but you should know that once a Vanguard takes a job, they must deliver that message. To hand it over would be breaking the oath we took."

"I know," Elvis replied with understanding. "It's a noble gesture, but under the circumstances, I am sure you can bend the rules."

Elvis moved forward, spouting more words of wisdom. "You see, right now, you're way overdue for your race. The race organisers think you, your vessel and partner are dead." He then leaned back, believing he'd won the argument. "Now, I can release you and you'll return a failed Vanguard, a prospect that would scar you for life, or I can create an official mission status that will tell the race officials that you were employed to fill out a mission of utmost importance. This will, by default, graduate you to the next level."

Alice wrestled with the offer and could not make up her mind. It was a sound problem she was in. All hopes to win the race were over and she would be classed as missing in action. If she turned up later, that would class her team as unfit. She

would lose all status and be removed from the guild. And what was more terrifying was the damage this could cause for her partner. A prospect she was not looking forward to.

Alice looked at Elvis and tried to discover any sign of deception. A sweaty forehead, eyes pointed in the wrong direction, even a nervous swallow. But there was none. The man was as calm as a rock.

"I'll have to discuss this offer with Samuel. We work as a team."

"I think that's a start. But don't take too long about it. The offer will expire in one day. If you don't hand the crystal over, you and your partner will be searched invasively, your ship destroyed and you two will be dumped on a random planet with a long-range communicator to call for help. Accept my offer or not, I will get what I want. The choice is yours yours, *my sweet*."

Alice swallowed that knot in her throat. There was little choice, but she had to discuss it with Samuel. Perhaps he could figure a way around this mess.

## Chapter 51

(Londo Mollari)

"Vir, get in here now!" Londo's voice boomed through the bulkheads as his faithful servant shuffled into his quarters.

"Do you see that?" Londo pointed to a video image on his monitor. It showed hyperspace, nothing more.

"Umm, see what Londo?" Vir asked.

"Look, you idiot...The trail from the Narn cruiser. It's leading off the beacon away from the main hyperspace lanes. The Narns think they can escape, but they're wrong. I will have G'Kar's head on a stick!"

"But don't you think that's a little dangerous, Londo? I am sure the Narns are all dead now. Look, they even went off the beacon and are lost in hyperspace."

London shot Vir a look of scorn. "Don't mock my thoughts. If there's one thing I've learned, that is to never underestimate the Narns...they'll be one step ahead of us if they get the chance, and I will not have G'Kar get away with killing my nephew."

London walked over to his collection of alcoholic beverages and poured himself another glass. He then made the decision to order the ship deeper into hyperspace. He could see the objection in Vir's eyes.

The one question that remained in his mind was: why did the Narns leave a perfectly good planet? What happened to the fleet, and why did they advance deep into hyperspace where they could easily get lost?

But at the end of the day, he had to find those animals and make them pay. There was only one thing for it: to physically go and investigate. They had the Narn's engine signature and that would lead them to them shortly.

"Londo, I think you have drunk too much. Aren't you forgetting your prior engagement?" Vir interjected, irritating the man profoundly.

"Oh, go away, Vir, why must you bother me at all hours of the day? You're like all three of my wives put together..." Londo paused for a moment. "Ohh, my three wives, the very cause of all my suffering. If it weren't for them, I would be a happy man."

Vir moved closer, desperate to say something. "But Londo...There's a call for you. All three of your wives demand your presence. You must..."

"I must nothing, Vir!" Londo shouted, throwing his glass across the room and reveling in the satisfying sound of destruction. "I'm fed up with those leeches sucking on my very soul. Day in and day out, those hags always hound me. Even halfway across the galaxy, I can't get away from them!"

Londo coughed up some mucus from deep within his throat and spat it out on the tray beside him. Vir had a look of disgust on his face as Londo handed him the tray. "Clean that up."

Reluctantly Vir trotted off to do what he was told. Londo expected some level of resistance as his assistant had become difficult recently, but his behaviour had somewhat improved after the incident down on Ragesh 3.

Returning to the matter at hand, Londo moved up to the screen, looked down at the receive button and evaluated his options.

He could: press the button and talk to his wives, a thought that troubled him most.

His second choice would be to reject their call and hope the distance would be too much for them to follow. Londo remembered the time he had been relaxing on a far away colony on the edge of Centauri space. He had ignored his wives' calls for weeks and after a month of pleasure, he was suddenly attacked by all three of his wives when he returned to his hotel room. The memory was vivid, the attack sound in his mind. Would Londo learn from his mistakes?

He pressed the reject button and hissed through his teeth. "Those barbaric leeches can chase me to the end of the galaxy, I'll never surrender to them."

Londo looked back towards the swirling clouds of hyperspace and saw his face in the glass. Was it a look of a guilty man? Was he looking at the reflection of an emperor with hard choices to make?

Londo grinned. Being emperor of Centauri Prime did sound good. So good it gave him ideas. If he could use the technology from one of the legendary hyperspace cities, he could rule his home world and banish his wives. Then again, he had to deal with the mundane task of catching G'Kar and his band of misfits. How could he rule when a group of Narns murdered a Centauri colony and his nephew? He had to bring the Narns to justice no matter how long it took.

\*

**F**or two hours Londo's capital ship searched the depths of hyperspace as he grew ever more worried about their location. Following a small trail that deteriorated the longer they stayed in the hyperspace was one of the most risky manoeuvres Londo made so far.

Pacing his quarters anxiously, waiting for a result, Londo could wait no longer. He rattled on his COM unit demanding updates. "What's taking so long? You should contact me every half-hour. It's been over half an hour already!"

A hesitant voice broke spoke through the background static. "S-Sorry, Londo." Londo recognised that voice.

"Vir, is that you?"

"Y-Yes."

"Well, stop stumbling around you fool, tell me what's going on!"

"We've detected a jump point made by the Narn cruiser."

Londo interjected, barking mad. "Why didn't you tell me sooner. Jump out into normal space and hunt them down."

There was an uneasy silence on the COM before Vir spoke up again.

"Londo, we're currently in an uncharted area of space. From our probe, we're in a densely populated solar system consisting of hundreds of planets."

Londo poured himself another glass of alcohol and replied coldly. "I don't want any excuses. Jump into normal space and hunt them down."

Londo cut the communication channel and decided to leave the confines of his small room. It took him five minutes to reach the sealed chambers in the lower part of the ship, but the person he was visiting needed his words. Londo honoured him that much. Once he cracked the sealed door and walked into the cold dark room, he ordered the lights on and he stepped in front of a silver patterned drawer that was used to house objects of great importance. He grabbed hold of the metallic bar and pulled effortlessly. Once the drawer was fully extended he walked around and saw his nephew in a frozen state, with that same horrid look on his face, albeit, partly decomposed.

"Carn, I will avenge your death, mark my words. We're closing in on the Narn and I will make him beg for your forgiveness. I'm sorry I was not there sooner."

Londo placed the glass of alcohol to his mouth and drank the whole lot in one shot. After the initial buzz wore off from the drink sliding down his throat, he focused on the moment. "There are times you make silly choices. And there are times I understand what you have done. I hope she was worth it, just like the time I lost my beloved Adeira. I know just how you feel. May you rest in peace my nephew. You'll be missed."

He paused for a moment before saying some final words. "I will make sure you receive a proper burial back on Centauri Prime. Hold on there, your soul will be with the great ones soon."

Londo gently closed the drawer and left the room. He felt his nephew's presence in the room; he knew the spirit would stay with the body until a proper ritual could be preformed.

