

# BABYLON

A large, stylized number '5' in a metallic, blue-tinted font, set within a circular, metallic frame that resembles a lens or a porthole.

## Baptism of Fire



*Claudia Christian*



# BAPTISM OF FIRE

# PROLOGUE

Captain Susan Ivanova felt the vibration shudder through the deckplates of the *Titans*. The screen ahead of her displayed the green and red symbols that differentiated friendly ships from foes. A mass of red swarmed around the large green circle that represented her ship, like ants flowing out of a colony that had been unwittingly disturbed.

Red lights blinked out as enemy vessels were torn from stem to stern by the *Titans'* Heavy Particle Beam Cannons, or blown apart by the continued salvos from the missile batteries. On the array of monitors the emptiness of space was a barely visible backdrop to the fiery criss-crossing of plasma weapon burst. Even with the tiny green specks that denoted the Starfury squadrons, the numbers still did not add up and it was obvious that they were outnumbered.

She grabbed the armrests of her chair as the ship was buffeted again.

“Direct hit amidships,” Commander William Berensen announced calmly as sparks showered down across his console. An acrid smell drifted across the bridge and the exchange of small arms fire that echoed down the corridor and into the bridge seemed to be getting louder.

Relay systems in the walls ruptured behind her and Ivanova turned to see her navigator, Lieutenant John Maddison, throw his hands up in front of his face as his console overloaded.

“Damage to the navigational system, unable to take evasive action!” Maddison called out as he managed to avoid the full brunt of the explosion. He tilted his head back, keeping his left eye shut as blood ran down the side of his temple, pooled around the eye socket and continued down his cheek. It was impossible now to make a tactical withdrawal, Ivanova realised. All they could do was stand their ground and fight.

“Full power to the forward batteries. Punch a hole through their hearts!” Ivanova ordered.

“Particle beams, retargeting,” Berensen said. “Firing!”

The monitor flared white as the full force of the particle beams ripped

through the enemy ship.

“Narn heavy cruiser disabled,” Lieutenant Commander Amelia Graydon announced, grabbing on to the railing in front of her station as the ship was rocked again by incoming fire.

“Jump points opening!” she called out.

“Where?” Ivanova asked, unable to see anything on the monitors.

“Directly behind them,” Graydon said, her voice wavering.

“It looks like reinforcements.”

## **BABYLON 5**

### **ONE**

She stretched out almost the full length of the station. Babylon 5. The last of the Babylon stations. Home to a quarter of a million humans and aliens wrapped in its two million, five hundred thousand tons of spinning metal. For once there was so sense of urgency. She could drift at her leisure. The waves of her long brown hair spread out around her as she curled herself around the warm glow of the fusion reactors. She felt the comforting pulse of its power spark through her like a heartbeat as her fingers traced lines through the miles of conduits that zig-zagged around the station bringing light and warmth and energy.

She wrapped herself around the central core, turning gently with the station, as she floated down through Brown Sector, Green Sector, Red Sector and Blue Sector. She entered the lives of the Lurkers who had coming chasing a dream that had failed to materialise, the Dockers unloading the precious cargos from the multitude of transports filling the docking bays, and the alien ambassadors debating in the council chamber. On and on she moved, through businessmen hammering out

deals and traders selling their wares in the Zocalo. They drank in the bars and ate in the restaurants. When the hustle and bustle got too much, they stood in quiet contemplation in the Zen Garden. She saw all this as she spiralled around toward Command and Control at the very front of the station. Few believed Babylon 5

would succeed. It had united league nations and, at a cost, brought peace. For a while she had been part of it, but not any more. She wasn't needed here. She wasn't needed now. Just then, in that final instant, as it was time to turn her back after the final goodbyes, her diaphragm went into spasm as it inflated her lungs. As her back arched and the air was expelled in a rush, she felt not the station spread out around her but the soft cushion of the MedLab bed she was laid out on.

She felt the tingle of her nerve endings, the rhythmic thump of her heart and the deep roaring in her ears as blood rushed to her brain. The muffled shouts that had been nothing more than distant echoes rose suddenly into an urgent din of voices.

A blur of colour swum in front of her as she opened her eyes. She blinked, focused, and as the colours separated and shapes took form, her eyes jerked in their sockets she jumped from one orderly to the next as they swarmed around the bed, registering their looks of astonishment and fear. She tried to turn her head but it was locked, rigid in a metal brace that encompassed her.

Her right arm felt numb and too heavy to move, but she found her left arm was free and, raising it, she clawed to free

herself while nurses endeavoured to hold her down. Only then did she notice the body slumped on the mattress. It lay face down but she recognized the black hair and the dark robes of the Anla'shok. As the nurses lifted the prone figure up, and she recognised the bearded face that lolled back in their arms, Susan Ivanova screamed and screamed until her lungs burned and her throat felt raw.

Susan Ivanova sat on the corner of the sofa with her knees pulled up to her chest. Her robe hung loosely over the medical gown and her hair was a mass of tangles. The lighting in her quarters was dimmed, except above the small, circular table where Doctor Stephen Franklin sat with her medical file spread out in front of him.

He had brought her something to eat but the meal remained untouched on the low table beside her as Ivanova stared blankly into the darkness. Rather than force her to have something, Franklin had left it until she was ready, and stayed to review the results of the recent tests he had performed on her. Leafing through the pages, he stopped and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He felt tired after the long journey from Mars to Babylon 5. Worse was the feeling of guilt from having failed to get back before it was too late.

When he finally arrived, Franklin had found the medical staff congregated in the corridor outside the MedLab, fearful of going back inside. The facility looked like it had been turned over. He had found Ivanova curled up on the floor, wracked with guilt, broken by the pain.

“What was that, the machine he used?” Ivanova asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

When she had come round, Ivanova had found a bracelet strapped around her wrist that was attached to a similar bracelet strapped to Marcus. She had reached out for him, grabbed his hand in hers and was shocked to feel the coldness in his dry skin. As Ivanova looked over to Franklin for an answer she absently rubbed her wrist where she had been connected to the alien device. They had talked about it already in MedLab, but Franklin had noticed the circular nature of her conversation and was happy to accommodate her.

“Remember that free clinic I set up in DownBelow for people who either didn’t have the credits for medication or just didn’t want to visit MedLab for treatment?” Franklin explained. “Well, one day the patients started to dry up. I discovered that instead of coming to me they were going to this woman, Laura Rosen.

“I assumed she was just some quack faith healer. But she actually was treating them. Not with any more of medication but with this machine she had bought from an alien trader. Obviously it didn’t come with a handbook of any kind but she had got it to work nevertheless. Except, it did so by transferring the life energy from one person to another.”

He took a breath and sat back in the chair.

“It came into my custody. I still didn’t know very much about it or even where it had come from. I wasn’t planning to

have anything to do with it, but when Garibaldi was shot in the back

we used it to heal him. Sheridan hooked himself up while I monitored the transfer to make sure it was within acceptable limits. After that it was locked away. Sheridan and I knew about it but nobody else.”

“So how did he find out?” Ivanova asked.

“It appears he hacked into my personal records where I had made some mention of it,” Franklin said. “Nurse Jola said that when Marcus came in to MedLab with you he started shouting ‘Where is it?’ When they couldn’t help him, he locked them out and...”

His voice trailed off. He shrugged. Nobody had been there to monitor. Ivanova knew that would not have mattered. The Minbari physicians aboard the White Star had practically pronounced her dead. It had to be a life for a life.

“He never did anything by half,” Ivanova said, not sure whether to laugh or cry. “That stupid man. Every since he came to the station he did things his way. Sheridan and Delenn might have been in charge all this time, but somehow he always got his way.”

“And the singing!” Franklin added.

“He sang?”

“Incessantly. And badly. Days stuck in a cramped cargo hold with him on the way to Mars, listening to him massacre these operettas. It was like someone was repeatedly stamping on a cat’s tail.”

It had been a tortuous journey, but thinking back Franklin could not help but smile. He sat down on the edge of the sofa and turned to Ivanova.

“The first time I saw him he had been admitted to MedLab,”

Franklin said. “He was dehydrated, suffering from exhaustion and oxygen deprivation. I turned my back on him for one moment and he was up and gone.”

“He was the first of the Rangers I was officially introduced to.”

Ivanova laughed. “John did this big introduction in his office, apologising for having kept me out of the loop.”

She had explained to Sheridan, in no uncertain terms, that Marcus Cole was one of the Rangers, that in this sector they were under the joint control of him and Delenn, with Garibaldi acting as liaison.



“He was keen to show me his Ranger’s pin, the symbol of his faith to the Anla’shok,” she said, remembering the brooch that was always pinned to his lapel. “The gold he had to mine himself. To get the silver he had to convince one of the worker caste to mine it for him as a lesson in co-operation and communication, he said.

“The metals were forged in the white hot flames in Tuzanor using tools said to be handed down by Valen. Then they were cooled in three different bowls. The first was filled with holy water from Minbar, the second his Minbari inspector’s blood, and the last his blood. The blue stone was an Isil’Zha which were used by the Minbari religious caste in their icons.”

Ivanova wiped away the tears that glistened on her cheeks.

“He didn’t say it but I could tell he was so pleased and proud to have found somewhere where he could finally belong.”

She tried to smile but her face twisted in pain and she dropped her head in her hands.

Franklin leant forward and gently stroked the back of her head. Ivanova wiped her eyes with the back of her hands and shook her head.

“I’m all right,” she said. “Please.”

Franklin stood up, understanding that finally she wanted to be alone. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny bottle. Unscrewing the cap, he tapped out two pills and set them down on the table in plain sight of Ivanova.

“Take these,” Franklin said, “they’ll help you sleep.”

Ivanova shook her head.

“I’ll check in on you tomorrow.”

“Where is he?” Ivanova asked as he gathered the pages together and closed the file.

Franklin hung his head, his face hidden in the shadows.

“Its been taken care of,” her said.

The medical staff had laid the Ranger out on one of the beds while Ivanova struggled to wrench herself free of the neck brace. Knowing what he had done, Franklin didn't have to examine Marcus to know that he was dead, but for Ivanova's sake he had gone through the procedure of having him put in cryogenic suspension.

“Have you heard anything about what's happened with John?”

she asked as Franklin turned to go.

“Nothing yet. I'll let you know as soon as I know anything.”

He opened the door. Ivanova turned her face away from the light from the corridor.

“Take the pills. Get some sleep. Doctor's orders,” Franklin instructed.

Alone in the room Ivanova looked at the pills. She leant her head against the back of the sofa and stared up at the ceiling.

“Lights out,” she said and the room was plunged into darkness.

## TWO

Arms folded, Franklin stood and watched Ivanova eat.

“I can cut it up for you, if that helps,” he said as she unenthusiastically pushed the food around the plate, creating a multicoloured smear before bringing a forkful up to her mouth.

“If you don't want to eat, you can pick out a bed in MedLab and get all the vitamins and nutrients you need there, through a tube,” he told her.

“You're enjoying this,” Ivanova said, chewing glumly. Years before Franklin had put the whole command staff on a restricted diet and loved every minute of their suffering. Now, dressed in the black uniform Delenn had had specially made for each of them after Babylon 5 declared independence from Earth, there was a

certain sly grin on his face that Franklin was not even attempting to mask.

“Eat up, you’ll feel better,” he instructed. “There’s good news and bad news.”

“What is it?” Ivanova asked, lowering the fork. Franklin waved his finger at her to keep eating and waited until she had swallowed the food before answering.

“Sheridan’s out of EarthForce. They forced him to go,” he finally said.

“When did this happen? What did he say?”

“He hasn’t told me anything. It’s all over ISN. You’d know if you actually turned on your monitor and watched.”

“So what happens to us now?” she asked dropping the fork back on to the plate. “Gulag, for the rest of our lives.”

“He got us an amnesty. In writing. Which he gave straight to the press. We’re home free. And we’re heroes again,” Franklin told her. “Oh, and he promoted you to Captain before they showed him the door,” he mumbled as an aside in the hope that she would miss it.

“So we dodged another bullet. The amnesty is for the everyone?”

“Everyone on the station. Zack Allen, Corwin and everyone in C&C. All the Starfury pilots. Even that snotty *maitre d’* in the Fresh Air Restaurant.”

“And nobody likes him,” Ivanova smiled. “So what’s John going to do, become a citizen?”

“Well, in other news The League of Non-Aligned Worlds has been dissolved,” Franklin said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“What the hell’s going on back there?”

“If you watched the news, you’d know this. It’s now the Interstellar Alliance and they’ve even got Earth to sign on. G’Kar gave quite a moving speech. He, Londo and Delenn are the new advisory council. And they’ve elected John the President.”

“John Sheridan’s the President of the Interstellar Alliance?”

“He’s President. You’re a Captain. And I’m still just a plain old Doctor,” Franklin said.

“I’m a Captain?” Ivanova said, her brows knitted.

“I thought I mentioned that. As his last act as an EarthForce Officer, John promoted you to Captain.”

“Captain...” Ivanova whispered to herself.

“Captain Susan Ivanova,” Franklin declared. He gestured to the room around her. “So all this is yours now. Not just this room but the whole station.”

The smile gradually slipped from Ivanova’s face as she looked around her.

After Franklin left her quarters, Ivanova washed and dressed and made the call that she knew would affect the rest of her life. It was a mistake to think of it in those terms. This was her new life now. She had changed. The universe had changed. Babylon 5 would change. And she knew that she couldn’t be a part of it.

When she made the call, the General had been pleased to hear from her and surprised by her request, but he had taken it in his stride and promised a quick reply. *They may not want you*, she had thought to herself as she paced her quarters, *Then what do you do?*

Nervously she waited for their response. Pacing the room, she turned on the news to watch events unfold on ISN. She heard talk of purges and reprisals, but found it difficult to concentrate otherwise.

“Right now we need all the good officers we can get,” the General had said and she clung on to those words. Two hours stretched out to an eternity. By the third hour she was beginning to wonder what other options she could take if they turned her down. Garibaldi was on his way from Mars, she had been informed. Sheridan and Delenn, aboard the White Star were less than a day out. She wanted the decision to be hers alone, not swayed by friendship or influenced by the guilt of responsibility.

Ivanova changed into the EarthForce uniform that had hung, neglected, in the back of the closet for the last year and a half. Deep blue with rich brown leather cuffs and a wide strip that ran down the front of the jacket, concealing the fasteners, Ivanova had brushed the fabric down, polished the EarthForce badge and gold duty stripe that ran across the left breast, and the rank insignia. The trousers felt loose at the waist and the jacket needed to be pulled in, but Ivanova was surprised at how comfortable she felt putting the clothes back on. She

was relieved when the General eventually reappeared on the BabCom screen. There was no time for small talk as before. This time he was officious, respecting her rank but still addressing her as a subordinate. The assignment was being drawn up. Transit papers were being arranged. She would receive them in due course. It was certainly not what Ivanova expected and she tried to hide her shock. When she saluted, Ivanova could tell that he was pleased to have her back, and, oddly enough, she actually felt pleased to be back.

It took less time that she expected for Franklin to be back at her door.

“I just stopped by to make sure I didn’t leave any mindaltering medication lying around the last time I was here,” he said, surveying her quarters. “You’re transferring out?”

“Where did you hear that?” Ivanova asked.

“It’s on ISN already.”

“Then it must be true.”

“You couldn’t have waited and talked to us about it.”

“Stephen,” Ivanova said, “this was a decision I had to make for myself.

The bell chimed and she opened the door. Two workmen from the Dockers Guild entered pulling a narrow palette loaded with long-haul personal storage containers. They stacked them beside the sofa and handed Ivanova a clear plastic pouch filled with

EarthForce-stamped identity labels, customs forms and barcode strips.

Franklin looked around at the clothes laid out on the bed, the few books and personal effects piled up on the table.

“You can stay and help me pack if you’d like,” Ivanova said after she showed the dockers out. “There isn’t much, so it shouldn’t take long.”

“So it’s too late to try and talk you out of it?”

“Why would you want to do that?” Ivanova asked as she removed the lid of the first container and started to remove the small boxes arranged inside.

“Well, we’ll miss you for one thing,” Franklin said.

“You need to come up with a better answer than that.”

Franklin nodded.

“Michael’s back. He arrived a little while ago.”

Ivanova stopped sorting out the containers and stretched her back.