\*

**L**ondo stepped onto the command deck of the cruiser and took in the situation at a glance. Lights flickered in the background and sounds of people jostled past each other until everyone was silent as if they had just noticed him.

Speaking with authority he began. "At ease gentlemen." He walked to the centre of the room. "What's our current status?"

There was a brief pause until somebody was brave enough to answer the question.

"We have jumped into normal space," one crewmember said. Londo could not remember his name, despite him being one of the bridge officers. He put that lack of judgement down to the alcohol he ingested a few minutes ago. He listened to the man continue his sentence. "But we're unable to find the Narn cruiser."

"What?" Londo exploded. "There're in normal space, how hard can it be to track a simple ship?"

Londo watched the man fidget with his communicator. "The radiation from this part of space is obscuring the Narns' engine readouts. Even if they made it this far, chances are that they landed on one of those planets to conduct repairs."

"So, start scanning the planets for the Narn ship."

More excuses hit Londo like an avalanche of stone and dirt.

“We can’t scan the planets from this distance. We will have to orbit each planet and take individual readings. Even then, the results would be badly distorted. The cosmic radiation is causing severe disruption to the scanners.”

“Won’t the Narns be affected by the radiation? Won’t we?” Londo placed his hands on his genitals and prayed to the Great Maker that he would have all six appendages intact after this was all over

“The radiation is not strong enough to penetrate the armour on the hull, or the planets’ atmospheres, but it’s enough to disrupt our scans. There are over one hundred planets in this solar system alone. It’s going to take a long time to scan them all manually.”

Londo sat down on his womblike chair and placed his left hand to his chin. “I guess we’d better get started.”

Londo would stay on the command deck for a few more minutes before retiring for the rest of the day. No matter how long it took, he would find the renegade Narns if it were the last thing he did.

## Chapter 52

(Elizabeth Lochley)

**T**he damage to her city was not as bad as she had thought. Of course it would take a fleet of Minbari ships to inflict much damage on a city this size and the design was so impressive, she had never understood the layout of shield cables and joints. The city was designed in such a way that it had to hold the weight of all the water, people, land and materials. Energy was siphoned from the friction core located at the centre of the city and any energy weapon used on the city would cause it to dissipate quickly down the channels and into the core, providing power to the city. Elizabeth had seen the effect of this technology from her location on the control deck when the Minbari ship fired its weapons. Streetlights and buildings would light up as the energy beam struck telling her that this city was receiving a tremendous amount of energy.

So far the city was running off three nuclear reactors at different locations throughout the city. The reactors provided power to the emergency and life support systems and they were also used as the primary source of charging power to force the city into hyperspace. Once the city was in hyperspace, the nuclear reactors would shut down and the friction core would take over, providing unlimited power for eternity.

Elizabeth parked her vehicle at the intersection that was closed off due to the damage the Minbari had caused. Huge gouges had been created in a diagonal line all the way to the upper town district. The damage looked severe, but repair bots had already removed the damaged segments and material had already begun to pile up for the repairs. The engineer she had spoken to earlier appeared from the crowd of volunteer workers who marched up to greet her.

“Elizabeth.” His hands were open, in a warm greeting. “It was not necessary for you to come all the way down here. I told you this over the intercom.”

“Well, I could not sit around and ignore what happened. This will be my city soon and I want to know everything about it. I’ve been studying the designs and learning the layout since the day I left the academy.”

Walking over to one of the damaged segments, Elizabeth stared down a huge twelve-deck hole that ripped through the main street and some of the buildings before disappearing beyond her vision.

“What’s the progress?”

The engineer removed his hat and ran his gaze over the damaged area. “It looks worse than it actually is. Most of it was cosmetic damage that will take considerable time to repair, but my teams have been working around the clock to restore all the utilities to this area.”

“What’s been affected?”

“We’ve restored the main transport track in and out of this section. The electric and communication lines had been done today and the water and sewer lines will be the next to be fixed. But our manpower is stretched thin because Elvis has given high priority to getting the hyperspace engines installed and operating. He wants both cities ready to go at a moment’s notice. I guess the Minbari showing up kind of spooked him.”

Elizabeth dismissed the last comment because that man did not appear to get spooked at anything. She had heard the rumours about his behaviour and the type of man he was. It stood to reason that he wanted the cities ready at a moment’s notice so he could escape in luxury and gain the credit for quick thinking when it was the workers that had done all the hard work.

“So, when will you officially become the commander?”

Elizabeth looked at the engineer; the question had been asked just a bit too casually. But of course he did have a point.

“I’ve received no orders at the moment. The only person that can assign me the post is Elvis and we all know what type of man he is.”

Elizabeth was suddenly horrified by the words that left her mouth. She wanted to keep her opinions to herself and blabbing on about the man was dangerous. But she was comforted when the engineer gave her a look of agreement. Just then, one of the workers caused a three-foot electrical arc that shorted out several tools and caused a small fire beside one of the substations. With more work than he could handle, the worker excused himself and left Elizabeth alone.

The man’s question about when she would officially be given command of the city plagued her mind. She had checked up on the second city docked beside, but that had yet to be allocated a commander. It had been announced that she would be given the keys to this city.

She had packed her belongings and moved into the officers’ building located near the central control tower that oversaw every operation in the city. But her appointment as the commander had yet to be finalized. Elizabeth had been looking forward to the big celebration and the parties that would follow all around the city. But so far, everyone was holding their breath as the decision had yet to be made.

As she continued to inspect the damage caused by the attack, she knew it would take more than workers and steel to repair the city’s mental scars. If she could offer her certainty, the city would be okay.

Once she became the commander Elizabeth would assure the people that this city would not become a floating ~~mass~~ wreck in hyperspace. It would be a colony guided by one person who would unify the city and its people.

More damage could be seen past the local park and close to the lake that provided all the water the city needed. As if by fate, the line of destruction had ended just beside the large barrier that held the water back. If it were penetrated, thousands of tons of water would have spilled down the gash and flooded all the decks below. She was glad the Minbari were stopped and disaster averted.

She looked up and saw Elvis walking along the path towards what looked like a residential complex. She wondered what he was up to, but was smart enough to stay out of his way. The rumours grew worse the more she learned about the man. In the end she wished she had never asked.

## Chapter 53

(Zack Allen)

Zack always knew the Minbari was playing with his mind; it was a common assault in any warfare. But this line of assault was more powerful and damning than anything he had yet to imagine. How she knew about his desire to have children was beyond him. He could almost kill the woman for what she had done.

*Damn that bitch, using that as an excuse to stop me from raping her.*

There were many reasons he wanted to keep the woman. First she was the only Minbari he penetrated sexually and he was developing some deep-rooted emotions for the girl. But who was he kidding. Would a rape victim fall in love with her attacker?

That was one of the many questions that rattled around in his mind. It was only recently he began to notice changes in her behaviour. Perhaps she was beginning to like his touch, albeit, she would never confess. Perhaps she liked the human interaction?

Zack shock his head. He did not know where that line of questioning came from but it had to stop. At the moment the Minbari called Shaal was being transferred to the holding cells back on the main complex populated by a skeleton crew. He wanted to keep the prisoners for leverage in case their fellow Minbari came looking for them. But his second and more important reason was he could use Shaal as a tool so he could use Delenn when he was desperate to rape some more.

But he could not get those words out of her mind. The begging, the pleading.

When he got back to his office he found a report waiting for him. It was about Shaal collapsing again in the holding cell the two Minbari were occupying. The doctor stated that her body was going through a change and a strange substance was being produced in her blood. Perhaps he had given her a sexually transmitted disease of some kind. Maybe he had picked something up from the Narn female he'd slept with months ago that had mutated in his body. He felt fine, but his compassion for the Minbari was long gone. The words she said scarred him for life.

*How could she do that to me?"*

He did plan on venting her into space once he'd finished playing with her friend. But at the moment, he did not want anything to do with them.

\*

It was four thirty in the afternoon and Zack was finishing up some status reports when he had an unexpected visit from Elvis.

Elvis strolled in and looked at the assortment of monitors that littered Zack's office. Zack wondered what he wanted, perhaps it was something to do with Garibaldi, but he kept quiet and waited for him to speak.

Elvis appeared normal for a man of his age, still in an immaculate suit with a green tie today no less. Why anyone would want to dress like that was beyond him,

but Zack was the commander of the complex and not a stylist. But Zack was only looking for things to occupy his mind in the deadly silence.

"Did the Vanguard's offer the data crystal yet?" Elvis began. Zack felt relieved the silent treatment was now over.

"No, they're still claiming that it will seriously damage their honour if they do that. The only way for them to hand over the data crystal is if Garibaldi cancels the contract, which I am sure he'll not do...Sir." Zack said shuffled papers this way and that, making himself look as busy as possible. It often worked, but not today.

"I see. And what about the two Minbari prisoners. Have you gotten anything out of them?"

Zack looked into his eyes. He finally knew what Elvis was about to say, it was in his body language. Pity, Zack had really wanted to work on Delenn next.

"No, nothing at the moment. I still think it's-"

Elvis cut him off with a wave of his muscular hand, that same hand he used to hold down many of his victims. "I'm not interested in excuses. If they won't give us any information, I want them vented into space. They're spooking the workforce. You had your fun, I think it's time we let them go."

Zack could almost see Elvis's point of view. The two Minbari had been posing a little bit of a problem for the local workforce. Some of the workers had strong religious beliefs that they were demons sent to corrupt the facility and bestow bad luck on the cities. They had already come in their huge cruiser and killed over thirty people. Something had to be done. But Zack really wanted to have his fun.

"But sir, if I could only have a few more weeks with them, I have-"

"I know what you've been doing to them Zack. I gave you plenty of time to ~~for~~ fill your sexual lust. If you've neglected to rape both of them that's your own fault. Now I want those two gone today. Do I make myself clear?"

Zack gazed down at his notes and fiddled with an electronic marker. He stared deep into his own soul, considering the damage Shaal caused. Sure she was an attractive Minbari to molest and Delenn was second best, but the words Shaal had said could not be forgiven. She'd fooled him, hurt him and would have given him false hope if he had been gullible enough to believe her story. He looked defiantly back at Elvis in agreement.

"No problem, I'll have them at the airlock right now. Would you like to witness the event?"

"Don't mind if I do. I always have a thing for Minbari and the vacuum of space." Elvis smiled in collaboration with Zack, who got up from his desk and made his way over to the cells.

"So, how long do you think it will take for the gas that is dissolved in their blood to explode into the vacuum?" Zack asked, entering his key code in the holding block.

"I've seen it before. The body tends to freeze before that happens. Eyes as crystal and dead before they even know it." Elvis shrugged off a few creases in his uniform and followed Zack into the holding cells.

From his office, Zack could faintly hear his communicator beeping. He decided to ignore the call and proceed with the execution.

On the way there, Zack asked if Elvis would like to have the execution broadcast throughout the complex. To his surprise, Elvis declined, saying he didn't want to interrupt the workday and a simple announcement would do. Besides, he added with relish, he wanted this event to be his personal showing.

"Come," Elvis said as he gestured to the holding cell the two Minbari were in. "I know you had your fun, but the people come first. Let's finish this and return to our duties. You're a good man Zack, I'm glad to have you on our team."

Elvis smiled and his lily-white teeth glowed mischievously. Zack returned the smile, thinking eagerly of the possibilities that awaited him as Elvis's right-hand man.

With his access code entered into the door panel, the door clicked open and Zack walked in accompanied by Elvis. Huddled in the corner, rightly so, Shaal and Delenn clutched each other and waited for their doom. At the moment they had no idea death was imminent.

"If you've come to question us, we will tell you nothing. Minbari do not betray their own people." Delenn snapped.

Elvis cackled slightly, like an evil witch.

"No," He said. "You've come to the end of the line. You are of no use to us."

Outrageously, Shaal knelt down to her knees and begged to live. Despite it all, Zack felt a twinge of pity underneath his anger at her.

"But you can't do this. I have your baby inside me, you will kill your only child."

"If you won't tell us about your fleet's movements and defences, you are no use to us."

Elvis interjected before Zack could think. "Don't listen to her. It's a trick, these Minbari are animals. They will say anything, get into your skin and turn you against us. I bet she offered herself unconditionally if you leave her friend alone." Elvis glanced at Delenn. Although he preferred humans, the thought about trying some new meat was tempting. But it was not enough.

The deep anger slowly crept to the surface and Zack could no longer hold it back. He snapped. "I've had enough of your trickery Shaal..." He grabbed her by the scruff of her neck. "I can't get you pregnant. I've tried to have children with other people but it's impossible. I'm infertile, unable to..." Zack looked down, tears flowing from his eyes, heart wrenched from his chest.

"I don't know how you found out about my weakness, my disability, but using that excuse to delay your execution is unforgivable. I'll personally escort you to the air lock and turn the key myself."

Zack dragged Shaal out of the room and down the corridor to the hanger bay. He saw Elvis escort Delenn not far behind, but Zack was so pumped up with anger, he wanted every bump to hurt Shaal. He had never felt anger on a scale like this. He wanted to kill the bitch right now.

Partly empty due to the evacuation and the hour, Zack rushed into the hanger bay with Elvis not far behind. Shaal, bruised and maimed from being dragged along the floor, got to her feet, only to be hurled around.

"Stay on the floor!" Zack demanded. He looked around for an available airlock, found number one airlock empty and smiled.

"Meet your new home."

Together, Elvis and Zack hurled the two Minbari into the airlock and the heavy steel door closed behind with a loud thunderous din. Peeping through the view window on the door, Zack saw Shaal kneel on the floor. She had continually said he was the father, but he knew it was impossible.

"Zack, you know what to do." Elvis reminded.

"I know. That bitch has been tormenting me far too long. I can't believe what she said." Zack scowled.

"You know what these Minbari are like. They destroyed our world, killed millions of our people. Do you really think you mean anything to them? Those two would kill you where you stand, you know this."

"Do you mind if I have the key. I want to do it myself."

Elvis looked down at the large key in his hands and he extended it towards him. "Sure, You've come a long way Zack."

Several security personal rushed into the room, late.

"You're a little late, gentleman." Elvis snapped. "All of you were ordered to the holding cells five minutes ago."

"Sorry sir, we had some trouble down on maintenance. Won't happen again."

"I can guarantee it. That insubordination will cost you dearly. Now wait in the observation booth with Zack and stay there for the rest of the day. If you're lucky I might remember to return you to your family."

Just at that moment, Elvis received a call on his personal communicator. As he left the loading bay, he wished Zack luck and asked him to remember his lesson. It would have been normal for Elvis to witness the execution, but the call was urgent, and he'd seen rapid decompression before. "Return the key to me later," were his last words.