“You, me and Garibaldi. Dinner at the Fresh Air in three hours,” Ivanova said. She looked around at the meagre amount of possessions she had either brought with her when she was first posted to Babylon 5 or picked up over the years onboard the station. “Make that two hours. This won’t take long.”

Michael Garibaldi stood up from the table and smiled as Ivanova worked her way through the restaurant. He looked healthier than when she had last seen him, but the smile still worried her. It usually meant he had some foolish plan up his sleeve that would end up with someone getting into trouble.

“I hear you gave the order to have me shot on sight,” he said as they sat down.

“I did, didn’t I?” Ivanova remembered. “But only if you came back here to the station. How’s that working out?”

“So far, so good,” he replied.

It had been a tough year for all of them, but Garibaldi had possibly had it worse than others. Abducted by the Shadows who swarmed around the station, only retreating after Sheridan plunged a White Star armed with Gaim thermo-nuclear missiles into the heart of their homeworld, Z’Ha’Dum, Garibaldi had been turned over to the Psi Cops and reconditioned. First he had surrendered his position as Head of Security on Babylon 5. Back on Mars, he lured Sheridan into a trap and turned him over to EarthForce officials. That was the point at which an enraged Ivanova made him a marked man.

“My head became the official playground for telepaths,” he told her as they ordered from the menu.

Garibaldi Explained how, once he was of no further use to them, Psi Cop Al Bester had taken fiendish pleasure in showing him the lengths they had taken to screw up his life and turn him into their puppet. Trying to make amends, Garibaldi had been captured by the Mars

resistance. They were ready to execute him until Garibaldi convinced Franklin to let Lyta Alexander get inside his head and prove he was telling the truth.

“That must have left you with one hell of a headache,”

Ivanova said over the entrée, shuddering at the thought of having a telepath rooting around inside her mind.

“Well the Mars guys did a good job of redirecting the pain away first,” Garibaldi said, rubbing his jaw at the memory. “And it’s better to have a scrambled head than a bullet through the brainpan any day of the week.”

He ran his hand up over his forehead and over the top of his bald head.

“If I had any hair left it would have gone white with shock. But we got Sheridan out, which was what mattered.”

“And he got himself stabbed doing that,” Franklin said. Garibaldi waved it away as nothing.

“I hear you got yourself pretty banged up,” Garibaldi said to Ivanova. “And I was sorry to hear about Marcus.”

Ivanova wiped her mouth with the napkin, nodded her thanks.

“So, we have a plan, Steve and I, to try and convince you to stay,” Garibaldi announced to lighten the sombre mood.

“Let’s hear it,” Ivanova said, folding her arms. Garibaldi looked over at Franklin for support but the doctor’s look told him he was alone on this one.

“Susan,” Garibaldi said with all sincerity, “pretty please stay here on Babylon 5 with us.”

Ivanova almost pitched forward laughing so hard. Even Franklin could not help but smile. Only Garibaldi remained straight-faced, confused that his gambit had not worked.

“That’s the best you can come up with?” Ivanova spluttered, choking back the laughter.

“Well, you didn’t give us much time,” Garibaldi admitted.

“You said that would work?” he told Franklin.

“I’m going to miss you guys,” Ivanova said, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

“There, you see?” Garibaldi said to Franklin. The doctor simply closed his eyes and shook his head. Garibaldi shrugged and sat back in his chair. As if on cue, the waiters arrived with their main course. They spent the rest of the meal reliving old times.

Garibaldi reminded them of the Centauri’s Celebration of Life, staged during a week of religious ceremonies when the major races were encouraged to share their dominant beliefs.

“All those banging of gongs and the exotic dancers,”

Ivanova laughed.

“I mean, it was supposed to commemorate a victory over their war with the Xon, but it seemed to have evolved into an excuse to get hammered.”

“I can’t believe I missed that,” Franklin said. “Didn’t you once tell me he kissed the butt of some statue before he passed out?”

“Right on the table in front of DeLenn. Right after he told her she was cute for a Minbari, bang, out he went.” Garibaldi said, laughing so much he almost tipped out of his chair.

“And then Vir triumphantly declared he had become one with his inner self,” Ivanova spluttered.

“And then there was the Minbari Rebirth Ceremony,”

Garibaldi added.

“With all those bells and the little pieces of red fruit,”

Ivanova said.

“Except of course what they don’t tell us was it can also double as a marriage ceremony,” Garibaldi told Franklin. “So it was possible that Jeff and DeLenn got married. Depending, of course, on how serious the exchange of looks were.”

“I never get invited anywhere,” Franklin complained.



“Do you think John knows about that?” Garibaldi asked Ivanova.

They ate, drank, talked and laughed until Franklin eventually asked, “What are you going to tell Sheridan?”

“Pretty much the same thing I told you,” Ivanova had said as she gave the waiter her credit chit, after refusing to let either of them pay.

# THREE

Ivanova stood at the window of the EarthForce Office, looking out over the entire length of the Hydroponics Garden. Finally she turned away, her hands brushed the fabric of the chairs as she wandered around. She circled the desk but had no inclination to sit down. This was where so many plans had been formulated and fates decided. First with Jeffrey Sinclair, before he was appointed Earth's ambassador to Minbar, then with John Sheridan after he had assumed command of the station.

“Having any thoughts about what it would be like from behind the desk?” Sheridan asked from the doorway.

Ivanova had patched into the Command & Control Deck, listening out for Sheridan's arrival. She turned the volume down until the chatter, back and forth between the station and the ships coming in to dock seemed little more than a distant echo. Lieutenant Corwin had taken her place in the interim and, although his voice occasionally betrayed an occasional flutter of uncertainty, he was good at the job. It had been a year of shouldering additional responsibilities onboard Babylon 5 and the crew pretty much risen to accept any challenge.

“John... Sorry, Mister President,” Ivanova said, greeting him.

“I'm not sworn in yet so John will be fine,” he told her.

“We can leave our ranks outside the door.”

“I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner,” Sheridan apologised. Ivanova understood. Garibaldi and Franklin had organised a surprise party for Sheridan and Delenn to celebrate their wedding, which, it was reported, had taken place on the White Star during their journey back from Earth. She had not attended simply because personally she had not felt in the mood for celebrating, whether it was their wedding or the end of the war. She did want to see Sheridan before she left.

“Congratulations,” she said. “Where's the blushing bride?”

“Getting herself acquainted with the rumba last I saw,” he said shaking his head. “Michael is certainly going to have a lot to answer for if she takes to it.”

“I’m sorry to drag you away from the festivities.”

“Don’t be silly,” Sheridan said. “Stephen told me and I wanted to see you.”

He sat down on the sofa and gestured for her to join him.

“So, you’re really going?” he asked as Ivanova sat down opposite him.

Ivanova nodded firmly.

“I ship out in three hours.”

Her quarters were stood bare with only the standard furniture remaining. The possessions had only filled two storage containers. They had been labelled and stowed away onboard the shuttle, along with the garment bag containing her spare uniform and hand luggage, ready for her departure.

“I wish you had waited to make your decision,” Sheridan said.

“Would you have tried to convince me to stay?”

“You know I would,” Sheridan said. “We need you here, Susan. Maybe now more than ever.”

“Which is why I couldn’t wait,” Ivanova replied. “Being here in this room reminded me of what we did here; the choices we made. Whether it was to put an end the Shadow War or free Earth from Clark’s tyranny. *We* made those choices and *we* decided our own fate.”

“And Marcus?”

Ivanova looked over to the far side of the room.

“It was over there where you first introduced him to us.”

“I remember,” Sheridan nodded.

“He didn’t give me the choice,” Ivanova said. “I shouldn’t be here, but I am. Now there are too many ghosts walking the hallways. I should be one of them.”

“Death is a life-changing experience,” Sheridan agreed.

“How do I make people understand that?” she asked.

“You don’t. They don’t have a frame of reference,” Sheridan told her.

He sagged down in the chair and for a moment he looked tired and vulnerable, like an old man whose body was slowly giving up on him. The years on Babylon 5 had taken a toll on all the command staff, none more so than Sheridan. After all the years of carrying the grief of losing his wife, he had been shocked to suddenly find Anna alive and well, a puppet of her new masters, the Shadows. Although she had been altered by them, and nothing remained of the woman he once knew, he had had to see her die a fiery death when he took the fight to the Shadows own doorstep. Just recently he had suffered torture and humiliation in his fight to rid his home of the evil that blighted it these past years. Now that it was done he had accepted probably the greatest responsibility any man could ever take on as the new President of the Interstellar Alliance.

“You look like you need a holiday,” Ivanova told him.

“Don’t we all,” Sheridan sighed. “Maybe I should have all the outer doors on the station sealed for the next year and we just kick back and relax in the Zen Garden.”

“That’s an idea,” Ivanova said.

“And we could start a baseball league!” Sheridan announced, suddenly all fired up.

“And that’s certainly another, very *different* idea,”

Ivanova said, perplexed at his sudden change in thinking.

“Can’t you see it?” Sheridan asked, sitting forward in his seat, suddenly animated. “Londo can be the umpire. We can have G’Kar pitching.”

“For the sake of my sanity, I have to say no,” Ivanova demanded.

“If Kosh was still here, he’d be in the outfield.”

Sheridan smiled and relaxed back into the chair.

“It’s been some adventure,” he said.

“An awfully big adventure,” Ivanova suggested, which made him laugh.

“When we were stationed together on Io, neither one of us could have imaged we would have lived through what we have.”

“Over ten years ago,” Ivanova said.

Sheridan lapsed into silence, thinking of how quickly the time had passed.

“So have you found someone to replace me?”

“I’m thinking about Elizabeth Lochley. I have a call scheduled with her later today.”

“Lochley?” Ivanova said. The name definitely rang a bell.

“You mentioned a Lochley when we were on Io. You married...”

Ivanova broke off and slowly shook her head as she made the connection. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I need someone I can trust implicitly. I’ll see if Delenn approves the idea, but I hope there won’t be a problem.”

Ivanova looked over and checked the time.

“Are you going back to Earth first or straight to your posting?” Sheridan asked.

“Earth first, for my briefing at EarthDome with General Smits.”

“How are you getting there?”

“Ah, the travel papers came through earlier. And, I’m taking the scenic route!” Ivanova pulled a folded document from her pocket and sighed as she scanned the text. “The transport goes from here to Sector 49. I have a ten-hour layover there, which will no doubt be fun, until the next ride takes me to Proxima. And that would be Proxima Station, not Proxima III or IV, so they’re keeping me in the military bases. From there to Io. Then on to Mars. After that I have to hustle a ride on the first ship back to Earth.”

“I think I can rustle up a White Star if you’d like, get you there in next to no time,” he said but Ivanova shook her head.

“Thanks for the offer, but I don’t think I can be aboard a White Star yet. It’s just too soon, you understand?”

“Of course,” Sheridan replied.

“And I should still get two days liberty if everything keeps to schedule,” Ivanova observed.

She stood up and held out her hand. Sheridan rose out of the chair and shook it warmly.

“It’s a pleasure to know you, and its been a honour to work with you, John,” she said.

“Likewise, Susan. Good luck with your commission. And you’re always welcome back here any time,” Sheridan replied.

“Hopefully things should quieten down here a little. I don’t think anyone will schedule another war or rebellion just yet.”

“At least not until the end of the week,” Ivanova said with a smile. Sheridan nodded.

“We might just catch a break this time,” he agreed.

As Ivanova started to go, Sheridan held her back for a moment.

“The one thing I learnt from death...” he confided, “is to enjoy every second of your life afterwards because it’s precious. The time you have is everything. Don’t forget that.”

Ivanova swallowed and smiled weakly. She squeezed Sheridan’s arm and walked out of the office.

Ivanova found Franklin waiting in the corridor to escort her to the docking bay.

“So are they sending you to command a listening post on some barren ball of rock?” Franklin asked.

“That depends, who would win the bet if I said yes, you or Michael?”

“Garibaldi,” Franklin admitted.

“Well, you would think,” replied Ivanova. She stepped to one side to allow a delegation of the Gaim to pass them. Of all the races that made up the League of NonAligned Worlds, now the Interstellar Alliance, the Gaim were perhaps the strangest she had ever encountered. Methane breathers who would suffocate if ever they were exposed to a normal atmosphere, the insectoid-like aliens wore their armoured encounter suits continually.

With a language that was impenetrable to the other races, and unable to learn any other languages themselves, chairing debates in the council chamber, Ivanova had always associated their voices with the detached electronic rasp of the computer translators.

“No, I’m overseeing the shakedown of the EAS *Titans*,”

Ivanova explained.

“The *Titans*? What is that?”

“The new Warlock class destroyer.”

“I’m impressed,” Franklin said. “And one hundred credits up.”

“Well, hurray for you,” Ivanova said.

They turned the corner and walked into the Zocalo.

“Well, this is an unusual route to get to the docking bay,”

she observed.

Ordinarily one of the most heavily populated parts of the station, the marketplace was heaving with even more people than

usual, all celebrating the end of the war and Sheridan and Delenn’s marriage. Ivanova pushed balloons out of her face as they skirted the crush of bodies.

“I thought you’d want to come and see what you were missing,” Franklin said.

Ivanova tried to catch up with him but Franklin disappeared into the crowd. She looked around her, saw a flash of red hair as Lyta Alexander weaved her way through the party. The telepath looked drained. She reached the bar and turned around. Her eyes narrowed, as if she was searching for the answer to a question she knew she should know. Then she fixed her gaze on Ivanova and her face relaxed. The creases disappeared from her brow and she nodded, almost imperceptibly, as if she were sharing a secret. Ivanova smiled and raised her hand to wave goodbye. Revellers stumbled in front of her. When they were gone, so was Lyta. Along the bar sat Londo Mollari and G’Kar. The Centauri was downing drink after drink with complete abandon. His hearty laugh booming out as he regaled the Narn with what was probably another lively story about the gods in the Centauri temples. Though G’Kar looked like he was barely tolerating his fellow Ambassador, he stuck by his side, listening. Theirs was certainly an unusual partnership, Ivanova thought. Four years ago they were at each other’s throats. Now, after all the time they had spent together through the good and the bad, they had come



to accept each other for who they were.

Ivanova imagined G'Kar look her way but she suspected she was mistaken. She was almost clear of the throng when somebody jabbed her playfully in her ribs.

“Peek-a-boo!” Garibaldi whispered in her ear. He spun Ivanova around, almost bowling her off her feet, as they spent a moment dancing to the music that reverberated through the hall.

“How'd you find me?” she asked, wiping coloured squares of confetti off his jacket.

“I wouldn't be good at my job if I let you sneak out of here without saying goodbye.”

“Well, it's a warship. You lost.”

“Damn!” smarted Garibaldi. “I just hate it when that happens.”

They took a breath as they joined Franklin.

“Listen, you look after yourself, okay?” Garibaldi said.

“However far you travel don't forget about us. Don't forget the old place.” He looked around at the happy bustle of people, soaking in the party atmosphere. “And always remember the secret of Babylon 5.”

Ivanova gave him puzzled look.

“I must have missed that meeting. So what is it?” she asked.

“Babylon 5 is all about second chances,” Garibaldi explained. “Since the Earth-Minbari War it has brought the different races even closer together, sure. But it also works on a more personal level. Look at G'Kar, who was swallowed up by his own rage when he came here. Or me for that matter.”

“I'd say in your case it's been second, third and possibly four chances,” Franklin interjected.

“You see what I mean?” Garibaldi told her. “You always get another

roll of the dice. Maybe this is your turn. This is your second chance. Don't let the opportunity pass you by."

"I won't," she assured him.

"Be good. And if you can't, make sure you give me a couple of days notice," Garibaldi said as she kissed him goodbye. Ivanova turned and suddenly found herself face to face with G'Kar. The reptilian alien stared at her suspiciously as light bounces over the mottled cranium. His deep-set eyes, mismatched in colour after a temporary blue-coloured artificial implant had been required to replace the red eye plucked out on the whim of the Centauri Emperor Cartagia, had once been filled with anger and vengeance. Now they suddenly twinkled with mischievousness. A wide grin spread across his face as he leant in toward Ivanova, his mouth close to her ear.

"Be careful out there amongst the humans," he whispered. His grin spread even wider as Ivanova flung her arms around him and gave him a hug goodbye.