Zack looked at the deadly key with a concentrated glower. He hesitated to turn the key, thinking of all the fun he'd had with her in the past – surely that was the only reason he was hesitating? Then again, memories of her hurtful words raced through his mind. The horror of hearing her say she was pregnant with his child.

A beep on his communicator brought him back to reality, but once he saw the caller ID was from the doctor, he decided to ignore it. He knew that the doctor wanted. He wanted the Minbari for himself, for experiments.

But Zack had other ideas. She crossed the line and she didn't warrant experimentation.

He rejected the call, walked over to the small room beside the airlock and nodded to a few security personnel who were waiting inside. They said nothing as Zack walked up to the dripping damp window with algae and mildew climbing up the sides.

Huddled on the floor, Shaal and Delenn waited for their doom. Zack could only imagine the horrors going through their minds. It was only weeks ago that Elvis vented all the children and other Minbari out the airlock, now he was about to murder two females. Could he do such a thing?

Hell yeah, after stepping on that Minbari soldier and killing him on the spike back on the Minbari cruiser, he could do anything. So venting two Minbari prisoners into space should be easy. So why was he hesitant?

Their system was ready, green lights all along the board. The two females cowered in the middle of the grated room and condensation dripped from all four walls, everything was ready. Zack tried to justify his actions. Why was Elvis not here to do this? Suddenly he remembered the answer, he was called away. Perhaps the reason for his hesitation rested with the fact he would have to kill two defenceless people. But he had nothing to be proud of, he had raped, mutilated and beaten Shaal, so this should be easy.

Hesitating some more, he suddenly found the answer. What if Shaal was telling the truth, what if she was pregnant with his baby?

But that was impossible. Zack thought of all the possibilities. He'd slept with hundreds of people, bribing and sometimes tricking them, he used every trick in the book to implant his seed and stood back and waited for it to grow. Nothing

happened. When he checked himself out at the medical centre, they concluded that he was infertile.

Zack squeezed the key in the palm of his hand. The sharp edges cut into his skin, drawing blood. After releasing the copper object, he watched his crimson blood drip onto the control panel. Anger rushed through his body. He turned the key to the ready position. The lights changed, alarms sounded. He had only to turn the key one last time to start the countdown. He wanted the Minbari to know every second, he wanted to see them squirm, see Shaal confess her lying and ask for forgiveness.

"This is your last chance, Shaal. I know you're not pregnant, confess and I will let you both live." Zack could deal with Elvis later; he could always hide his playmates. But his anger was still there.

"Minbari do not lie. I am having your baby, why won't you listen?" Through the viewport, Zack could see tears of desperation on her face.

"I don't believe you. I can't have children; you must have fucked someone before we captured you. You..." Zack wanted to call her a filthy whore...but he decided to close the microphone and turn the key.

Red lights blinked all around, the computer's voice spoke.

*Attention, outer doors primed for opening, doors will open in ten seconds. Please Stand by.*

The seconds sounded like eternity. The woman's voice that counted down the seconds seemed like a soothing mother with the authority of a sergeant. This would be the last time he would see the two Minbari alive.

Suddenly, at around eight seconds, the doctor barged into the small room yelling, "Stop Zack... It's true, she's having your child!"

"WHAT!" Zack's reply was almost as earth shattering as the countdown. There were only six seconds left on the clock. Nevertheless, Zack continued. "What are you talking about? The doctors told me I was infertile."

"They said you only had a slim chance...you've done it... Oh my god!"

Zack looked towards the shatterproof glass that protected the small room the vacuum of space. Red lights washed the room's interior as alarms sounded. The din echoed everywhere.

"NO!" Zack frantically turned the key while breathing heavily. Nothing happened. The system was locked. He bashed at the control panel and finally grabbed the nearest object, a chair, and attempted to smash the glass. Security personnel inside the room caught him by the arms. "Are you crazy, sir?! If you break the glass it will kill us all!"

Zack felt his hopes and dreams shatter in a second, the moment the doctor finally gave him the auspicious news of hope he had now just destroyed, killed his own child.

He was forced to the ground by security, struggling all the way.

There must be something he could do!

The computer counted.

Damning alarms sounded, it was over.

*Two...one...opening outer doors.*

"NO! Shaal!" He forced his way to his feet, banging on the controls, then tore away from the console and charged out, searching desperately for an override switch.

An explosion erupted behind the bulkhead. It was all over. His only chance for a child was gone, he had killed the only person who gave him the gift of life, Zack could do nothing but wish death upon himself...Silence fell as he collapsed to his knees and cried. The computer voice spoke.

*Attention, life signs detected inside airlock number one. Explosive seals activated on outer doors. Airlock permanently sealed. Maintenance personnel have been informed. This is an airlock not an execution chamber.*

The inner door opened. Zack, a complete wreck, turned to the smoky airlock room. He was unable to believe his eyes. Shaal was standing there with Delenn in her arms.

They were alive.

Zack stared at them, and Delenn stared right back. In the background, the doctors were arguing. Zack struggled to his feet and the two Minbari wept before calling them all animals.

## Chapter 54

(Zack Allen)

**T**he revelation had hit him like a raging storm in the middle of the night. He had no idea what to do. The news that he was suddenly a father appeared like some cruel joke by the persons involved.

But it was no joke, this was reality and Zack was constantly reminded of this every second he stood in the medical ward watching Shaal undergo detailed scans. He was speechless, but his mind roared on with thoughts, cries and hope for the future.

He analysed the room and watched, as the doctor probed Shaal, extracted blood and had her lay down on an examination table. The trio of doctors all huddled around examining the miracle that was taking place. Zack thought it was a miracle that he managed to seed a child, let alone get a Minbari pregnant. It might have been front-page news if he got a Centauri or Narn pregnant, but a Minbari?

From his research and the intelligence gathered from other races, the Minbari were a very close race and it was unheard of for them to intermix with other species. In fact, it was rare for any race to mix, unless it served their purpose. But the human population did have a tendency to break boundaries and spread into all forms of life.

The doctor approached from the mass crowd by Shaal and he began. "Good news Zack: despite the near fatal incident at the airlock, it looks like your baby will be fine. But there is something I should tell you."

"Go on doctor," Zack replied, dreading the answer. If two completely different species were to have children, chances were that some difficulties would occur. He knew all too well that changing the human genome would cause some form of cancer, or deformity. He could not imagine the damage the child could go through. But what kind of changes would fool the doctor in thinking the baby was okay to begin with?

"We've detected a unusual amount of protein being drained from the mother, Shaal, that's why she's been fainting frequently and her illness." The doctor picked up a tube of brown syrup substance and handed it to him. "Adding this organic crystal based formula into her diet should reverse the damage the baby is having on her body. We still don't understand the fundamentals of what's going on, but from what we do know the baby's organic makeup is completely different from that of Minbari and human alike. It's amazing on a complexity I've never seen before. Its skin and bones are comprised of organic crystal far superior to our own design and her development is worryingly rapid. In the space of just two weeks, she's

progressed over one month and the signs are already beginning to show. We estimate she'll be born within a few months, perhaps less."

Zack almost fell onto the side cabinet he was using to rest on. Half the news was unbelievable and the rest was way beyond his understanding. His initial thoughts were on the miracle of having a child. Then to suddenly find out he was having a girl spooked him even more. He had always wanted a girl, a baby daughter he could love, hold and bring up as a tough little character. Had come across many strong willed women in the past and he would love to bestow those characteristics into his own child, perhaps escalate her development into becoming a very important person. It was a tall order, but he knew each child went down their own path no matter how much you wanted them to follow your guidance.