Franklin escorted her the rest of the way to the docking bay. As they said their goodbyes Ivanova gently kissed him on the cheek and wished him well. With that she turned and headed toward her waiting ship. Not once did she look back. Not even when she had taken her seat aboard the shuttle and passed through the station's docking portal to rendezvous with the waiting transport.

## **ST PETERSBURG**

# FOUR

The shuttle swept in low over the Gulf of Finland. As the pilot banked on his approach to the EarthForce garrison west of Pulkovo Airport, Ivanova pressed her face against the port window, eager to catch a glimpse of the early morning sunlight reflecting off the gilded dome of St. Isaac's Cathedral which, she was heartened to see, still managed to dominate the skyline of St. Petersburg four centuries after its completion. Once the ship had touched down, Ivanova remained seated while the other passengers who had accompanied her from Mars hurriedly disembarked. She wanted to savour the moment, not rush it. Coming back to St. Petersburg, it felt like a homecoming even though, truth be told, there was no actual home for her to return to. But if Ivanova was to enjoy this second chance at life, as Garibaldi suggested, where better to start than the land, and the city, where she had been born.

During dinner with Franklin and Garibaldi, as the conversation touched on her returning to Earth, Ivanova was struck by the realisation that this would be the first time in over four years that she had set foot on a planet's surface. The

only time she hadn't walked the metal decks of either space stations or space ships was when she had journeyed down to Epsilon 3, the barren planet Babylon 5 orbited. Even then it was specifically to visit the caverns housing the mysterious and powerful Great Machine. To get there meant piloting a shuttle four and a half miles straight down into a dark fissure, and in Ivanova's opinion that did not count.

"That's pretty much the same for us," Franklin had said.

"You've both come back from Mars," Ivanova countered.

"And we were underground with the resistance most of the time. At least I was," he said, turning to Garibaldi.

"Most of the time?"

"I was in MarsDome and the Edgars compound," Garibaldi admitted as he looked at their faces. "Okay, so I was *outside* when we captured that observation post. But that was only because we had to trudge miles around the landing field to avoid detection."

“Outside, *on the surface*,” Ivanova said.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a stroll in the countryside. You’re wearing a breather all the time and scrabbling around over all that dust and rock.”

“Still outside,” Ivanova announced. “That still counts.”

Now, as she climbed out of her seat ready to leave the shuttle, Ivanova felt almost giddy with excitement. The breaks in the journey to Earth had offered little more than repeatedly recycled air and flavoured, perpetually reclaimed water while she sat in transfer lounges on orbiting stations, waiting to be shuttled from one ship to another. But each stop had advanced her forward one more stage and this was the reward. Ivanova stopped at the hatch to savour the moment. A military base, with its rows of hangers, refuelling stations, administration blocks and control towers was probably not the most ideal location but it would do. She took a deep breath, feeling the crisp, cold air that tingled against her cheeks burn inside her lungs.

She walked down the steps onto the tarmac and looked up at the clouds that hung, almost motionless above her. Crowned with childish white daubs lit by the sun, their swollen blue-grey bellies, feathered at the edges, gave the promise of snow. She looked beyond them, up into the pale blue sky. The overlapping throaty roars of jet and rocket engines broke the silence and she squinted at the sunlight reflected off the metal fuselage of a passenger liner lifting off from the airport runway.

Just once, in the stillness before battle, Ivanova had promised herself that if she ever made it back to Earth she would visit St. Petersburg, Paris and her father’s grave. Up until now it had always seemed like an abstract concept; words mentioned in passing that had no real relevance. Although Paris would not be on the itinerary this time, she was choked with the realisation that she was actually home.

“Captain Ivanova?” a voice called out.

She turned and noticed a transport parked to the side of the landing pads, the young driver, who looked like he had come straight out of the Academy, standing beside it. She walked towards him, noticing how the cold made him tremble as he stood to attention and saluted.

“The base commandant requests your presence,” he said, opening the door for her.

She saw the tiny figures dressed in grey general staff uniforms that had joined her on the flight disappearing toward the distant hangers.

“I think I might walk,” she said as the driver relieved her of the carry-on luggage. She could already feel the cold biting into the fabric of her uniform but the opportunity to breath fresh air and stretch her legs seemed too good an opportunity to miss. “Which direction is it?”

The driver pointed away from the hangers, across the crisscross of runways to a small administration block that flickered like a mirage through the heat haze from the jet engines.

“The driver will be quicker,” the driver announced, helping her find the excuse she needed to change her mind.

General Gorev, the commander of the St Petersburg garrison, was a ruddy-faced man in his late fifties with steel-grey hair shorn into a severe crew-cut and a large barrel chest.

“Captain Susan Ivanova. *The hero of the Motherland!*” he announced with a flourish as Ivanova reported to his office. Arms outstretched as he stepped from behind his desk, Gorev embraced her in a crushing bear hug. When his hot flesh pressed against hers as he kissed both her cheeks, Ivanova smelt the faintest hint of vodka.

“Now you are back, yes?” he said. “After liberating us from the deathly grip of that evil man.”

Ivanova wondered if the General had spoken so openly when the planet was under Clark’s rule. She knew that in Russia, now as it has always been, that the way to survive was to know which way the wind was blowing, geographically and politically.

“I have two days before I report to EarthDome,” Ivanova told him, although it was clear that Gorev already had a copy of her itinerary.

“And you chose to spend it in your home country. Good. A wise decision. Natalya will assign you a billet. The driver is at your disposal for your stay here.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ll find my own way,”

Ivanova said.

Gorev frowned.

“You are without an overcoat,” he observed, as he looked her up and down. Ivanova had fully intended to requisition one once she arrived at the base.

“Cold of space, not like cold of Russia!” Gorev exclaimed. He pushed down on the intercom and called his secretary into the office.

Ivanova had already met Natalya Castranov after the driver had deposited her outside the administration block. With her pale

white face and black hair pulled back tight against her head and braided into a ponytail, she had looked like a frail bird sat behind the computers at the secretary’s station. Up from behind the desk, Ivanova was surprised to find that she was taller than expected with more meat on her slender bones.

“Our hero Captain needs suitable clothing to wear out,”

Gorev explained to Natalya, using his hands to trace the shape of an overcoat in the air in front of him.

Natalya nodded sharply and made a sharp exit. Gorev’s eyes trailed after her as she left.

“Nyet, nyet, nyet!” Gorev admonished her when she returned with a standard issue leather long coat. “This is not right for the hero of the Russian Consortium.”

From the look he gave her, the secretary knew what was required. She returned almost immediately, this time with a fur coat draped over her forearm. Given that they were roughly the same build, Ivanova suspected the woman had not had to look too far.

“Good, yes?” Gorev asked after he instructed Ivanova to try it on. He returned to his chair, eyeing her agreeably as she herself admired the coat. “Very good.”

He turned to his secretary who was waiting by the open door.

“Natalya will see to your further requirements,” Gorev announced. Ivanova saluted the General and left the office.

Ivanova stood in the outer office while Natalya sorted out temporary accommodation for her in the officer’s quarters. She absently dug her hands into the coat pockets as she looked at the framed photographs

of past Consortium Premiers, which was the only decoration in the otherwise faceless office. Her fingers snagged against something thin and hard and Ivanova pulled out a credit chit, which she turned over in her hand.

“Yours, I think,” she said. Looking up from the monitor Natalya nodded thanks as Ivanova passed it across to her.

“Officer’s quarters are at the near end of the barracks. You are assigned to S211. The driver will be available should you require transportation off-base?”

The door to the outer office opened behind them bringing with a faint chill from outside. Natalya looked up from her desk and Ivanova, off to one side, turned to see a grim-faced EarthForce officer standing in the doorway.

“Captain Gregor Vasney,” he announced, eyeing Ivanova suspiciously.

“The General is expecting you. You may go in,” Natalya announced indicating toward Gorev’s office. Vasney nodded. He rapped on the door, entering without waiting for a reply.

Before the door closed behind him, Ivanova and Natalya heard General Gorev enthusiastically proclaim Vasney *the* hero of the Russian Motherland. Natalya gave Ivanova an almost consoling look.

“Here is your access card,” she said handing Ivanova an EarthForce-branded rectangle of plastic. “You are meeting people later for celebration?”

“I was born here. My parents died here. It is only them I have come to see,” Ivanova informed her. “There is nothing to celebrate. Only time for myself before I go back into space, if I am allowed.”

Natalya’s eyes narrowed. She nodded as she understood what Ivanova meant by being allowed to have time for herself.

“Because of the Interstellar Network News?” Natalya asked. Ivanova nodded.

“Because of ISN.”

Broadcast to Earth and its colonies, Interstellar Network News had only recently returned to normal service after the channel had been

turned into an ugly propaganda tool for President Clark and its reporters imprisoned after attempting to uncover the corruption in EarthGov.

Back on the air, ISN had celebrated by reporting the demise of the dictator and the overthrow of his forces by Sheridan's fleet. Like Universe Today, which had printed the amnesty decree awarded to Sheridan and the crew of Babylon 5 on its front page, ISN had solemnly broadcast news of Ivanova's fatal injuries sustained during her engagement with Earth Alliance ships loyal to Clark.

When it was announced that Sheridan was promoting Ivanova, many had inferred it to be a deathbed promotion. By the time the media outlets ran follow-up pieces reporting that Ivanova's injuries were obviously not as serious as first suspected and that she was leaving Babylon 5 to take command of an Earth Alliance warship, neither were headline stories. On the protracted journey to Earth, Ivanova had noticed people glancing in her direction, pointing her out to friends and colleagues. Conversations seemed to fall silent in her presence. In crowded departure lounges, where humans and aliens jostled to get to their ships on time, she had found space appear around her. On the rare occasions the transport had a hostess service, the crews had not been very successful in hiding their discomfort around her.

EarthForce personnel at Promixa Station had treated her well. Proxima III, after all, had been the first planet liberated by Sheridan and the White Star fleet, but Ivanova still felt an air of tension hanging over the general staff. The closer she had got to Earth and encountered personnel who, if not loyal to Clark, understood the regulations they were expected to follow, the more Ivanova sensed they just wanted her gone from their station.

"Take this," Natalya said. She had gone to the small closet between the filing cabinets and returned with a large fur hat.

"This will help you blend in."

Once inside her quarters, Ivanova laid the coat across the bed and placed the hat on top. As expected, her assigned billet was not much to speak of, but it had a firm mattress and a clean bathroom. The bathroom had a real shower, which was what she

needed after too many days in transit. As the water heated up she eagerly peeled off her uniform, gathered up her toiletries from the travel bag and stepped under the hot spray.





# FIVE

Ivanova rode the Metro to Ploshchad Vosstaniya. It was later than she would have liked but she had stayed, soaping herself in the shower until the luxurious hot water started to run warm. Afterwards she had dressed in a pair of plain black slacks and a black high-neck sweater. With her hair pulled back and braided, and wearing the fur coat and hat, she looked like just another well to do Russian citizen. Throughout the journey into the centre of the city, she had watched parents doting over their children, listened in on the conversations around her. Some people discussed the bigger picture, wondering how the sudden changes in EarthGov would affect the long term standing of the Russian Consortium now that Susanna Luchenko was Acting President of the Earth Alliance. Most were simply happy to exchange views on the more mundane aspects of life, sports and, typically, the grinding routine of work. Out of the Metro station, Ivanova stood opposite the imposing façade of the Moskovsky Station, which dominated the south side of Uprising Square. A thick blanket of cloud had positioned itself over St. Petersburg during her journey north. Foreshadowing the onset of night, one consequence of the premature darkness that had descended over the city was that it highlighted the elaborately designed and brightly lit Christmas decorations that were strung across the streets and around the facades of buildings.

After a cursory glance down Ligovskiy Prospekt, Ivanova turned west, along Nevskiy Prospekt. She did not do what she expected. After so many years away it did not surprise her to find that many of the businesses had undergone significant changes since she was last here. A favourite restaurant from her childhood was long gone, but that was to be expected given the economy. The same was true of various stores and boutiques that had enjoyed her custom back before she enrolled in EarthForce. As she walked the first block, carefully trudging through the snow and slush, taking in the shop fronts on both sides of the street, it appeared that the shops and restaurants had simply swapped names and locations in the same way someone would shuffle a deck of cards. The different restaurants may have given way to different tastes, but as Ivanova stopped to peer through the glass, she was pleasantly surprised to see the familiar scene of bored waiters hovering in the background as diners conversed over plates of Shashlik and Pelmeni.

Of the buildings themselves, some had been modernised, remodelled in high-rising glass and steel, although the developers had been very careful to keep the original facades intact. Although the city had shown itself willing to move with

the times, Ivanova was reminded of a dinner party her parents had hosted for various scholars and academics of their acquaintance, one of the last before Psi Corps discovered her mother's secret. It was one of the rare occasions both she and her brother had been allowed to stay up little later than usual. Don't forget to be on your best behaviour tonight, her mother had instructed as the guests started to arrive. The children had eaten their supper at the kitchen table, watching the cook, who had been hired for the special occasion, fuss over the pans bubbling furiously on the stove. Sofie Ivanova had come in to check on their progress and, seeing that they were done, wiped their mouths with a cloth to make sure they were presentable. Looking back Ivanova wondered if it would not have been better if their mother had introduced them at a later time, although that surely would have carried them much later past their bedtime. With everyone seated, even before the drinks were served the dining room suddenly became the setting for a heated debate. From the sighs it elicited at first, it appeared to be an old argument that had suddenly come back to the boil. As Sofie Ivanova escorted her two children around the large dining table, the men and women broke off from the debate to thank the children for welcoming them into their house.

Shaking their heads wildly and gesticulating in time to their very vocal opinions, the intellectuals had looked like a puppet show that had gone out of control. Even their father was joining in and the young Susan Ivanova had almost broken into spontaneous laughter had it not been for an aside from her father that told her to behave.

From what she could remember, Ivanova gathered that the whole argument had been started by a narrow-faced historian with half-moon glasses and thinning blond hair who was bemoaning the fact that the recent spate of high-rise developments in the city, in particular an ambitious project to the west of Moskovskiy Prospekt that effectively joined Baltiysky Station and Varshavsky Station together, would spell the end of any future Russian heritage.

"Everything will look the same," he had declared. "In another generation, less even, and only the difference in climate will tell you which country you are in!"

Across the table, those opposing his view had told him he was a fool

to believe such a tradition would ever be lost.

“Russia will always be Russia,” a stern blonde in her late fifties had shot back.

“When we look back, perhaps that will be our greatest regret,” announced another, adding fuel to an already expanding fire.

As Sofie finally ushered her children up to bed, one academic had ventured that the city would share the same fate that had befallen Moscow where the Kremlin Museum was now best known to tourists for The Russian Experience multi-media presentation. Obviously it *was* an old argument, judging from the groans and laughter than accompanied the announcement, but

everyone around the table still leapt in with their thoughts and opinions.

At the top of the stairs, where the sound of the argument below seemed to have gotten louder rather than receded, a voice bellowed, “They lay one finger on Nevskiy Prospekt and the whole of Russia will come to Vosstaniya and then we will see an uprising! Just you see.” With that pronouncement ringing in their ears, Sofie had looked down at her daughter’s questioning face and kissed her goodnight.

Over the decades, as the country was transformed, the Great Perspective Road had managed to remain virtually untouched. Aside from the businesses, which would always be in a state of flux, Ivanova felt comforted to see the same hotels, churches, and town-house palaces, with their individual Neo-Classical, Baroque or Neo-Romanesque design, just where she expected them to be. So much had happened over the last few years that she felt reassured to know that there were some things that would not change. The only thing that seemed new to her was the traffic. The metro had reminded her of the transfer shuttle that ran through the core of Babylon 5. Waiting to cross at the intersection with Vladimirskiy Prospekt, Ivanova found herself having to watch out for the steady stream of cars, cabs and delivery trucks, most of them dusted with a coat of white frosting, jockeying for position in the wide lanes. Intoxicated by her surroundings, she had almost stepped straight into the oncoming traffic without thinking but an abrasive car horn had sent her back onto the sidewalk.

Snow crunched under foot as she continued her journey. Before she realised it she had reached the bridge over the Kanal Griboyedova.