Then again, she had already defied all the odds. She came into existence when he was told time and time again he could not have children. Her mother was Minbari, the very race that had destroyed Earth and if that was not enough, the Minbari were hunting them down like animals.

Zack felt the pressure of yet more questions bang at the door of his mind. How would she grow in a society that would hate her no matter what side she was on? If she were raised in human society, she would be resented for being part Minbari. If she was raised in Minbari society, she would be resented for being human, perhaps even killed. All the thoughts raged on in his mind until a voice brought him out of his daydreaming.

"Are you listening to me?" The doctor angrily raised his voice. "Don't make me repeat everything I just said."

Zack was not in the mood; the main question still echoing in his mind was, "How? How's this possible? You told me that I had no chance of having a child?"

"As I explained before, you had a low chance of producing a child, about one percent. I did not say it was impossible. Chances are that because Minbari reproductive organs are so close to where your seaman would be ejaculated, it increased your chances of impregnating her dramatically."

The doctor changed the subject. "But Shaal has to be monitored closely and any irregularities must be reported. Immediately."

Zack held a small bottle of grey tar like liquid that swashed around in the tube. "What's this?"

The doctor pointed to the tube, "this substance is what your child is made up of. It's an organic crystal substance that Shaal must inject frequently." Zack was sure the doctor explained this before. "When your child is born she'll need to take this frequently but the exact details are still unknown. When she is born, I can run more tests and find out more."

The doctor was almost babbling with excitement, Zack interjected with a stern warning. "Now wait doctor. I'm warning you, I will not have my child probed and experimented on like some lab rat!"

The doctor took a step back, waving his hands in apology. "I didn't mean any offence. I have analysed your child's DNA and despite Dr Franklin's notes on Minbari physiology, there're lots of things I still don't know."

The doctor carried on, and Zack tried to listen and follow what he was saying. The last thing he wanted was a doctor who ran away with excitement. Over the doctor's shoulder, Zack could see Shaal still lying in bed. She looked exhausted and he himself was tired too.

"We still don't know why the baby is developing the way it is. The organic crystal is very advanced and we can only relate it to a long lost animal that once

lived on Minbar. We are certain the Minbari evolved from them and that gene had been released inside your child.”

“How did you know that?” Zack asked. It was strange the doctor knew all this information about a race they were unable to defeat.

“It became common knowledge when Dr Franklin’s data was released to the general public and expeditions to the world by the Vanguarders have herald more information. The biogenetics warfare division wants to create a plague to wipe out the Minbari, but the president refused to lower the human race to that level. What you have done, Zack, has upset the balance of everything.” The doctor’s eyes radiated with excitement.

“I don’t understand.”

“This pregnancy has changed everything. When news about this spreads, and it will, Minbari society will be changed forever. It’s unheard of for the Minbari to procreate outside of their own race. This could change the way the Minbari think of humans and usher in a new era for humans.”

Zack leaned on the table, not knowing where this conversation was heading. He too felt more bored than ever. He just wanted to take Shaal away from all the doctors and have her all to himself. He did not like her being prodded like that.

“It was lucky you used Airlock Number One. What exactly happened? Why did the airlock fail to work?”

“The other airlocks were updated two months ago. They removed the safety checks John Cho installed years ago. Airlock Number One was next to be updated, but the maintenance team weren’t bothered to do it...So when it detected life signs, as a safety precaution the explosive bolts detonated sealing the airlock permanently until the engineers can repair it.”

“What will you do about Elvis?” the doctor asked. He had brought up a valid question and it would be hard to explain what happened to airlock One. Elvis would want the Minbari executed but there was no way Zack would let Shaal die!

“Don’t worry about him. I’ll take care of Elvis. You just get Shaal ready for transport to my personal quarters on the city Euria.

Zack looked back at Shaal who was passed out on the medical bed. Delenn was there too, angry, perhaps ready to kill him. He did not care; all his attention was on Shaal now.

\*

**L**ater that evening, when the commotion settled down, Zack returned home to find Shaal sitting in the corner of the living room with fear clearly on her face. She appeared weak and unable to move.

He stepped into the room and glanced around, looking for any signs of tampering or missing items. Once satisfied that everything was still in its place, he placed his jacket and a few items from his pockets onto the wall cabinet. He stared at her intently, knowing that his own child was growing inside of her. He had thought she might try and kill the child, so he had a security guard constantly watch over her all the times. In his worry, he had even hesitantly approached Delenn, asking whether Shaal would try to end her pregnancy. Delenn had spat with contempt at the very suggestion, calling it “barbaric.”

Zack did not care if Shaal saw the child as a Minbari child. Its appearance would undoubtedly speak for itself, and he felt an overwhelming sense of joy to know she would not try to end the pregnancy.

He stepped closer, she flinched.

He moved even closer. She was shaking with fright. Finally she found the will to speak.

“Please don’t rape me again.”

Zack kneeled on the floor to match her height. All thoughts were on his child growing inside of her. He wrestled with the thoughts all those months ago, the moment his hopes were shattered by those doctors. The many failed attempts at getting any woman pregnant, the experiments. In the end it only took one special Minbari. He gently held her hand and replied as soft as he could. “Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you anymore.”

She flinched, just seconds from passing out, weak. Zack knew what must be done.

He pulled out a tube of tar-like liquid the doctor had given him, and remembered the instructions the doctor gave him before they left the medical bay. With the substance oozing in the tube he opened the end and attempted to place it in Shaal’s mouth.

Rightfully she edged back, concerned. “What’s that? What are you doing?”

Zack realized his error. He had forgotten to tell the Minbari about her condition. He wrapped his fingers around the tube for a better grip and explained everything to Shaal.

\*

**A**fter the explanation of her condition and that of the baby, Shaal reluctantly took the substance and waited for the effects, good or bad. Zack assumed Shaal must have thought the vial contained some kind of poison, but even he would not give her anything to harm his unborn child. He could only guess, thank and surmise her thoughts. But he could see much improvement in her skin tone and body shape.

All hate for the Minbari had vanished and Zack had never felt this level of calm and happiness before. He stepped back and looked at her from afar. She remained motionless with the pregnancy barely noticeable under her long clothing. He made sure to gather as much fresh clothing and provisions to look after her. He knew this was serious and there was no room for error. He was about to become a dad—and soon by the doctors’ estimations. —His life would change and Zack had to make plans for the future.

“What are you going to do to me?” Shaal asked.

Zack did not have an answer right away. His only concern was for the child. “I’ll take care of you and our child. For the moment you are to remain here until this city leaves for hyperspace. If my commander in chief sees you, there’s very little I can do.”

“What about Delenn?”

“She’s safe. As long as you do what I say and don’t do anything reckless, she’ll be well looked after.”

“Can I see her?”

Zack thought for a moment then nodded. But he would have to arrange the meeting carefully. At the moment Delenn was being held under guard in one of the empty apartments one the floor below. Once the city repaired itself from the attack and moved into hyperspace he could then move Shaal to the spare room and keep an eye on her once her child was born. Naturally his child would stay with him, but his mind did not venture too far from the present.

Elvis was the problem and if he found out about what he did, there would be no telling what would do.

Zack was filled with excitement. All he could think about was his future hope and joy – yet for the present, the feelings eluded him. He had beaten and raped this Minbari. He knew deep down she would not forget and the situation was growing direr every second.

She slapped him across the face and he could tell she feared for her life, now more ever. She must be wondering what he would do.