She stopped to take in the flamboyant exterior of the great Khram Spasa na Krovi, the Church on Spilled Blood, built on the spot Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in the latter part of the 19th Century.

Many times as a young child she had walked down the street with her father, listening to him explain again and again the background history of every building. On every occasion she would dutifully answer the questions he quizzed her, even correcting him on the times he purposefully misremembered to make sure she had been paying attention. Even now she could remember being taught that the site of the Nevskij Palace Hotel originally belonged to the Industrial School of the Tsarevich, or that the Passazh arcade was the first department store in the city to break away from State financing, or that Number 2, Nevsky Prospekt originally belonged to Volnoe Ekonomicheskoe Obshestvo, the non-governmental economic research institution founded and funded by Catherine II.

The impromptu schooling would last until they reached Dom Knigi, the House of Books. Once there, Ivanova would wrench her hand from her father's grasp and skip from one window to the next, taking in each display of books. In the glass she would catch her father's reflection as he watched over her from the kerbside, beaming with pride.

If she had done well answering his questions Andrei Ivanov would hold open the door and usher his daughter inside. There he would follow close behind as she roamed the shelves looking for the sought-after book that would be held up as her prize. If she had not paid enough attention and answered more questions wrong than right, Andrei would be the one to decide which book to buy. It would invariably never be as good as what his daughter wanted. As a consolation they would trudge back to the National Library buildings at the intersection with Sadovaya ul where she would hope to find a copy of the book she so desperately desired. Ivanova crouched down by the bookstore window. Trying to keep the hem of the borrowed coat out of the slush and snow, she stared at the glass, trying to picture the young girl fired with enthusiasm who had stood on this spot over a quarter of a century ago. She tried to recall the dreams and ambition that filled her life back then.

Her father had never hidden the fact that he expected her to follow him into academia, but what was it she wanted out of life? Would she have followed his wishes if life had not taken the turns it had? If her mother had not taken her life to escape from the twilight life dulled

by Psi Corp medication, if her brother had not been killed in the Earth-Minbari War, if she had not joined EarthForce against the wishes of a father she blamed for letting her mother slip away. Would St Petersburg, a city that seemed infinitely large when she was young, and alarmingly small to her now, have been the boundaries of her world?

Ivanova felt tears welling up and she wiped her eyes with the knuckles of her thumbs. The wind blowing off the canal prickled her skin and crept into her bones. She stood up, overcome with a feeling of abject sadness. She had come here to recapture her past. There was no way to attempt to replicate those moments or be that person. Everything around her, the microcosm of the old St Petersburg, only made her realise that she simply didn't belong here. Everything, from the imposing Kazansky Cathedral to the Hermitage Museum, was all part of the past. The memories associated with them were from another lifetime, a different lifetime.

She could walk into the State Museum and find the Half Tournament Armour and Parade helmet with the dragon motifs that had been Ganya's favourites when he was a boy, or the delicate porcelains that caught her eye, but what would that achieve? When she was in space she had dreamed of coming back home, but now that she was here what did it mean? She could think of fond memories from when she was very young, when the city was her home. But after she had been sent abroad to school, returning briefly once each term had finished, St Petersburg had simply become somewhere to come back to.

It had stopped being home long ago. Ivanova had spat almost the exact words in her father's face, after her mother's funeral when he had asked her to come back home. She had felt the rage building up in her throughout the service and his words had opened the floodgates.

Andrei Ivanov had simply stood there, ashen-faced from having buried his wife, as all the invective spewed out. Ganya, home on compassionate leave to attend the service, had tried to intervene but she had pushed him away. When she was finally done he had said nothing in reply. In his eyes Ivanova could see the emptiness of his soul. As she turned away she knew that the rift that had grown between them would never heal. Wiping away the tears that now burned her cheeks, Ivanova stumbled to the kerb and hailed a cab.

"Finlyandskiy Station!" Ivanova barked at the driver as she climbed in and slammed the door behind her. Ivanova caught sight of the driver's

sour expression at having a fare that would take less than three kilometres. For the first time she wished she was wearing her EarthForce uniform to show him that she commanded respect and was not a bored housewife on a shopping spree who could not be bothered to make the effort to get there on foot. She was about to repeat her instruction when the cab jerked away from the kerb into the stream of traffic.

## SIX

She took the Metro north to Plochad Muzhestva. There had been a Metro station on the other side of the Kanal Griboyedova which would have meant her changing trains but allowed the cab driver to prowl for the larger fares he obviously desired. Going from Finlyandskiy Station meant crossing the Neva on the Liteyny most. As much as these symbols of her childhood meant nothing to her anymore, the journey did afford her one final view of the Peter and Paul Fortress on Zayachiy Island in the Neva river delta.

The family home had been sold long ago. Andrei Ivanov had found it too big for one person and the burden of his failures as a family man drove him to put it on the market. He moved to a smaller, more manageable apartment where he could live out his days without sharing rooms that once echoed with music and conversation and laughter with the ghosts of his past. For years after her death, Sofie's clothes still hung in the bedroom closets. Back from school Ivanova would abandon the luggage on the doorstep and dash up the stairs to bury herself in the coats and dresses and inhale the lingering scent of her mother. Sat at the dressing table she would carefully lift the lids of the jewellery boxes and listen to the halting, tinkling notes of the Tchaikovsky suites as she ran her fingers over the necklaces and earrings that lay within. All that was now gone. She assumed it had either been sold or given away or destroyed.

On her final visit to St Petersburg after her induction into EarthForce, Ivanova had planned to stay with friends and only drop by the old house to collect the few personal effects she would be allowed to take to her new posting. As the time grew nearer the offer of accommodation unexpectedly fell through, leaving no time to make alternative arrangements. She believed

the friends had either conspired to make her stay with her father, or

been pressured into rescinding the offer to affect the same result.

Either way, on the first day of her leave Ivanova had found herself standing, with some trepidation, at the end of the stone path looking at the house, bathed in the cool Autumnal light. The brown leaves that carpeted the front garden rustled in the breeze. Unexpectedly, her father came to the window to draw the curtains. They stared at each other for a moment. She had worn her EarthForce uniform for the journey back and from his expression it looked like Andrei had at first taken her for Ganya, back from the dead. Finally Andrei retreated from the window. A moment later the porch light glowed brightly and he unlatched the door.

To prove her point she slept in one of the guest bedrooms rather than in her old room. She washed his laundry and cooked the meals. The only time they really spent together was at the kitchen table. Over the food they talked about everything but what mattered. It was the conversation of strangers who find themselves seated next to each other on long journeys.

Her father's routine, she soon discovered, was almost exclusively divided between sitting at his desk in the study, reviewing old papers, or sojourns sitting in his living room armchair staring blankly out into the garden. On her last full day there, as Ivanova wandered the house, she discovered the door left open and both rooms empty.

In the hallway she found the door to the basement ajar. Inching her way down the wooden staircase she saw her father kneeling on the hard earth floor. Stacked against the walls were storage boxes filled with the clutter accumulated over a lifetime that he couldn't bear to part with. Some of the boxes had been lifted down and placed in front of him, the lids tossed aside as he sifted through the contents.

Ivanova recognised some of her mother's possessions amongst the photographs of her ancestors, souvenirs from holidays the family had taken many years ago. As she reached the bottom step, which groaned under her weight, her father turned to face her. Tears stained his face. In his hands he cradled a Matryoshka.

“Last night, when you indicated I didn't want you here, that I hadn't ever wanted you here since mama's passing, since she started taking the sleepers...” Andrei said, struggling to get the words out. “This is why we sent you away to school. This is why we kept you away from



home.”

He held the doll out to her.

Ivanova stepped forward to take it. She looked down at the brightly painted peasant face.

“It was your mother’s idea for you to go. After this came, one day in the post. I knew nothing of it at first. Maybe it was six months after they began administering the injections. It dulled her beautiful mind yes, but as you know, sometimes in the beginning there were those brief moments of perfect clarity when she came back to us”

“I remember,” Ivanova told him. It had shocked her the first time she had found her mother suddenly lucid. If she remembered rightly, she had run screaming from the bedroom when it happened. Later on she eagerly waited for those precious moments when they could talk and laugh together as they had done long ago. Inevitably her mother’s voice would dry up, sometimes in mid-sentence, and she would at everyone as if they were strangers. Struggling to hold back the tears, Ivanova would continue the conversation to its end, their dialogue becoming a monologue.

“One day I found that amongst her things. It was at the bottom of the dressing table drawer,” Andrei explained. “The next time she came back to me, I showed it to her. She made me swear a solemn promise to take you out of school here and send you abroad.”

Ivanova felt the doll rattle as it shifted in her hand. She twisted off the lid of the mother figurine. There should have been the biggest of the four wooden children neatly fitted inside. Instead there was only the smallest child rolling loose from side to side. Ivanova lifted it out, turned the doll around. The small face had been blacked out. The Psi Corps symbol was painted across it in gold.

“She wanted you away from prying eyes,” he explained.

The cemetery gate creaked as Ivanova pushed it open. Snow crunched

underfoot as she dug her hands deep into the coat pockets and headed up the narrow path between the rows of gravestones.

The family that had become fragmented all those years ago was finally coming back together. What had started as one gravestone had now become three. There was space there for a fourth. Ivanova brushed the snow off her mother's gravestone. She leant down and kissed the cold granite.

"Sleep well, mama," Ivanova whispered.

She straightened and turned to Ganya's grave. He could have been buried in the EarthForce cemetery but Andrei had insisted he was laid to rest beside his mother. Instead his name was added to the Memorial Wall honouring the sons and daughters of St. Petersburg who gave their lives during the Earth-Minbari War. A Starfury pilot aboard the EAS *Lexington*, patrolling the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter during the war, he had been lured into a trap by a Minbari transport.

Ivanova had visited him before the cruiser shipped out. She had given him one of her earrings. It had meant to be for good luck. As it turned out it hadn't worked for either of them. As she thought of him Ivanova touched the lobe of her ear. After all these years she only wore one earring in memory of Ganya.

Laid the other side of Sofie was Andrei Ivanov. The grave was new to her. The last time had seen her father he was propped up in a hospital bed, a shadow of the man he once was. He looked gaunt and his skin had a waxy sheen. His beard was unkempt and his hair a mess of tangles. As his condition worsened he had lapsed in and out of a coma. Maybe he knew his time was short and

having watched the last years of his life waste away to grief then regret, he had bartered for one last moment of clarity to unburden his soul.

In his last remaining minutes Andrei Ivanov reached out for the one good thing he had left in his life. He asked his daughter to forgive him for his failure as a father; for his neglect. He told her that he was proud of her achievements and called for forgiveness, which she was only too pleased to grant.

“Thank you Dushenka Moya,” he had said. He had not called her his Little Angel since his beloved Sofie had passed and Ivanova felt touched. He had lost a wife and a son, but in the last remaining seconds of life he had regained his daughter. As the words passed his lips Andrei Ivanova felt the weight lifted, and then he was gone.

Ivanova said a silent prayer as she laid a pebble on each gravestone. She straightened and stamped her feet against the hard, frozen ground to keep her circulation going. Looking around she saw a wolf padding through the cemetery. Its fur was discoloured grey and matted from scavenging. The animal could do with a few more meals. Sensing it was being watched it stopped still and looked in her direction.

“Ganya,” Ivanova murmured as the wolf’s dark eyes fixed upon her.

The animal took two steps towards her then halted again. It raised its snout, sensing something in the air. Someone else was in the graveyard with them. The wolf turned its head away from her. Ivanova followed its gaze until she saw a rotund figure in a heavy fur coat bending over a gravestone across the cemetery.

The figure stood up and took a step back from the grave. He turned and even from a distance Ivanova could see the shock on his face.

“Suzotchka?” she heard him call. Hesitant at first, the figure trudged through the snow towards her, a look of pained confusion on his face. “Is that really you?”

“Uncle Yossel?” she called out and his face brightened.

Rabbi Koslov was breathing hard when he reached her. He wiped the beads of sweat that glistened on his forehead and looked her up and down.

“I saw you and I thought for a moment you were a vision. Things like that can unnerve an old man,” he said. “And this is a very different look for you, yes?”

Ivanova reached forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“This old thing?” she said, indicating to the fur coat. “I borrowed it from the General’s secretary at Pulkovo station.”

Koslov half-turned, pointing back over his shoulder.

“I was over visiting a friend, Gregori Buresnik. His daughter Natasha was the year below you at school, yes?”

Ivanova rolled the name around in her head. Natasha Buresnik. She pictured the narrow face with its permanently sour expression, short black hair cut in a typically severe style.

“She was the year above,” Ivanova corrected him.

Rabbi Koslov shook his head. “Further proof that the older I get the more unreliable my memories.”

He looked Ivanova up and down, still trying to disguise his puzzlement.

“So, you finally made it back home,” he announced.

“Back home,” Ivanova answered with a smile.

“You look well,” he told her.

“And you,” she replied. It had been almost four years since she had last seen Yossel Koslov. After her father’s death the Rabbi had travelled all the way to Babylon 5 to sit Shiva for Andrei. It had been a struggle at first, but eventually he had helped her come to an understanding about her father. To return the favour, she had introduced him to the pleasure of Treel.

“And were you coming to visit?”

“I thought I’d surprise you,” Ivanova explained. Koslov nodded. “This is certainly a surprise. We heard about you on the news. Gravely injured in the conflict, they said.”

“Their information was wrong,” Ivanova said. Koslov looked like he wanted to believe her. Finally he nodded in agreement.

“After everything that has gone on, we should expect some confusion. Martial law, curfews, the propaganda and the secret police. We huddled together like good little Russians and asked, have we travelled back to the old days?” It was meant as a joke but neither of them could manage more than a sharp laugh. Koslov looked down at her father’s gravestone.

“Our people fighting amongst ourselves. What would Andrei have said? It would have broken his heart to see out own countrymen at each other’s throats. And a man cannot have his heart broken too many times, no matter how strong he is.”

He looked at Ivanova, saw the tremble in her lip.

“Suzotchka, has this old man meddled again?” he asked. Ivanova turned to him, a weak smile on her face.

“The ISN reports weren’t completely wrong,” she admitted. She lapsed into silence, unable to explain further. Koslov nodded. He looked down at the gravestone.

“If you can’t talk about it I understand.”

“There was a man back on Babylon 5. He was one of the Rangers. We fought side by side in many battles. I was gravely injured but he found a way to cure me and died instead of me,”

Ivanova sobbed. “He died for me.”

She lifted her head and looked up at Koslov, tears rimmed her eyes.

“He gave his life for mine because he loved me. And I didn’t know.”

“There are always just as many casualties in love as there are in war,” Koslov said.

He looked around the cemetery at the lengthening shadows. The first flakes of snow began to float aimlessly down from the sky.

“You will tell me about it, but not standing here,” he announced.

“Marsha will cook and we will eat. A hearty meal cures all ills, and she will be very pleased to see you, yes?”

“I’d like that,” Ivanova said.

“Good. And there are things I have for you. I brought you Andrei’s samovar to your Babylon 5 station but there was more. Long before he went into hospital he left some photo albums and what remained of dear Sophie’s elegant jewellery in my care. Have you been by the old house?”

“I was going to but couldn’t bring myself to,” Ivanova admitted as they set off for the cemetery gates.

“No matter. A very nice family have taken it over. They have a lot of dogs,’ Koslov said. “You haven’t said how long you are here. If there is time, maybe I can make some calls and get us tickets to the Mariinsky.”

**GENEVA**

# SEVEN

The shuttle took off from St Petersburg just after midnight. Ivanova was the sole passenger. It travelled south and west, heading for Switzerland and the centre of operations for the Earth Alliance.

She had spent the night at Rabbi Koslov's, eventually retiring to the guest bedroom after they had finished poring over the images in the old photograph albums. Ivanova was surprised by how many there had been. Expecting just to see the family portraits she still remembered, she marvelled at the books that went back hundreds of years, through countless generations of her ancestors. All of them were perfectly preserved. Even more surprising was how much Koslov knew about all the various individuals. Finally he admitted that he had looked through them before with Andrei in his final years.

"He schooled me in your family's history," Koslov told her.

"Again and again we looked through them. I think he did this because after he was gone, I could pass the information on to you."

He reached for a large plain envelope that had been slipped under the cover of one album, pulled out the pages that were covered in Andrei's elegant handwriting.

"He wrote everything down so I wouldn't forget and you could remember," he said.

Ivanova brushed her fingertips over a small monochromatic portrait of a wizened old couple who looked like their lives had been particularly cruel ones. The important thing was they were survivors. She looked over at Rabbi Koslov and smiled. After a hearty breakfast they walked around the old neighbourhood together, continuing to abide by the Rabbi's rule of reliving only the good memories. She stayed for lunch but then decided that it really was time she was getting back. Ivanova took a taxi back to the garrison headquarters. On the way, looking out at the city wrapped in a blanket of white snow, she realised that everything she needed to do was done. On

her lap were two photo albums documenting the marriage of Andrei and Sophie Ivanova and the first years of their children's new lives.

She had also taken a couple of pieces of her mother's precious jewellery. Ivanova doubted that she would ever wear the necklaces or rings but she had taken them to have a little piece of her mother with her.

She had also picked out a pair of sapphire earrings. When she returned the coat to Gorev's secretary she gave them to a delighted Natalya as a way of saying thank you. There in the outer office she decided to move up her flight time.

Upon arrival at EarthDome, Ivanova reported to the Duty Office. There she was logged in and the time of her appointment with the General was confirmed. With hours to spare until the meeting, the Duty Officer directed her to the officer's mess. Instead Ivanova elected to walk the grounds. She wandered the paths in the pre-dawn light. There was a chill in the air, but here, sheltered by the mountains it was nothing like the cold of Russia, and anyway, she was used to it by now. While lights burned in the senate offices, Ivanova knelt down on the carefully manicured lawns and gently ran her fingers through blades of grass already beginning to bead with dew. She listened to the faint chirrup of birdsong that was interrupted only by the rush of shuttles that flashed across the sky.

She had spotted the tail within the first ten minutes. In the Duty Office, the Lieutenant who processed her identocard had tried not to show any surprise when he logged her details into the system.

"Captain Susan Ivanova," she had announced and noticed heads tilt away from the monitor screens when they heard her name. After so much attention already, she would have been disappointed if the name had not stirred a reaction.

In Rabbi Koslov's parlour, over a glass of hot tea, Ivanova had voiced concerns over her impending meeting at EarthDome. The old man listened to her tell of the choices the command staff of Babylon 5 had to make and the consequences they lead to. She told him of the Earth Alliance Destroyers that had gone down in flames as Clark's forces sought to wrest control of the space station once it had declared independence, and the ships she had ordered the White Star fleet to attack as the campaign to depose the President edged every closer to Earth.



“To turn your guns upon your own comrades is not a decision that is made lightly, at least not by men of conscience,” Koslov observed as he stroking his beard. “Clark would have brought this planet to ruin. If they do not see that, then they don’t deserve you. You don’t belong with them.”

In the gardens of EarthDome, Ivanova wondered whether the officer who had been shadowing her from virtually the moment she arrived had been sent to spy on her or simply to watch over her. Either way he kept a respectful distance. After a night reminiscing, Ivanova had woken later than usual. Koslov told her not to apologise when she saw him waiting at the breakfast table, obviously she had needed the rest.

Ivanova had wanted to see a proper sunrise. Though there might have been time before her original departure time, the view across Pulkovo Airport was not very inspiring. From the window of her billet it was less so.

Here in Geneva, Ivanova looked to the east and watched the first rays of sunlight touch the snow-capped summits of the Alps and tentatively edge their way down into the valley. She sat on one of the stone benches around a reflecting pool and waited until the light danced on the cool water. Beyond the low wall she could see sunlight sparkle through the water from the fountain as it shot high up into the air.

On more than one occasion she wondered what it would have been like to be here the day after Clark was disposed, the day after their hard fought victory. Would she have sat here with Marcus Cole beside her? The Ranger had journeyed with her in search of the last remaining First Ones to call them to arms in the final, decisive battle between the Shadows and the Vorlons. He had stood by her side as they went head-to-head against the ships intent on ambushing Sheridan’s fleet as it headed for Mars on the way to end Clark’s rule. He had made her laugh and driven her to distraction in equal measure. Although the victory did not belong to one man, Marcus deserved to share in it. She sat there until she felt the warm light on her cheek. By then it was time to go.

# EIGHT

Ivanova reported to the main reception at the Earth Central complex. Close to the appointed time, she expected to be escorted straight through to the offices of the Fleet Commanders. Instead the receptionist rechecked her screen, holding up a finger to keep Ivanova waiting as she talked briefly into her headset and then nodded along to the lengthier instructions she received.

“You will come with me, please,” the receptionist said as she came around to the front of the desks. They made their way to the security scans, waiting in line until it was Ivanova’s turn. She glanced at the people standing patiently in front of her, and those already starting to queue behind. Dressed in suits with aides standing behind them rifling through files to make last minute adjustments to the material, they were likely senate representatives or their assistants who had crossed over from EarthGov to sit in on meetings. All of them had a visitor pass tagged to their lapels.

“Is this really necessary?” Ivanova muttered.

“Yes,” the receptionist said, staring straight ahead. She wore a charcoal Graydon suit and had a permanently pinched mouth. Ivanova noticed that she had looked at her with an air of someone whose gaze had fallen on something terribly unappealing. She wondered if it was just her or the receptionist saw everyone who came through the doors of Earth Central. The security guards waved her straight through, surprised that an EarthForce officer had been made to wait in line. Ivanova

followed the receptionist down the main corridor, expecting to be taken straight to the General’s office.

“You will wait here,” the receptionist said. She opened the glass door to a small waiting room.

“General Smits knows I’m here?” Ivanova asked, trying not to let her frustration show.

“Someone will come for you,” the receptionist explained.

“You will wait here.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Ivanova said. The receptionist simply gave her a curt nod and turned on her heel. The room was narrow and brightly lit with three high-backed chairs set against the wall beside a small table. A restaurant guide to Geneva was the only reading material provided. She had not noticed before but once Ivanova sat down she realised that the wall facing her was a single sheet of glass that looked out onto the main corridor. Instead of a waiting room it was a display case, and she was the exhibit.

It felt like it was as if she was a youngster again, sitting outside the principle’s office at school, waiting to receive a reprimand. Then she would have sat with her head bowed, ashamed at how her behaviour would reflect upon her parents and the family name. Now Ivanova sat with her head held high, defiant and proud. If they were trying to humiliate her, she would not let them succeed. When people passed by in both directions, whether they were government officials or military personnel of all ranks in a mixture of grey, green and blue uniforms, she looked every one in the eye.

Some were too busy to notice her as they hurried on to their next appointment. At times the rumble of conversation coming down the corridor would tail off once they saw her sitting there. “Is that her?” she heard a few of them ask. Others in the party would nod in reply or take a good look at her and say,

“That’s her.” There were other officers that grinned when they saw her and gave her a quick nod as they carried on their way. As the minutes ticked by it felt as if the whole of the permanent staff at EarthDome had paraded past.

She was looking in the other direction when General Smits finally tracked her down.

“Captain Ivanova?” General Smits said, as he eased open the door. “So this is where you are.”

“General,” Ivanova replied as she stood to attention.

Smits returned her salute.

“I see they put you on show,” he stated, looking past her into the corridor.

“I’m happy if it makes the OJC happy, General,” Ivanova replied.

“Everything has a natural evolution, save military humour,”

he explained. “Sorry that you were kept out here. My last appointment overran.”

“I was expecting a last request before the firing squad.”

“What would your request be?” the General enquired, “out of interest.”

“A fast shuttle to a distant star system,” Ivanova said.

“Just proving your point about humour, sir,” she added off the General’s expression.

“Walk with me,” he told her.

Out of the waiting area, Ivanova fell into step beside him the General. For a while they said nothing. As they encountered subordinates coming the other way, Smits returned their salutes but his hand barely reached above shoulder height before it dropped down to his side.

He seemed to have aged ten years since she had last seen him, in a priority Gold Channel communiqué to Babylon 5. On an open line he had sent Sheridan a cryptic message, warning of the growing threat from the Nightwatch, Clark’s branch of the Ministry of Peace. As career-military he had put in enough years to be a canny player in the politics of war. Adept at reading the signs, he had managed to survive but at a price. His hair had been thinning but now it was almost gone. From steely silver it had turned pure white. Even when standing to attention his body seemed to sag as he put all his weight on the cane, which he grasped in his left hand. But there was still a calculating mind at work. Anyone who simply decided to write him off as a tired old man would be in for a surprise.

“What you have to understand is, the Earth-Minbari War forged deep bonds between everyone in EarthForce, for the officers and enlisted men alike who survived the conflict,” Smits told her. “You enlisted when?”

“During the war,” Ivanova stated. “By the time I graduated from the academy it was over.”

“An effective fighting force is built on trust,” he explained. He stopped and looked at Ivanova. “If you can’t trust the man beside you, even on the most basic level, you’re finished.”

“I agree, sir,” Ivanova said.

Smits nodded. They had reached an intersection and he stood for a moment, deciding which direction to take.

“This way, I think,” Smits said, waving his cane to the right. Ivanova obediently followed after him.

“We were still reeling from the death of President Santiago,” he continued. “Obviously everyone was on a heightened state of alert. We were too caught up in matters of planetary security to see what was really happening: Clark putting his men in positions of power, slowly, over time. And the sonofabitch did it in plain sight, under our very noses.”

Ivanova nodded as she listened to what sounded more like a confession than an observation. They took another turn. The next corridor was practically deserted.

“By the time we started to question the policies it was too late. We had the Home Guard, Nightwatch and the Ministry of Peace,” Smits added. They stopped at an elevator and he pressed the call button.

“Quiet isn’t it?” he observed as they stood and waited. Ivanova looked around her. The particular wing of the building they were in did appear unnaturally silent. Before, even

after they had turned off the main corridor, there had been staff hurrying past them. While listening to the General she had caught glimpses of doors opening and closing as people arrived for meetings or aides breathlessly delivered much-needed files or memorandums. Ivanova had heard secretaries taking or redirecting calls, snatches of muffled conversations or gruff voices issuing instructions as well as one or two sharp rebukes. Now it felt like they had the whole of EarthDome to themselves.

“There are corridors here in EarthDome with a lot of empty offices,” the General explained once the elevator had taken them five decks up. “Some recently vacated, given the sudden spate of retirements or re-

assignments. Others have stood that way for well over a year now.”

He stopped and stared at a door that seemed to invoke a particularly strong memory. Ivanova wondered if they were about to step inside but Smits simply cleared his throat and continued walking.

“Some officers tried to take action. They didn’t last very long. They were either killed or betrayed. The rest of us had to play along, simply as a means of survival. A few managed to get off world like General Hague, but once Clark made his move and declared martial law most of us were assigned round-the-clock personal protection.” He spat the words out, shaking his head at the thought of it. “Psi Cops, every one of them. Which meant they knew who was had misgivings about Clark. They kept us around and they made us keep up the charade just to rub our noses in it.”

As they continued walking Ivanova noticed the framed photographs that began to appear on the walls. Almost all were of past EarthGov Presidents, either alone or in the presence of dignitaries and alien ambassadors. The late President Santiago dominated the pictures, which, she figured, had only been recently re-hung. A new addition showed President Luchenko flanked by Ambassadors Delenn, Mollari and G’Kar, smiling after ratifying Earth’s induction into the Interstellar Alliance. All signs of President Clark had been efficiently erased.

“It left us feeling impotent and jealous even, knowing that if there was going to be salvation it would come from the outside and we wouldn’t play a direct part in it. Once Babylon 5 declared independence we knew that was the turning point, right there. Out in space you could do something. We depended on Sheridan and his command staff. You knew him before his posting to Babylon 5?”

“We were stationed together on Io. I served under him there. My brother was a Starfury pilot on the *Lexington*. He was killed before Sheridan took over command.”

Smits nodded. He stopped to take a deep breath and check on his surroundings. Ivanova stood beside him.

“In the end you came though. The true irony is in the eyes of many people here you went about it the wrong way. An effective fighting force is built on trust. It is also built on rules of military protocol that have to be followed to the letter. From the point of view of members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on down, you disobeyed direct orders and that was unpardonable.”

“Which was why no one here acted against Clark sooner,”

Ivanova suggested.

A broad grin spread across the General’s face. Smits continued walking along the corridor with Ivanova at his side.

“Even if we had an inkling of what was really going on?

It’s flattering of you to suggest we knew more than we actually did,” he replied. “If it wasn’t for you and Sheridan and the rest of the B5 crew, who knows how far it would have gone. What Clark and his followers created was an aberration; a distortion of our principles, which you set right.” He stopped in his tracks and looked her in the eye. “You should be proud.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ivanova responded.

“Sheridan becomes President of this Interstellar Alliance. These next few years, we’re going to see a lot of changes, here and out there in space. Hopefully for the better,” Smits said.

“Yes sir,” Ivanova agreed.

“And as for you, we were more than surprised to see the transfer papers come through,” the General said.

“It was time to move on,” Ivanova said.

Smits nodded. He knew there was more to it, but he let it go. Instead he looked over her shoulder to the door behind her.

“Well, here we are,” he said. “This should give us more privacy.”

# NINE

General Smits opened the door and they entered a small outer office. An officious-looking secretary in a woollen slate grey suit sat behind a trio of monitor screens that ringed her curved desk. Her hair was flecked with grey and cut in a bob. She pushed the half-moon glasses back onto the bridge of her nose as she looked from Smits to the screen directly in front of her and then over to Ivanova.

A carton filled with framed photographs sat on the chair facing of the secretary's desk. Leaning against the wall, too big to fit in any box was a painting of Starfury squadrons in orbit around the planet, ringed like a crown of steel atop the blue sphere of earth rising behind them. Ivanova recognised it as one of a celebrated series of paintings commemorating The Battle of the Line. Books had been taken from shelves and piled on the carpet.

"You can go straight in," the secretary said in a heavy Swiss accent. She took a thick folder from the desk and handed it to Smits. He briefly glanced at the cover and passed it to Ivanova.

The General walked across to the door behind the secretary and gently knocked.

"Enter," a voice called from inside.

"Good luck with your new command, Captain," Smits said as he opened the door and ushered Ivanova inside ahead of him.

Ivanova stepped into the inner office. The door closed behind her. She turned quickly, surprised to see that the General had not followed her inside.

"Please, take a seat," President Luchenko said. She sat behind the desk at the far end of the room. Her hair was tied up in a bun just as it was in the photographs, although the style had been relaxed slightly so as not to make it so severe. She was, however, wearing the same black trouser-suit. Ivanova wondered whether, with everything that was going on, she had ever had time to change.

"I should not be more than a few minutes," she added, not looking up from the paperwork that required her immediate attention.



Ivanova sank down into one of the deep leather chairs. She glanced around the bare office. A pale rectangle on the wall indicated where the painting had hung. Labelled cartons lined the walls, some with their lids askew where they had been packed full of mementos or too many files from the cabinets.

“This was my old office before I took office,” Luchenko added, “I’m keeping in on in the interim to conduct business away from any prying eyes.”

Finally Luchenko put down the pen let out an audible sigh. She shuffled the papers together and closed the folder, transferring it to a stacked out tray.

“And that is for me, I assume,” she said with a smile, indicating to the file Ivanova held in her hands. Ivanova handed her the file, which the President spun around on the desk to face the right way and turned to the first page.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting. It was not intentional,”

President Luchenko explained. “There is so much to put right. These things do not happen overnight, much as people would like it to be that way.”

Ivanova nodded and accepted the apology for what it was.

“So, Captain Susan Andrejevna Ivanova...” Luchenko said, letting the words hang.

“Madam President,” Ivanova replied, waiting to see which way the conversation was heading.

“You have had time to visit the home country?”

“A few days in St. Petersburg, back where I was born. My father died during my first year assigned to Babylon 5 and I was unable to return home for the funeral. So this was the first time I’ve had to go back and

visit his grave.”

“And your mother?” Luchenko asked.

“Sleeping beside him. She died when I was fourteen,”

Ivanova explained.

Luchenko turned the page of the open file, scanning the material in front of her.

“Sofie Ivanova. She was a latent telepath.”

Ivanova nodded.

“We found out on her thirty-fifth birthday,” Ivanova told her. “As unexpected presents go... it wasn’t the nicest of surprises for any of us. When she refused to join Psi Corps they

put her on a program of sleepers to suppress her abilities. She stayed on the medication for ten years before she took her own life.”