But Zack could do nothing. Under normal circumstances he would have dragged her to the bed and raped her, but he could not do that. He felt a heady weight upon his heart. He was a changed man.

## Chapter 55

(Michael Garibaldi)

It had been almost a week since Michael handed over the data crystal that was supposed to incriminate Elvis and his dark deeds, but when he checked the departure records for the facility, he grew worried because the two Vanguards had yet to leave.

*Something's wrong!*

He scanned the computer records to locate their current location and when that failed, he scanned again to find their last known location. An entry into the database put them in the security holding cells. That told Garibaldi they were in trouble.

There was only one man who could help him now.

With a calm composure, Garibaldi waited at the *Bolt Hole* for Zack to arrive. How ironic it had only a few months since they were both in the same establishment. How ironic that it had been only a few months since they had last been in the same establishment, discussing Zack's problem. This time it would be his problem they discussed. Garibaldi needed Zack's help and he felt he had earned it.

*Five minutes late*, Garibaldi thought as he fidgeted with his beverage and twirled something on his plate that looked like a delicacy a Pak'ma'ra would ingest. He pushed the plate aside and gulped down the rest of his drink.

Ten minutes later and he was growing agitated. He tapped the table with his left hand and watched the overhead clock that seemed to count backwards the longer he stared at it. After Garibaldi had waited another five minutes, Zack strolled into the foyer. Garibaldi could see Zack was excited about something when he walked in the door. "Sorry for being late, I had some urgent business to attend to."

"That's okay." Garibaldi smiled. "You can pay for my dinner."

Zack stuttered slightly before sitting down. "I have something I need to tell you, Garibaldi. Something amazing."

Garibaldi looked up from the sixth beverage he had ordered, eager to hear the surprise.

"My life has finally changed. You know the Minbari I saved from execution?"

Garibaldi sighed sarcastically. He knew very well that Zack had been performing his sexual fantasies on them; it was the talk of the facility.

"All my attempts... They were pointless. It only took one Minbari, one Minbari!"

Garibaldi was lost in the conversation already and it hadn't even started. He had his own message to convey, so he had to nudge Zack along.

"I know about the Minbari. What are you trying to say?"

"I'm going to be a father, I got one of the Minbari pregnant!"

Garibaldi dropped his beverage on the table; it tumbled over, spilled its yellow contents and rolled off the edge to the hard ground, shattering into millions of pieces.

"You said it was impossible, you're infertile!"

"I thought so too. The doctor analysed the baby and it's unlike anything he'd seen before. This could be a turning point in history."

Garibaldi knew the trouble it would cause. "Do you realize that if the president or Minbari find out about this child, it could cause an incident? How will this child fit into society? How will Elvis respond to the news?"

"Who knows?"

"I'll tell you exactly what he'll do," Garibaldi insisted. "He'll jettison that Minbari into space and then you for good measure."

"He already tried that!"

"What?" Garibaldi spat.

"The two Minbari were due to be executed a few days ago in Airlock One. But due to the delayed upgrade the old system recognised life signs and disabled the outer doors. It took a whole day for the maintenance team to repair the damage. I've kept Elvis out of the loop but, Garibaldi..." Zack suddenly became nervous, fidgeting with his drink and shifting his eyes this way and that, looking for people who could report back to Elvis.

"Go on?"

"...Elvis has imprisoned two Vanguard's in the holding cells until he can decide on what to do. He's got surveillance footage of you handing over classified information."

"That's bull shit!" Garibaldi snapped, waving his left hand in defiance. "I handed them information about Elvis's behaviour with the female staff. I want the authorities on Casabianca to intervene and arrest him."

Garibaldi felt his anger surge and nearly hit the table with his fist. The beverage he had spilled a moment ago had begun to drip off the edge of the table and on to his trousers. He brushed off the liquid with his hands and dabbed the excess from the table with a handkerchief. "Are you able to get to them?"

Zack looked up, "I think so. Why?"

"I only intended for the data crystal to be transported. But if it's getting them into trouble I don't want them to suffer for what I have done."

"I only intended for the data crystal to be transported. But if it's getting them into trouble, I don't want them to suffer for what I have done." Garibaldi could only imagine what Elvis would do. He asked Zack, "Do you know what he intends to do with them?"

"He hasn't told me yet," Zack replied softly. "But I know he won't do anything to harm them."

Garibaldi had an idea. "There is only one way to put an end to all of this."

"And what would that be, Garibaldi? Hand over the data crystal?"

"Exactly."

"What about the data you collected? Won't Elvis get away and continue to abuse the female workforce? I've seen his handiwork over the years."

"That's not going to happen. Yes, we will hand over the data crystal, but not until we copy it first. I want you to see the Vanguard's and copy the data. I will then

instruct the Vanguard's to hand over the original to Elvis. This way, he will think the plot has been foiled. Later, before the Vanguard's leave the facility, I will smuggle the copy to them and they will deliver it to Casabianca."

Zack looked doubtful. "I don't know. Elvis could be watching us now and if the plan fails I'll probably be shoved out the airlock."

"Better make sure it's Airlock One," Garibaldi replied sarcastically, leaning back in his chair. "Don't worry, this is a public place, impossible to bug. I'm also running a jamming device anyway."

Garibaldi gestured to a portable projection of a naked woman dancing in miniature form in the middle of the table. Zack picked it up and saw the blinking light underneath. "You think of everything."

"This is what I do."

Zack carried on though the smile vanished from his face. "How do I inform the Vanguard's about this little plan without Elvis knowing? He'll have the room bugged for sure."

Garibaldi had planned for that contingency. He reached into his deep pockets and handed over a slip of paper. "Enter this PIN into the control console 96 and a virus will be uploaded from the main computer. It will record a loop back cluster in the surveillance system and that will allow you to make the deal. Once you leave it will automatically create a false meeting about food orders and then shut off. It's the latest design in surveillance virtual creation."

"Are you sure it will work?"

"I'm positive."

Zack ordered himself a portion of the gruel Garibaldi ate and they carried on for half an hour finalizing the plan.

There wasn't much to worry about. The plan was straightforward and Garibaldi was confident Elvis would not know. But he knew that man had a way of finding out everything, so he took extra care to make sure this plan was fool proof.

The news about Zack becoming a father was hot on the list now. As the man sat opposite, Garibaldi had to ask the burning question.

"So, are you going to stay at this complex? I can't imagine it a good place to raise a child, let alone Elvis letting you keep it?"

Zack looked down at the food that looked like a plate of diarrhea, and thought long and hard about his future, but he was stonewalled into a corner.

"It's still early days, but I know this place is no environment to bring up a family and besides, I have to get away from Elvis."

Zack appeared to have an idea.

"Perhaps..." he paused, finding the words to relay his plan. "Perhaps I can use the Vanguard's to get my own message across to the authorities on Casabianca. They should be able to transfer me."

"I don't see why not but, Zack, this is not the time to play around with your old tricks." Garibaldi tried his best to explain that his past actions were no longer acceptable and with the news about him becoming a father, he would have to change the way he saw the world. Earth had been destroyed and his family gone forever. He had been the survivor of his family line. But now some divine force had given him the chance to procreate. There would be no room for mistakes. He would have to make big changes to his lifestyle.

Zack appeared stunned at the sudden change in subject, but it was a fact he would have to face. Over the years Garibaldi has grown weary of his behaviour: bedding women, sleeping around and now this. Perhaps it was the knowledge he

could not have any children that derailed his path. But now this new revelation would be reason to change.