“How did that make you feel?” Luchenko asked.

“I was a child and my mother had died,” Ivanova said.

“And now?”

“The Corps is not exactly at the top of any New year greetings card list,” Ivanova explained. “but I doubt that makes me unique around here.”

Her answer elicited a smile from Luchenko who flicked through the next couple of pages.

“It says here you were schooled in Tel Aviv, Buenos Aries, here in Geneva.”

“That’s right,” Ivanova replied.

“Your parents did not find the Russian educational system up to their standard?”

“I think they both believed I would get a more rounded education if I experienced the different cultures,” Ivanova explained.

“I have many old family friends,” Luchenko told her, “One couple, quite some years back now, discovered that their child showed signs of emerging telepathic abilities. To keep him out of the grasp of our friends the Psi Corps they sent him around the world, always trying to keep one step ahead. Of course I should have reported them immediately, but when it is personal you are apt to maybe bend the rules, are you not?”

“I would say that depends on your conscience,” Ivanova concluded. Across the desk Luchenko smiled.

“And you had a brother,” she said.

“Ganya. He died the year after my mother. He joined EarthForce and was assigned to the *Lexington*. He was killed when it engaged the *Black Star* during the Earth-Minbari War.”

Luchenko nodded. She took one last look at the pages in the file before finally closing it. Pushing the folder to one side, she sat back and studied Ivanova.

“I am still trying to fathom the logic of our Commandersin-Chief,” Luchenko freely admitted. “It is something I have struggled long and hard with, even before I took over the presidency. If I may be candid, do you see this promotion of yours as a thank-you or their way of keeping you out of the way?”

“Until I know better I’m happy to take it for what it is,”

Ivanova said. Luchenko considered her answer.

“Well you have General Smits to thank for that. He appears to have fought your corner very well, and he was not alone. Just between us, one Susan to another; we’re not back in at a time where people will believe what I tell them to believe,” President Luchenko explained. “That age is long over. The crew of the *Titans* will have their own opinions. You’ve won me over, time to work a bigger room.”

“With a tougher crowd,” Ivanova added.

Luchenko shrugged. “They may be a tough crowd, but I’m sure you’ve stood up to worse.”

“I’m a Russian Jew,” Ivanova told her. She didn’t need to say any more.

President Luchenko smiled. She settled back in her chair and nodded to herself.

“Would you like some tea?” Luchenko asked as she reached for the intercom. “And then you can tell me what it was that made you not want to stay on Babylon 5.”

TEN

Lieutenant Kyle Wynant sat in the austere transit lounge at the landing field due south of EarthDome. He had spent just over two hours waiting there and was doing his best not to fidget. He took the slim leather document case embossed with the Earth Alliance symbol off his lap and tucked it firmly under his arm as he stood to stretch his legs. Since becoming its custodian two days ago it had never left his sight.

Wynant walked over to the windows for a clearer view of the steady stream of shuttles taking off from their assigned pads and rumbling overhead. One shuttle sat waiting on the pad, unmoving. He could read the registration numbers from where he stood: EANS398G. From the moment it touched down he had been waiting to oversee the transfer of the storage containers and hand luggage that had been from the earlier flight in to Geneva. Everything was stowed away safely onboard. All it needed now was the human cargo.

He turned at the sound of the glass doors hissing open, just as he had done every time since arriving here. It was an automatic response now. Just as automatic was his resigned look at discovering it was not who he was waiting for. Instead a quartet of Army Warrant Officers in green uniforms walked though the lounge. He watched them disappear out the other end, their conversation and laughter all but obliterated by the throaty roar of shuttle engines at full burn.

Wynant doubted that the Captain would be such jovial company. His fellow crewmembers had ragged him mercilessly when they discovered he had drawn what they considered the short straw of being given the detail of accompanying their new Captain from EarthDome to the shipyard.

When the news of who had been assigned to take command of the *Titans* was announced, audible groans had echoed throughout the corridors of the ship. It had been virtually the only conversation for the next few days. As last-minute transfers reported to the ship, amongst the lower echelons it was sometimes the first thing they were told, bypassing all military protocol. Wynant himself had stayed on the periphery of the discussions but made it a point not to become actively involved in the debates that raged through the mess hall with such ferocity that few people actually got to eat a full meal before returning to duty. The initial announcement had raised some concerns, but once people began to see that they had been fed a

steady diet of lies and half-truths by the old administration, views subtly changed.

He was determined to bide his time and wait to make his own decision. The real benefit of the duty was two whole days back on Earth. Even though he was kept on base for most of the time, his one scheduled appointment was when he received the document case from the Chief of Naval Operations Office. On the second evening his parents had flown over specially to see him. The glass doors hissed open again. This time the waiting was over.

“Captain Ivanova, Lieutenant Wynant,” he announced with a salute.

“Lieutenant,” Ivanova said, as she returned his salute.

“Junior Grade,” Wynant added.

“Junior Grade?” Ivanova repeated, unsure whether to feel slighted or not that such a lower ranking officer had been sent to meet her.

“Everybody is busy preparing the ship for launch,” Wynant blurted out as if to make excuses for himself.

“I hope you haven’t been waiting long?” Ivanova said.

“Two days sir,” Wynant said. He shook his head as he realised his mistake. “I’ve been Earthside two days. And no, I haven’t been waiting long.”

He was young and nervous and he made Ivanova smile.

“The shuttle is this way,” Wynant said, directing her to the departure gates. “All your luggage is already onboard so we can leave when you’re ready.”

Wynant remembered he was still in possession of the leather document case. He reached to hand it over only to find Ivanova walking ahead of him. He quickened his step to catch up.

Ivanova entered the shuttle first and took a seat directly behind the cockpit compartment. Wynant sat across the narrow isle and buckled himself in.

“This is for you,” he said, finally handing over the pouch. Ivanova partially unzipped the case. She bent the leather back just enough to study the top sheet and flick through the pages underneath. There would be time to study it in detail on the journey.

Through the cockpit door Ivanova heard the pilot requesting clearance to take off. Once it was approved she felt a deep vibration rise up through the seat. Outside the landing field dropped away as the shuttle rose up into the sky. He looked over and saw Wynant staring wistfully out the viewport on his side.

“It’s nice to get back to Earth once in a while,” Ivanova said. “Remind yourself of the things you’re missing.”

Wynant nodded.

“So what do you miss most?” Ivanova asked.

“The sunlight,” Wynant said. “Real sunlight, where you feel the heat on your face.”

It was such an honest and innocent answer that Ivanova had to smile.

For Ivanova it was snow, or even rain. She had forgotten how much she missed the rain. As a child she could play happily in the snow for hours. When it rained she would always run for cover, squealing. If she had known where her life would take her, Ivanova was sure she would have stood outside more often, arms outstretched as the rain washed down her face.

“It’s a shame then to come back in the winter when the days are shorter,” she said. “So where are you from, Lieutenant?”

“Sarasota, sir,” he said, “Although originally I’m from St. Petersburg.”

“Really?” Ivanova said, showing a sudden interest.

“St. Petersburg, Florida,” he said.

The shuttle raced up through the layers of cloud until it was high into the mesosphere. As she looked through the viewport Ivanova saw a convoy of large Condor troop transporters heading for Earth.

“GROPOS coming back from Fort Redstone on Mars,” Wynant observed. “Now that its been granted independence, EarthForce is scaling back on the numbers of troops deployed there.”

Ivanova nodded.

“I see them,” she said.

Before Clark had started throwing his weight around, even before the Shadow War had started to escalate, Babylon 5 had the unenviable pleasure of playing temporary host to a fleet of Condors, and the 25,000 Ground Pounders they were carrying. The marines were on their way to assist in attacking a rebel stronghold on the Sh’lassen world of Akdor IV. Ivanova was assigned the task of finding them billets. Typically, in the calm before the expected battle, the troops found every conceivable way to let off steam. It had taken everyone weeks to recover once they had shipped out.

“And this?” Ivanova asked.

After Wynant's comment about Mars' long sought after independence she wasn't sure if he was simply innocent and eager or whether there was something else going on. She sat back from the window so Wynant could see a collection of cargo shuttles huddled together in orbit.

The payload bay doors were open and figures in cumbersome EVA suits were clambering around, gently manoeuvring solar panels and large cubes lined with empty missile silos toward the bulky, bulbous satellites that had already been deployed.

"That's the GOD-squad at work," Wynant said. "The Global Orbital Defence. They're replacing the Prometheus defence platforms the rebel fleet destroyed..." The words trailed off as Wynant realised what he had said and who he was saying it to.

"...Destroyed to save the planet," Ivanova finished. "A year of changes," she added, repeating the last words President Luchenko had said to her.

Wynant nodded in agreement.

"How was the news of my appointment greeted by the crew?"

Ivanova asked.

She watched him squirm in his seat. Although she did not mean to put him on the spot, if he considered them rebels, Ivanova could only guess what the more experienced crew thought. Wynant didn't answer immediately, which was an answer in itself.

"It provoked a lot of debate," he finally announced, attempting to sound as diplomatic as possible.

"I bet it did," Ivanova replied.

She looked over to Wynant who was trying, and failing, to formulate a better response. He looked relieved to hear the muffled voice of the pilot in the cockpit requesting an approach vector.

"This is our ride," he smiled, looking past her. Through the viewport, Ivanova saw the rotating centresection of an Omega-class Destroyer. She tried to look cheery but instead a shiver ran through her.

After Sheridan's capture she had personally taken command of the



White Star fleet in the campaign to retake Earth and Mars from Clark and his followers. In his absence she had ordered the ships to open fire on Omega-class Destroyers whose crew had refused to stand down and surrender their vessels. Ships like the *Damocles* and the *Orion* had been no match to the superior firepower of the White Stars. Weapons systems and engines had been targeted, allowing the crew time to evacuate. The ships had attacked innocent civilians on the outer colonies of the Beta 9 System. She had coldly ordered the crews to be picked up and returned to the authorities there to stand trial for war crimes.

From one of the *Damocles*' officers Ivanova had been informed that not all the Earth Alliance vessels that defected to their side really defected. Clark's forces knew of their plans and were waiting for the rebel fleet at their rendezvous point in Sector 300. Even worse, the ships were an elite force of advanced model Destroyers, loyal to the President's new order. This time there would be no defection and no surrender. Ivanova had taken only the White Star fleet. What came out of the jump points that blossomed around them was dark and ugly. The hulls had a horrifying familiarity to them. Black and fibrous, they rippled with a synthesised version of the Shadow bio-armour. Later she had learnt that they were the Omega-X class and for a while it looked like even the White Stars had met their match.

Sitting in the shuttle, Ivanova remembered how she had been unwilling to let any of the ships get away for fear they returned with reinforcements. She had urged Marcus to keep firing. The beams from the White Star's cannons tore through the Omega-X's hulls. She had got up out of her chair, watching as a Destroyer was torn in half by the explosions. Then something went wrong. The navigational system had gone down, unable to take evasive action. Marcus called her name, warning her. She had looked out the forward viewport to see a chunk of debris, torn away from the destroyer's centre-section tumble through space towards her. Oxygen escaping from ruptured compartments fed the spluttering

flames made it look like the blackened debris from a spent firework. But it was something more deadly than that, coming straight for her.

She jerked back in her seat. Across the aisle, Wynant stared at her with a look of bewilderment.

"We're here," he said as Ivanova took a deep breath. As the shuttle turned on its final approach she saw the large blue and gold Earth Alliance logo. Above it, written across the front section in large block

letters was the name APOLLO.

***APOLLO***

# ELEVEN

General Robert Lefcourt arrived in the landing bay just as the shuttle was coming through the final set of space-lock doors. The overhead lights directed on his close-cropped grey hair created a white halo around the crown of head as he stood waiting for it to gently touch down.

“Captain Ivanova,” he said, as she stepped off the shuttle.

“General,” Ivanova replied, somewhat taken aback by Lefcourt’s presence.

Lefcourt smiled as he waited for Wynant to pick up the carry-on luggage, which had been dropped on the deck as he stood to salute alongside Ivanova.

“I’ll admit, I’m surprised to see you here,” Ivanova said as they left the landing bay.

“This is only a temporary command,” Lefcourt explained.

“John Sheridan was one of my star pupils when I taught at the Academy. EarthDome surmised that I would know him better than anyone and understand his tactics. So as he came full tilt toward Earth, the put me in overall command of the destroyer group defending Mars.”

“That must have been difficult,” she said.

“Morally? Yes. When you have to reduce friends and fellow officers to targets to be destroyed, there are feelings of guilt you have to overcome. It’s not a day I would want to repeat too readily in my lifetime, if at all. But as a soldier you have to take your orders without question and do the job.”

Ivanova knew that Lefcourt was an honourable man serving an unjust regime. From the look on his face as he relived that moment in his head, it was obvious that Lefcourt was relieved by the eventual outcome.

“Of course, in the end, we were proved wrong. When it came to a fleet-to-fleet engagement, Sheridan certainly showed that he had

become even more inventive since the Academy,” Lefcourt continued. “The day eventually comes when the master becomes the pupil.”

General Lefcourt had always expected Sheridan to have an ace in the hole, but even he had not been prepared for what happened. Prior to the fleet’s arrival, the resistance had

smuggled telepaths onboard each EarthForce destroyer loyal to the current regime. Once awake they crippled the ships, effectively leaving them dead in the water as Sheridan’s fleet appeared out of hyperspace.

“But you’re still onboard,” Ivanova said.

“With the shake-up in the command structure still ongoing back home, they’ve left me up here to oversee the replacement of the Prometheus platforms. If a General’s giving the orders, they think everything will be done that much quicker.”

“I appreciate you taking the time out to see me to my ship,” Ivanova replied.

“There are few ships in the fleet at present that are fully operational. The *Apollo*’s been given a clean bill of health, but it’ll give us the chance to wring her out a little,” Lefcourt replied. “We should have you at the shipyard in just over a day.”

Lefcourt stopped outside a door.

“These are your quarters,” he told Ivanova. He turned to Wynant, in step behind Ivanova. “Lieutenant, if you carry on straight down the corridor, Master Chief Fuchs will find a rack for you.”

“I’ll catch up with you later, Captain,” Wynant told Ivanova as he set her luggage down outside the door. Standing at attention he saluted both her and Lefcourt then followed the General’s directions.

Lefcourt punched in the code and the door slid open.

“It’s not much,” he admitted as he looked around the spartanly furnished room. Ivanova followed his gaze. It was exactly what it was, an empty room for people passing through.

“I won’t be here for long,” Ivanova observed, tossing her bag on the bunk. Lefcourt nodded. With the door closed he looked more relaxed.

“So, how are you finding it, back in EarthForce?” he asked.

“It has its good points and bad points,” Ivanova admitted as she placed the EA pouch on the table. Lefcourt understood and nodded.

“They don’t have to like the person, only respect the rank,” he told Ivanova.

“That’s what President Luchenko said. I ran into General Crossley before I left Earthdome. He had other ideas.”

“Crossley’s old school,” Lefcourt said, “Or rather he’s from the school they tore down to build the old school. The way he sees it, the military executes the orders that emanate from the heads of government, down through the chain of command.”

“Like you?” Ivanova asked. Lefcourt nodded.

“As for setting policy or overthrowing Presidents, that’s what the Senators are elected for. But if I was hard pressed, and it was strictly off the record, I’d say it had to be done,” he told her. Considering his words, he ran his hand over his clipped grey hair.

His link chimed.

“General, we’re ready to break orbit,” Captain Mitchell announced.

“Get us underway Charlie,” Lefcourt replied. He turned to Ivanova. “You’re welcome to join us on the bridge,” he told her.

“Thank you General, but I still have to review my new crew profiles,” Ivanova explained as she picked up the leather pouch.

“Do you know who you’ve got serving under you?” Lefcourt asked.

“Not yet,” Ivanova replied.

“Join me in the Officer’s Mess at nineteen-hundred hours. Bring the material with you. After we’ve eaten we’ll go through the personnel list, see who you have, and see if there are any ringers.”

When she arrived at the appointed time most of the officers were already sitting down to eat. The last of the late arrivals were being served and the murmur of conversation was gradually rising above the clatter of knives and forks on the china plates. Ivanova hesitated in

the doorway until Lefcourt saw her out of the corner of his eye and looked her way.