"I know, Garibaldi. I need to get out of this place. With Elvis on my back, and the depression of not knowing I could have children, I saw no point in living. I know I've not been the best friend or the kindest person, but I know this pregnancy has given me hope beyond my wildest dreams."

"What will you do about the mother? You know you can't keep her, she won't be accepted."

"I know," Zack said, wrestling with the thought. "I will have to keep her in hiding for now until she gives birth and then it will only be wise to let her go."

"You're going to free her? Won't she want to take the baby with her?"

"Do you know what the Minbari would do to a child like that? She might be killed and I am hoping Shaal will understand that!"

"She?" Garibaldi asked after the word shone out like a light from a lighthouse.

"Yes, the doctor told me it was a girl when he performed the tests."

"Well, that's surprising news. I always wanted a girl, lucky you!" Garibaldi returned to the subject. "What about our people? What makes you think this half breed child will be accepted in human society?"

"It's a known fact that humans intermix with different races. We are probably the most diverse race out there. I predict there might be some resistance, even today with news about Shaal's child being common knowledge within the medical community. But I will have to find a place that will accept us and I am sure Casabianca is that place."

Zack was getting ahead of himself; *perhaps it was the toxic food he was eating that began to nibble at his mind.*

Garibaldi kept his thoughts to himself and carried on with the original topic in hand. Zack had time and he was sure the man would be capable of finding a solution soon.

"If you manage to copy the data as I asked, it should be easy for them to transfer you over to Casabianca. I'll sign the papers as long as the job gets done." Zack drank down another swig of beverage and the deal was made. It was all down to Zack. Could he pull it off?

## Chapter 56

(John Sheridan)

**T**he Agamemnon had been in hyperspace for two days and current scans of the sector had indicated that they were almost on top of the Minbari colony.

As expected, the colony knew nothing of their arrival. Sheridan had been itching to score another victory. His last run in with the Minbari had not been a pleasant one and he lost a good friend in that battle. He wanted revenge and today was no exception.

He marched onto the command deck and demanded an update.

Officers darted between their posts and replied with systems ready. The new shield array had been installed properly during the journey and the new beam cannons were hot and ready to go. But Sheridan did not expect a ship-to-ship battle. He sighed at the mundane task of being a delivery boy. His orders were to drop off a package and let it do all the hard work. Then again, Sheridan always loved the

ingenious plans he would create in the midst of battle. Surely something would go astray on this mission. Any mission involving the Minbari had a nasty habit of going wrong.

"The Minbari colony is in range, sir," the helmsman began.

"Put it on viewer," Sheridan ordered, looking towards the large viewscreen in the centre of his bridge. As the Earth-like world came into view he saw that land covered most of the planet with only a few blue oceans. The screen began to zoom into the planet and dart across the land towards the small colony in middle of what looked like a desert. With sand surrounding the colony, the settlement was nestled at the bottom of several mountains and cliffs. Sheridan's mind already began plotting his observation point. He wanted to go down there and watch the destruction for himself. But that would be contradicting the president's orders and dangerous.

"Is the package ready?" Sheridan glanced at the scientist he had first met hours before; it was when he went down to inspect his robotic warriors in the bowels of the ship.

The scientist pulled a data crystal from one of the workstations and walked over to him. "Yes, I downloaded the program that should interface with the warrior and activate its primary systems. There's a minute delay before it's active. It wasn't easy setting it up. The binary code had to be converted into a language that would pass the challenge handshake before the unit would accept..."

Sheridan grew weary of the jargon the scientist was blabbing and shot him a look of scorn. "I'm not interested in your rubbish. Is the unit ready to be deployed in the instant I command it?"

The scientist fiddled with the data crystal. "Just give me ten minutes."

Sheridan turned in his chair and glanced at the screen. "You have five minutes. I want that colony vaporised."

Sheridan then magnified the image to show a crystalline building towering into the sky and a small band of Minbari could be seen walking along the paved streets towards a building that resembled a temple. Several small vehicles whizzed past the floor and a horde of children ran in and out of what looked like a playground. There might have been a time he would have showed mercy to a small colony, but not today. Did the Minbari show mercy when they knocked on the door of Earth? No! He wanted to exact the same thing and nothing would get in his way.

\*

Sheridan always knew this day would come. Mass genocide was a concept that had frightened him in the olden days, but not today. Of course, he would never do such a terrible deed to any other race, or colony of other beings. But when it came to the Minbari anything went. Their cruelty in destroying Earth had planted a seed of hate that could never be quenched. He had lost a lot of family on Earth and now his life was scattered in the depths of hyperspace. There was a saying that all humans have a deep-rooted connection to Mother Earth, as if she was part of some divine network that connected all humans together. He sensed some form of loneliness when he ventured into space. Now, that loneliness was dwarfed by separation.

The time was now.

He ordered the *Agamemnon* into the planet's atmosphere on an intercept course to the small colony. Initial scans showed this world to be inhabited by basic life forms no bigger than a golf ball. So once the Minbari colony was razed to the ground, the warrior could be nuked from orbit with no effect to the planet.

Or he could leave it to wander the planet and intercept any Minbari transport that might come to investigate the loss of contact. That was a scenario he liked very much. He could almost see it now, the small Minbari transport diving in from space, hovering over the colony and then ZAP!

"Sir, we are within striking distance. I recommend we deploy the unit just on the ridge of the canyon where the settlement is located. We risk being seen if we venture too close. The warrior can walk the rest of the way." the helm officer announced.

"Very well, set us just a few meters above the surface and get ready to leave once we deploy the package."

The order was given and Sheridan made his way to the bowels of the ship where the warrior rested.

What had once been a dark and frightening place was now bright as the sun reflected through the thick glass viewport of the hatch. The warrior stood motionless inside its alcove, waiting for the wake up call. The scientist continued to prod around its head, inserted a tool that dug into its skull and fiddled with a few buttons. The ship shook slightly as it entered the atmosphere.

"Do you think that's wise?" Sheridan asked, imagining the creature springing to life, destroying the ship before it even got to the settlement.

"It's okay, this baby is still on standby. Now, once I press this button," the scientist got down from the creature's head, walked over to the main control panel in front of the railing and pointed at a red button with his finger. "The creature will be released and we'll have about one minute to get clear."

"What happens if we don't?"

"The creature is programmed to destroy anything it sees, that includes us. I didn't have the time to program fail-safes so this is the raw deal."

Sheridan raised his left hand, talked into his communicator and instructed the ship to move on his command.

He gazed at the scientist who was standing by beside the button. When confirmation came through, Sheridan swiftly nodded his head.

The scientist hit the red button with his right hand and almost immediately several support arms swung open and the warrior fell out of the hatch and tumbled towards the desert surface.

Sheridan was awfully disappointed at its release as he stared over the railing. A cloud of sand could only be seen where the warrior impacted the ground. He expected the mighty machine to land on its feet, ready for attack. But it tumbled through the air and landed face first in the sand, probably breaking its neck.

It lay there, spread out like a deformed animal.

"What are you doing?!" The scientist squealed. "We've got to get out of here."

"What do you mean? The damn thing's dead!" Sheridan complained.

But the warning came too late.

The warrior sprang to life, shot to its feet and its eyes glowed red with murderous intent. Its body armour grew with ferocity and its cannon charged with deadly power. Sheridan, who was stunned at its sudden recovery, bellowed down his COM unit and the *Agamemnon* slowly rose up into the sky.

The unit appeared to gather its bearings rapidly. It unexpectedly looked up at the ship, rotated in its place and raised its cannon to target his ship.