“Captain, please join us,” he said, wiping the corner of his mouth with his napkin as he stood to welcome her. The room fell silent as the other officers quickly put down their cutlery and turned in her direction. They pushed their chairs back to stand up as she walked around to the empty place setting beside Lefcourt at the head of the table. A couple of officers across the long table caught Ivanova’s eye and nodded hello. Some pointedly looked down at their plates or focused across the room. Others glanced toward Lefcourt, waiting to follow his lead.

As she stood behind the chair, the officer directly across the table reached out his hand.

“Charles Mitchell,” he said in a clipped English accent.

“Susan Ivanova,” she replied shaking his hand.

“Charlie here is the captain of the *Apollo*,” Lefcourt explained. “And being very patient with me usurping his chair, here and on the bridge.”

Mitchell grinned as Lefcourt brought Ivanova’s attention to the blonde-haired man standing on her left.

“This is Lieutenant Commander Robbie Fairclough,” the General said.

Fairclough nodded and shook Ivanova’s hand.

“Captain,” he said.

“Next to him is Martin Kenwood,” Lefcourt continued.

“Lieutenant,” Ivanova said as Fairclough stepped back, giving Kenwood enough space to lean forward to shake Ivanova’s hand.

The rest of the officers were too far away and simply nodded when Lefcourt introduced them. Only Hans Rudi Niebisch, the *Apollo*’s Head of Engineering who was seated beside Mitchell and last to be introduced, reached across the table and squeezed Ivanova’s hand in a firm grip.

“Good to meet you,” he announced with the slightest hint of a German accent.

“Likewise,” Ivanova said.

“Shall we,” Lefcourt said to Ivanova, indicating to her chair. The General resumed sitting and the officers around the table followed suit. Mitchell poured Ivanova a glass of water as a member of the kitchen staff carried a plate to the table. He removed the metal warming lid as he set it down in front of her.

“How long were you back on Earth?” Mitchell asked.

“Two days back home in Russia, plus a morning in Geneva,”

Ivanova replied. “Long enough to get reacquaint myself with the homeland.”

“And get your taste buds back,” Mitchell added. She looked down at the plate in front of her, cutting through the chicken breast then spearing green beans and a cauliflower head with her fork.

“Hydroponics on Babylon 5 still couldn’t capture the full flavour of the fresh vegetables. That’s what I missed.”

“Fresh milk and fruit,” Mitchell said.

Ivanova nodded appreciatively as she chewed her food, remembering the bowl of ripe, fleshy plums Rabbi Koslov had offered her as he poured the glasses of hot tea.

“It must make a change from some of the alien dishes,”

Niebisch commented.

“Well, there is Treel, which is a sort of Centauri fish. That’s exceptionally good. There is another Centauri dish called Spoo,” Ivanova said.

“Spoo?” Niebisch repeated, getting his tongue around the word.

“That’s something certainly to try once.”

“Only once?”

“So you know never try it again,” Ivanova said. She took another bite as Niebisch brought his napkin up to his mouth to help contain his laughter.





# TWELVE

Though reticent at first, as the meal progressed the officers began to include Ivanova in their conversation. Even so, the topics were trivial and even then some chose their words carefully, remaining guarded about what they said. She began to relax once it became obvious to her that, with General Lefcourt at the head of the table, they were on their best behaviour for his benefit, not hers.

The recent events were rarely mentioned and only then in passing. Mitchell and Lefcourt were more interested in her time on Babylon 5 and the various races, and their ambassadors, which Ivanova had encountered.

“You’ll find a different change of pace sitting in the Captain’s chair,” Lefcourt told Ivanova as the dessert plates were being cleared away. “The routine is more routine, with everyone having their own little piece of sky to fly in.”

“And you’re commanding the *Titans*?” Mitchell said.

“That’s right,” Ivanova replied. She saw that the name had piqued Niebisch’s interest.

“And your crew?” Lefcourt asked.

With the serving staff pouring coffee for the officers, Ivanova reached down for the leather pouch that she had put under her chair as she sat down. She unzipped the pouch and handed the first pages to Lefcourt.

“It certainly looks like they have put together a good team for you,” Lefcourt told Ivanova as he scanned down the initial crew list. He handed the top page to Mitchell, pointing out one of the names on the list.

“Amelia Graydon, Charlie,” Lefcourt said. From the look on Mitchell’s face, the Captain was already ahead of him as he pored over the names.

“You’ve got Mel as your XO!” Mitchell exclaimed as Ivanova flicked through the stack of pages for Graydon’s profile. The crew profiles had been alphabetised rather than put in order of rank when she first went

through them. In her cabin, Ivanova had spread the pages out across her bunk gathering together the background histories of her bridge crew and the heads of the ship's departments. Even then she had only given them a cursory glance, preferring to let first impressions count before exploring their EarthForce records in depth.

"You've served with her?" Ivanova asked as she looked up from the paperwork.

"Long before my promotion," Mitchell explained as he studied the sheet. "This was on the *Furies*, just before Stephanie Eckland took command. Amelia was a junior officer then, but she soon made her mark. She had been one of the Simulations Assistants back on her first ship. Failed the Captain on every drill from what I heard."

"That's something to watch out for," Lefcourt jokily warned Ivanova.

"One time we had a jump engine misfire as we were escorting a supply run back from Ceti Gamma II," he continued. "It could have torn the ship apart. But it was really down to Amelia that it didn't happen. That helped her get her gold stripe."

Ivanova turned to Lefcourt, impressed.

"Robbie, you were on the *Pournelle*," Mitchell said to Fairclough who shifted around in his chair to face the head of the table. "David Maddison?"

"Maddison? He was the third watch navigator," Fairclough said with a chuckle. "Give Dave my regards," he told Ivanova.

"And don't play him at chess. Or cards for that matter. Where ever you want to go, Dave will get you there."

Ivanova watched and listened as Lefcourt went down the list reeling off names. Most of the *Apollo*'s officers were either familiar with, or aware of, most of the senior and junior officers who would be under Ivanova's command, having served with them prior to their most recent promotion or posting. A few names brought blank looks and Ivanova leafed through the profiles to identify the person. Although they were guarded at first, as the names were read out Lefcourt and Mitchell goaded their officers into revealing the sort of information the officer in question would hope never appeared on his official

record.

“What is said here stays here,” Lefcourt reassured them. Soon they began to freely reminisce and share experiences of their tours on a variety of ships of the fleet.

“Edward Dantes,” Lefcourt called out. “Anyone?” he asked after the conversation was brought to an abrupt halt.

“Yes, sir,” Ellen Morton said from the far end of the table. Morton had been one of the officers who refused to look Ivanova in the eye when she arrived in the officer’s mess. Throughout the meal, when the officers seated beside her engaged her in conversation, Ivanova had glanced down and caught the odd icy look from her.

“I served with him before my posting here and his transfer to the *Cadmus*,” Morton explained.

“Which ship was that on?” Lefcourt asked, missing the brief looks some of the officers were already exchanging.

“The *Agrippa*, sir, under Captain Smith,” Morton stated matter of factly.

The room fell silent. Ivanova looked down at her files, hearing a sigh from General Lefcourt.

Alongside *Roanoke*, *Agrippa* had been despatched to Babylon 5

by President Clark with instructions to take command of the station by force. Expecting to face only the station’s defences, both destroyers had come face-to-face with the *Alexander*, one of the first ships to turn against Clark, and the *Churchill*. In the ensuing battle both *Roanoke* and *Agrippa* had been destroyed. The *Roanoke* was broken in half after being rammed by the badly damaged *Churchill* on the command of its Captain, Sandra Hiroshi. Finding an excuse to shuffle through the pages in front of her, Ivanova felt her cheeks flush. Rather than watch the battle from Babylon 5’s command deck, she had taken command of a Starfury fighter wing that attacked both the Omega-class Destroyers.

As Lefcourt continued down the list they discovered other members of crew connected to ships like the *Pollux* and *Orion*,

which had been destroyed by the rebel fleet after refusing to stand down, or the *Excalibur*, which had been destroyed near Io by forces

loyal to Clark while helping the *Alexander*, at the time under the command of General Haig, escape into hyperspace. Lefcourt would give everyone a moment of quiet contemplation in respect for the dead before bringing up another name. On more than one occasion Ivanova noticed him foundering as he skipped over a couple of names on the sheet, not wanting to bring up someone whose career he was familiar with that was connected to an Earth Alliance ship that had fared badly in the rebellion.

By the time the officers around the table excused themselves to return to their posts or prepare for their next watch, Ivanova knew just enough about the crew waiting her arrival that she wouldn't be thrown by any surprises.

"You've got a good crew," Lefcourt told her. When the staff came to clear the table he asked for more coffee for himself and Ivanova. Once they were alone he settled back in his chair and absently patted his jacket.

"Back at Earthdome I would be having a cigar about now," he admitted sheepishly. "One of the things about being in space that I truly miss."

He handed back the pages to Ivanova, glancing at some of the photographs.

"So what do you think?" Lefcourt asked.

"I think they certainly sound able," Ivanova replied. Lefcourt nodded and took a sip of coffee.

"As they should," Lefcourt said. "But I sense a 'but' coming on."

"It worries me that I appear to be getting off so lightly,"

Ivanova told him. "Of course that may just be the Russian in me, or the experience from working for four years on Babylon 5."

"You received a full pardon from the President," Lefcourt said. "Any officer and enlisted man whose duty is to their homeworld and not just one man should see it that way. Especially after some of the atrocities that were carried out were brought to light. Maybe this time you should simply take it for what it is. But keep on the lookout just

in case.”

Ivanova nodded. She zipped the pages back into the pouch, drained her coffee cup and stood up to go.

“General, I’d like to thank you for what you did for John - Captain Sheridan,” Ivanova told him.

As his parting gift, President Clark had turned the Global Orbital Defence-grid against Earth. To save the planet from nearcomplete annihilation, Sheridan had instructed the fleet to destroy the chain of defence platforms before their Particle Beam cannons could come online.

With the forward cannons on the *Agamemnon* destroyed, Sheridan set about ramming the last remaining satellite before the fully charged beam could decimate the Eastern Seaboard of the continental United States. Initially disabled in orbit around Mars, the *Apollo* had appeared in time to take out the platform and saving the *Agamemnon* from destruction.

“Our orders changed,” Lefcourt declared with a grin. He shrugged. “I’m sure John would have done the same for me.”

Ivanova stood to one side of General Lefcourt and Captain Mitchell on the bridge of the *Apollo* as the Destroyer jumped out of hyperspace.

She watched on the monitors as, ahead of them Starfury fighters swept past in tight formation, patrolling a perimeter ringed with missile platforms that encircled a massive shipyard floating in space.

“This is Cyrus Shipyard Control to EAS *Apollo*. You are cleared for docking, on approach vector three-niner,” a voice announced over the intercom.

The *Apollo* changed course as it swept past the outer defence grid with a quartet of Starfuries escorting them in. On the fringes of the shipyard, Omega-class Destroyers were lined up alongside each other. Held in place by large gantry arms ringed with floodlights, their immobile centre-sections stood vertically as they were being retro-fitted and repaired.

Automated Cam-Bots swarmed around the ships, carrying out repairs to their hulls. Ivanova squinted to try and read the Destroyers’ names.

She only saw one name: *Delphi*. Shortly after the liberation of Proxima III, when both the Centauri Republic and Narn Regime issued a joint statement declaring their support for his actions, the *Delphi* engaged Sheridan's forces, but retreated after being damaged. She glanced over to Lefcourt who had identified the ship as well and raised an eyebrow. As the *Apollo* moved closer to the centre of the shipyard, Ivanova could make out a line of four massive walls suspended in space. Equidistant from each other, the giant slabs of metal appeared to be held together by nothing more than comparatively delicate frame works, top and bottom, which supported the large lighting rigs. Facing inwards, the rows of lights illuminated the trio of new Warlock-Class Destroyers, each in a different stage of construction.

Bright yellow Construction Furies fussed around the mighty constructs. Their grappling arms extended to offer the workers in EVA suits, surrounded by bursts of flashing light, the hull plates to be welded to the superstructure. On one ship, stripped of its armoured skin, Ivanova could see the sextet of fusion reactors that would eventually push the completed vessel through the emptiness of space. On another the finished sections of the ship's hull were pockmarked with shallow craters, as it patiently waited for the Pulse Cannon turrets to be fitted into place. Even peeled apart like a body undergoing an autopsy, the ships seemed to dwarf the slender Omega-Class Destroyers. Illuminated boards running along the top of the connective framework proudly identified the three ships as the *Sorcerer*, *Necromancer* and *Enchantress*.

"The new Warlock-Class Heavy Destroyers," Lefcourt announced. "And there's your ship," he said to Ivanova. A different view on the monitors showed a fifth wall that had been moved much further apart from the others. The gantries that would have once connected to the ship, allowing materials to be moved from the cavernous workshops inside the metal, had also been retracted to make room for shuttles to maneuver freely around the completed ship, delivering the supplies it needed for its maiden voyage.

"EAS *Titans*," Mitchell murmured. Aboard the *Apollo*'s bridge the crew looked up from their stations to stare at the ship directly ahead of them. Lefcourt turned to Ivanova, grinned as he said, "What do you think of your new ride."

Lost for words, Ivanova nodded in appreciation. "It will do," she finally managed, which got a snorting repost from Captain Mitchell.

Truth be told, the *Titans* didn't have the simple grace of the Omega-

class ships, which themselves paled in comparison to the sculpted elegance of most of the ships from the various races that formed the Interstellar Alliance. But what it lacked in style it made up for in sheer bulk and brute strength.

Ivanova turned to the General.

“Do you have to go straight back to Earth?” she inquired. Lefcourt pursed his lips as he looked at the screens.

“Not right away,” he said, already two steps ahead of her.

***TITANS***

# THIRTEEN

Lieutenant Commander Amelia Graydon shifted her weight from one foot from the other, trying to contain her anger as she stood in the central landing bay of the *Titans*.

“The order came through from the OJC, Amelia, what else can we do?” Commander William Berensen whispered as he stood beside her, waiting as the shuttle from the *Apollo* negotiated its way through the series of space-locks to reach the landing bay. It was not a conversation he wanted to conduct in front of the ranks of officers and crew, lined up ready to greet their new Captain. Even worse, they were in the presence of EarthForce Senator John Feldon whose tour of the Cyrus Shipyard facilities had just happened to conveniently coincide with the launch of the *Titans*.

Debra Strickson, one of the aides to the Shipyard Commander had told Berensen, strictly off the record, that the doughy Senator had typically shown far greater enthusiasm for the reception held in his honour than the work they were doing here, pulling double shifts to get the fleet back up and running after what Feldon had called “the recent troubles back home.” Although he had diligently visited each ship, meeting and greeting the crew with the same enthusiasm he would have shown if he was back home on the campaign trail, the shipyard staff accompanying him had noticed his disappointment at the lack of further receptions awaiting him onboard.

“Don’t be taken in by his *bonhomie* either,” Strickson had also warned him. “there’s a reptilian mind at work in that overfed body of his. You don’t become a senator simply by kissing babies, you have to wring a few of their necks as well.”

If that was not bad enough, travelling with the Senator was Eldon Vathek, his personal aide. That was how he had been introduced to the officers of the *Titans* but it was obvious that he was personal security, and most definitely a telepath. From the glances Vathek was giving them, their whispered conversation was most probably ringing loud in his head. If he was lucky, Graydon would not return to her colourful opinions of the obviously flawed thought-processes of the Office of the Joint Chiefs and, in particular, Chief of Naval Operations who she considered to be nothing less than mentally defective.



“She fired on her own ships, killing officers and men we trained and worked with,” Graydon hissed.

“We’ve been here, not there,” Berensen muttered as he looked around him. “It was some bad business, but even you must have had doubts about what was happening back home, right?”

He looked over at the other officers standing behind them and wondered who else had real concerns about their new commander. During the past week, once the transfer had been confirmed, there had been rumblings amongst the crew but none had been so vocal as the *Titan’s* Executive Officer.