"W-What the hell?" Sheridan exclaimed.

"Protecting!" the warrior spoke. Its cannon fired and sparks blew out systems and punctured a hole at the bottom of the ship

"We gotta go..." The scientist clawed at Sheridan's shoulder.

A second blast rocked the ship slightly as it made its way out of weapon's range. Looking back, the landmass below grew small; cloud decks filled the sky with a brilliant glow and Sheridan and the scientist rushed behind the bulkhead door before the ship left the atmosphere.

With the hum of the motor closing the door, Sheridan caught his breath. "Damn, I thought that thing was dead!"

"Its body mass and armour is incredibly strong. It will take more than a hundred story fall to stop it. We better get to the bridge and monitor its progress." The scientist got to his feet, brushed down his uniform and they headed to the bridge.

\*

Progress on the warrior appeared slow and uneventful. Sheridan did not know what the unit was up to, but it was walking in the wrong direction and taking its time. Suddenly, as if it heard his own thoughts, the unit turned and headed towards the colony.

"I've placed a loop in its main navigation system. Every five minutes it will instruct itself to head towards the town and once there, it will resume its normal programming."

Sheridan looked away from the scientist who explained the current situation and then focused his attention on the technicians. "Are all the scanners recording?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, I don't want to miss this. Better make sure all visual cameras are tracking, we need to document every weapon blast that thing takes. Even its destruction."

Sheridan was sure the Minbari would probably neutralize that thing before it even reached the town. All the hype of finding the ultimate weapon was child's talk compared to the weapons the Minbari possessed. He estimated it would take four shots to eliminate this warrior. But not before it killed lots of Minbari in its path. He expected a good show...No, he expected the ultimate show!

"I only hope this thing lives long enough for us to get some good readings and make the Minbari run in the opposite direction." Sheridan rubbed his hands and shuffled around in his chair to make himself ready for the show.

And sure enough, on the view screen, the Minbari had seen the intruder land on the planet and two teams of ground forces had already departed, on their way to stop the monster.

## Chapter 57

(Elizabeth Lochley)

**T**oday was the day Elizabeth would finally get the keys to the city. She had done her homework, filled out all the forms and had transported herself all the way to this damn asteroid complex to see the place for herself. She was heartbroken that the Minbari scarred her city and she vowed to have some kind of Memorial Day for all the workers who died in the disaster. Thankfully the city had been sparsely populated and only a handful of people succumbed to their doom. If this city had been full the alternative outcome might have been grim.

But Elizabeth sensed a problem. It was common for the city commander to be given command from the authorities at Casabianca, but only on the approval from the people who built the city. Then there was the assessment and final decision by Elvis that would finally decide if she got the job. She could appeal and have the case taken directly to the capital herself, but that would take time. She knew Elvis was the lowest human around, but he did an excellent job keeping his past and present indulgencies secret from his superiors, so what chance did she have to resist his judgement?

She could only imagine the reason for the delay, but a call from the room's communication system diverted her thoughts before they could get even more disturbing.

"Miss Lochley, Elvis would like to see you in his office. It's about your final assessment regarding the command of your city."

"Thank you, I'll be right there," Elizabeth replied as she stood in the middle of the room. She still had not gotten used to the communication system. Most places she used to work with had hand held devices or wrist communication devices that were annoying and failed on a regular occasion. So talking into nothing was a new hands-free experience.

She slipped into the navy blue jacket she kept by the door, entered a few commands into the control panel and left the room, making sure the lights and door were closed behind her. Although her room was located on the officer's deck, she had learned the hard way that thieves found their way into even the most secure places.

She took the lift and hit the first floor button and waited. She could guess what the man wanted. It didn't take a genius to understand the consequences if she refused. But there was always a chance she might not be his type and give her the city based on her good record.

The lift finally stopped at the desired floor and the doors opened. Rays of light from the hallway flooded the dim elevator. She stepped off onto solid ground and made her way over to Elvis's office, mentally preparing her self for what lay ahead,

The long walk through the office and towards the wooden felt like the walk of shame. She'd never been asked to visit his personal office before. The eyes of the other workers followed her as she walked, heightening her fear of what lay ahead.

Once she reached the door, Elizabeth stretched out her hand and placed it upon the warm handle. She wondered who touched *that* handle before. Was he performing his sick fantasies on some poor victim right now? Should she even enter?

Elizabeth froze her emotions and vowed not to be his *next* victim. She opened the door without so much as knocking.

The moment she flung open the door, Elvis sat behind his desk shuffling papers. He looked up and his icy cold expression failed to change.

"Elizabeth Lochley," he began with a slur in his voice. "Please take a seat."

Elizabeth took a step forward.

"Close the door behind you." he ordered, his voice layered over by a tone of warning.

Elizabeth did not obey. She stepped forward, intent on anchoring her authority in the room.

"What's the delay? I should have the activation key to the city already!" she demanded.

Elvis leaned back on his chair, tapped a button on his armchair and the door suddenly closed. Elizabeth snapped her gaze to the direction of the sound as she

realized her plight. A slight knot began to form in her throat, but she also knew it would be in her self-interest to keep up a strong appearance. Any weakness could lay the way for him to take advantage of her, and Elizabeth was not that type of woman.

“So, you’re going to answer me?” she demanded.

Elvis scanned through some files before leisurely acknowledging her request. “The final decision to give you the keys to the city depends on my evaluation and reports from Casabianca. As you know, it is my sole responsibility as cities construction manager to assess all the *candidates* to take over the city before it departs for hyperspace.” Elvis spoke very slowly and deliberately, in a manner calculated for maximum impact and intimidation.

“I have everything I need to give you the keys...however, there’s one more thing I need from you first.” He stood and then oozed his way around his table, eyeing her tight trousers. He extended his hand in an attempt to grab her leg, but anticipating this, Elizabeth jolted to the side.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she exclaimed.

Elvis smiled and fought hard to control the drool that wanted to dribble down his lips. He was such an asshole, and Elizabeth’s greatest fear was about to reveal itself.

“If you want your city, you’re going to have to give me something in return.” Elvis gave a leering wink. “You know, scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours...”

Elizabeth interjected, “How dare you!” She slapped him across the cheek. “I’ll never allow you to perform your sexual acts on me.”

“Don’t you want your city?”

“Yes I do.”

“Then you’d better assume the position. I guess all the other girls told you how I like my women?”

“You sick fuck! I’ll see you court-martialled for this.”

“That will not happen, Elizabeth. I control this facility and in it I control you and everybody onboard. If one person steps out of line I’ll make sure their whole family suffers.” He gave a menacing laugh

“I don’t care, I have my own people who’ll protect me.”

Elvis appeared to grow in physical size, resistant to that statement. “If you want your city, Elizabeth, you’ll bend over on my desk and get ready for my rod of oblivion. Or, you can leave without the keys to the city. But remember: I have spies everywhere. If you breathe a word of this, not only will I kill you but I will also kill your family and anyone associated with you, despite your threats. Doesn’t that sound fair?”

Elizabeth swallowed hard. He was giving her two choices: She could allow him intimate access to her and she would have the job she had always dreamed of or she could leave and keep her mouth shut. All the work done over the years would be lost. However the thought of being violated by this monster would be too much. She paused for a moment while she made her decision.

“Any rubbers?”

Elvis leaned on his desk, smiled and then rubbed his groin. “No rubbers, I like to ejaculate my stuff deep inside. Gives me a sense of accomplishment.” Elizabeth took a deep breath and gave her answer.