“I’ve put in calls to officers I know serving on the *Vesta* under Edward MacDougan. When Sheridan’s forces liberated Proxima III and then took on the fleet off Mars, they made a point of disabled the ships, not destroying them. The ones that went down fighting were hardliners,” Berensen said, trying to relax Graydon. “And there was misinformation coming out of Earthdome, warning the crews that if they surrendered they would be handed over to the Minbari who would execute them and take their ships. So let it go.”

Berensen looked over to see some of the officers looking in their direction. Even Senator Feldon briefly glanced in their direction as he cleared his throat. As for Vathek, he was preoccupied, pressing his balled fist hard into his right eyesocket. Berensen wondered if, having Graydon’s ire and opinions blasting away inside his head, he was coming down with the mother of all headaches. Having taken a step back from the Senator, the telepath was wavering on his feet and, judging from the concerned looks on the crew lined up directly behind him, looked like he was perilously close to toppling back into them. The large doors ahead of them finally began to part as the *Apollo’s* shuttle was guided through the final space-lock by the magnetic grapples before coming to rest in the landing bay.

“Have you got it all out of your system?” Berensen muttered to Graydon. She turned and glowered at him.

“Should I take that for a yes?” he suggested as they stepped up beside Feldon.

“Senator,” Berensen nodded, as the shuttle began to rotate around on the landing pad.

Berensen and Graydon took a step forward as the door to the shuttle’s

passenger compartment slid open and the steps automatically extended.

“Attention,” Berensen barked and with the exception of the Senator everyone stood up straight, heels clicking together.

“Captain Ivanova, welcome abo--,” Graydon faltered as the first person to disembark was General Lefcourt.

As they had stood waiting for the hatch to open Lefcourt, not wanting to look like he was pulling rank, had insisted that Ivanova was first off. Instead she had demanded that he have the honour of being the first to set foot aboard the new ship. As he saw Graydon trying to recover and officers in the ranks attempt to stand even straighter to attention, Lefcourt suspected Ivanova had purposefully allowed him off first to put her new crew on the wrong footing. Although she had wanted to proudly show off her new command, Lefcourt knew that his appearance would add a little muscle to her arrival.

Her smile had given it away and he imagined that Ivanova, a couple of steps behind him, had a big grin plastered across her face, like the cat that got the cream. Although he had guessed

her motive correctly, his second assumption was wrong. As Ivanova followed him off she felt a sudden chill rush through her. Her hand grabbed the railing for support and she had the uneasy feeling deep inside her gut that she didn’t belong here. With Captain Mitchell bringing up the rear, Ivanova forced herself to keep moving forward until the three of them were finally standing on the deck.

“Captain Ivanova, welcome aboard the Warlock-class Destroyer *Titans*,” Graydon announced.

“Lieutenant Commander Graydon, it’s a pleasure to be here,”

Ivanova said, briefly returning her salute before turning to her new First Officer, “Commander Berensen.”

Graydon was shorter than Ivanova expected, perhaps only a couple of inches above the minimum regulation height. But Mitchell had warned her that what she lacked in stature she made up for in sheer

force of will. Her honey blonde hair was cut short. With her piercing stare and taut, muscular body she certainly looked like a force to be reckoned with. Berensen on the other hand had a relaxed, almost casual air about him. Softer spoken, Ivanova imagined he used a more subtle approach when it came to giving orders or getting his point across rather than simply barking out commands. His hair was dark and wavy, like Mitchell's, but carefully styled. She suspected there was a vanity lurking not far beneath the surface.

"General Lefcourt, this is an honour sir" Graydon said as both she and Berensen saluted. "Captain Mitchell. Welcome aboard the EAS *Titans*."

"Lieutenant Commander," Mitchell said with a sly grin.

"Don't stand on ceremony for us," Lefcourt said. "We gave Captain Ivanova a ride from Earth and she kindly invited us to take a tour, obviously to rub our noses in it."

Ivanova chuckled at the suggestion.

"Your old bucket of bolts is still a fine ship Captain, don't let it get you down," Ivanova said to Mitchell in a loud stage whisper which elicited a hearty laugh from Lefcourt.

"Captain, may I introduce Senator John Feldon and his aide Eldon Vathek," Berensen announced, turning towards the EarthForce representative.

Feldon stepped forward and shook Ivanova's hand.

"Captain, it's a great pleasure to meet you," he said and actually sounded like he meant it.

"Senator," Ivanova replied. She glanced at Vathek to greet him but the aide seemed to be distracted by something in the air above his head.

"I was here on an inspection of the Cyrus Shipyard facility," Feldon explained after he had introduced himself to Lefcourt and Mitchell. "When they informed me that this ship of yours, the *Titans*, was about to be launched I just had to be here to see you off."

"Thank you sir," Ivanova said. "Have you been shown around the ship yet?"

“They’ve opened one or two hatches and let me have a peek inside,” Feldon told her, as he looked around at the walls of the landing bay.

“General Lefcourt and Captain Mitchell are coming to tour the *Titans* with me. You and Mister Vathek are welcome to join us,” Ivanova said.

“Why I’d like that,” Feldon said with a smile that even seemed to unsettle General Lefcourt.

“Shall we?” Ivanova said as she felt a dull ache build behind her left eye.

On cue Graydon stepped back and indicated to the nearest hatch. “If you’ll follow me, this way gentlemen,” she said, standing aside once the bulkhead door had been opened. Ivanova allowed them to pass through ahead of her, almost squinting because of the throbbing inside her head that was growing in intensity. She noticed Vathek rub the side of his temple. Ivanova turned to follow after him and almost bumped into Berensen.

“Captain, I’ll see to it that your belongings are taken to your quarters, and then catch up with you,” he said.

“Very good, Mister Berensen,” Ivanova said, for the moment not really caring what he did.

“Crew dismissed,” Berensen announced once Ivanova had left the hanger. The lines broke up as the men and women relaxed, sharing their first true impressions of their new Captain.

“If they are taking the grand tour, I suggest you all return to your stations,” Berensen told them and smiled as they hustled through the open bulkheads on the other side of the landing bay.

“The *Titans* has seven flight bays,” Berensen heard Graydon tell the Senator as he stuck his head out into the corridor to check on their progress. Obviously Graydon would know the crew had to be back at their stations and was deliberately taking it slowly to begin with to allow them the time to get there. “Six smaller ones are used by our shuttles. The larger bay we were just in is primarily used to launch the Starfuries that you saw back there. The *Titans* has two squadrons that include the standard SA-23E Aurora class and the SA-32A Thunderbolt FighterBomber for atmosphere incursions. Now, just along here is the pilot’s ready room...”

Berensen ducked back into the launch bay and glanced at the Starfuries concertinaed together in their launch racks. If Graydon was not happy with EarthForce's choice of command aboard the ship she could always resign her commission and get herself a job as a tour operator. But heaven help anyone who suggested such a career change to her.

He turned to the shuttle and saw Wynant had already opened the small cargo hold and had transferred Ivanova's flight bag and most of her cases onto a loader.

"How are we doing there, Lieutenant?" Berensen asked.

"Almost done here, sir," Wynant replied as he reached in and dragged the last case out.

# FOURTEEN

The tour continued aft along the lower decks. Ivanova noticed that the senior ranking officers were checking their appearance as best they could and trying not to appear out of breath as the tour party arrived at each new section of the *Titans*.

For the most part, in the Earth Alliance, a ship was a ship was a ship. The Warlock-class was all that, but on a larger scale. That certainly became apparent to General Lefcourt, Mitchell and Ivanova when Graydon escorted them into the companionway that ran alongside the starboard armoury.

“On the Omega-class warships like *Apollo*, the primary weapon systems are particle-beam lasers and pulsed plasma cannons,” Graydon explained to the Senator. “Secondary systems include just two missile launchers firing fusion-tipped missiles. Each ship has a total complement of forty missiles.”

They stared through the thick glass and looked down at the racks of missiles and the automated conveyors that would load them into the silo blocks extending from either side of the ship.

“Although the *Titans* has been outfitted with two Aegisclass, railed particle-beam cannons, of the type used on the Global Orbital Defence satellites orbiting this facility and Earth, we also have a total of twenty-eight missile silos that are capable of launching variable yield warheads. This means that the Warlock-class ships are more akin to a mobile defence platform, on a par with anything used by the Minbari.”

“We could have done with this beast back in the war, wouldn’t you say Lieutenant?” Feldon said. Ivanova wondered if he meant the Earth-Minbari War or something more recent.

“Yes sir, I would say,” Graydon replied. “We also have assorted Heavy-, Medium-, and Light-Pulse Cannon turrets. And, to deflect incoming energy barrages, a good number of small-calibre energy and projective AA placements. The armoured hull is between ten and fifteen meters thick and protected by twenty-two Mark III Defence Grid Energy Projectors.”

“Okay, I’m impressed,” Mitchell whispered to Ivanova.

“Yes, she is good, Ivanova replied, misinterpreting what he had said. Instead of paying attention to Graydon, Ivanova had been watching Vathek who, during the tour so far had started to develop a veritable collection of ticks and tremors. Even Senator Feldon showed concerned about his aide who had now begun murmuring incomprehensibly to himself.

It was obvious to Ivanova that Vathek was Psi Corp or maybe even Psi Cop. He might not have the black uniform, instead wearing a dark grey suit and black rollneck sweater, but there was something about his hair that gave it away. It was too glossy and lacked any subtle changes in tone.

All of the Psi Cops Ivanova had encountered, one in particular who had been a recurring irritant during her time on Babylon 5, always looked like they were wearing the most appallingly obvious wigs. The Corps doctor who administered her mother’s regular injections looked like he had straw glued to his

head. Maybe underneath they had implants, which required their heads to be shaved.

“In simple terms, this means the Warlock-class is capable of going head-to-head with a Minbari War Cruiser and can even seize any military installation or planet is so desired with the minimum of casualties on our side,” Graydon continued, oblivious to the deteriorating state of the Senator’s aide. As Graydon led them on toward Engineering, Ivanova blocked Vathek’s path, holding him back from the rest of the party.

“Mister Vathek, how are you doing?” Ivanova asked. He looked pale and gaunt. There was none of the fleshy excess that hung around the jaw lines of the Psi, or the usual look of casual disdain. Try as she might, Vathek refused to make eye contact.

“It’s Eldon,” Vathek said, muttering to himself.

“Okay, Eldon. How are you doing?”

“There’s something... I can hear the screaming. Somewhere in the ship I can hearing the screams screaming in my head.”

Trying to figure what was scrambling his head so severely, Ivanova finally looked him in the eye and was taken aback by the hunted and

haunted stare.

“Do you want to leave the ship?” she asked.

“Something is wrong. Something *feels* wrong. I think its me here,” Vathek said. His eye twitched and his right shoulder jerked involuntary. “I think I’m screaming. I think its me.”

He looked up and down the corridor.

“Is it me?” he asked Ivanova. “Am I screaming?”

“Mister Vathek, believe me, you’re not the one screaming,”

Ivanova assured him. She followed his gaze; saw Lefcourt and Mitchell as they moved on to the next compartment. Mitchell glanced back as the bulkhead door closed behind him.

“That’s wrong,” Vathek told her.

She looked him squarely in the eyes, wondering what to do. Ivanova reached out to take Vathek by the arm but he jerked away from her, a sudden look of terror on his face.

“Do you need a doctor?” she asked. “We can go to the MedLab here onboard the ship.”

“Off the ship. Off. Off. The screaming stops off the ship.”

“So let’s get you off the ship,” Ivanova reassured him. She activated her link, said, “This is Ivanova to Berensen, could you come to the starboard armoury companionway.”

She didn’t have long to wait.

“Mister Vathek is feeling unwell,” she told Berensen. “Can you escort him back to the Senator’s shuttle and see that he is taken back to Shipyard Control.”

Berensen started to suggest otherwise but Ivanova just shook her head.

“The screaming is wrong!” Vathek wailed as he grabbed Berensen tightly by the shoulder.

“Then we’ll make the screaming stop, sir,” Berensen said as he calmly peeled Vathek’s clawed fingers from the folds of his uniform, “If you’ll come this way.” Berensen took Vathek firmly by the arm and started



leading him back toward the landing bays.

*Get him off my ship and let him scream all he wants. Get him off the Titans so he isn't our responsibility,* Ivanova thought to herself, hoping that Vathek's brain was too scrambled to read her thoughts.

She picked up her pace and hurried after Graydon and the tour party. As the hatch slid open Ivanova turned and looked down at the racks of missiles and the pointed shadows they cast against the walls. She shivered, rubbing her hands to get the warmth back into them. There was something about the ship that unsettled her, whether she could hear screaming or not.

In the engineering section, Graydon had wisely handed over her party over to the Lieutenant Spencer Sheehan, the *Titan's* Chief Engineer. Attempting to get all the final checks completed on time, which would even be tight without all the day's interruptions, Sheehan decided the only way to impress the Senator and get the party turned around and back out the door was to bombard them with facts and hope that would do the trick. For men like Lefcourt and Mitchell, Sheehan knew their only concerns were whether the engines were working and how soon could they propel the ship to its target.

"The Warlock-class Heavy Destroyer is powered by four Military-Type Tokamak Corporation 650 high-energy fusion reactors and two new gravitic-enhanced Ultima 2000 ADV fusion reactors,"

Sheehan explained to Senator Feldon, which produce a combined power output of approximately 300,000 Terawatts. What this means is that this new configuration provides the *Titans* with significantly greater power than our old Omega-class Destroyers."

Sheehan saw Graydon wince at his suggestion that the Omegas were past it, especially in the presence of Captain Mitchell. But it was too late to go back on his words, and Sheehan knew that it was better to have said it in front of the Captain than the *Apollo's* Chief Engineer who would certainly have taken umbrage at the fact.

"You'll want one of these for yourself soon, Captain,"

Feldon said to Mitchell, adding to everyone's discomfort.

"Yes sir," Mitchell answered with all the enthusiasm he could muster.

“We’ll put your name down before we go, Charlie, maybe we can bump you up the list,” Lefcourt murmured, bringing a smile to Mitchell’s face.

“Propulsion is provided by a series of Z-105 Ion/Particle thrust engines which significantly improve the ship’s linear acceleration and rate of turn,” Sheehan quickly continued. To try and get across the fact that he was busy, Sheehan had purposely carried on reviewing reports handed to him by his team as he began reeling off the facts and figures. Now he was getting into his stride and ignored the crewmen that briefly loitered close by before returning, chagrined, to their stations.

“You may have noticed before coming aboard that the Titans does not have a central rotating section,” he said before Graydon could announce that they were moving on. “From the beginning, the

Warlock-class was designed to incorporate an artificial gravity system.”

“One of the promises made by the aliens if Earth joined this Interstellar Alliance,” Feldon noted. He stamped his foot on the floor as a way of proving to himself that the artificial gravity was functioning.

“EarthForce Research and Development had already gone some way to create an artificial environment,” Sheehan told the Senator, neglecting to admit that the technical information required during the initial design stages had, in part, been stolen from the Centauri Republic. “Initial tests managed to replicate a 0.3G environment used in the Warlock prototypes. But yes, the Minbari recently provided fully functional gravimetric technology.”

“Thank you for your time, Chief,” Graydon said as she saw Ivanova appear in the doorway.

“Thank you Lieutenant Sheehan,” Feldon said, shaking his hand. “This ship is certainly one to be proud of.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir,” Sheehan replied. He saluted General Lefcourt and Captain Mitchell who both gave him knowing smiles on their way out.

“Thank you, Chief,” Ivanova said, pleased by the good work he had done impressing the Senator. “If we get any additional funding in the next budget review it’ll be all down to you.”

Ivanova was about to follow the inspection party out of Engineering when the ceiling lights above her suddenly flickered and lost intensity, leaving only the lights on the nearby consoles shimmering in the darkened room.

“You have a mood-lighting setting fitted, Chief?” Ivanova asked. She looked up at the sections of dimmed ceiling lights vainly struggling to return to their full brightness, feeling pressure built up in her skull as she tilted her head back.

“No sir, Captain,” Sheehan barked, not so much puzzled by the anomaly but angry that it had happened in front of her. He looked thankful that the visiting dignitaries had left just in time. “It looks like a minor glitch in the systems.”

“Have you had anything like this reported before?”

“No sir, the ship has been faultless--”

“So far,” Ivanova interrupted.

“I’m sure it’s just something minor,” Sheehan added.

“Which under different circumstances could prove to be pretty major,” Ivanova observed.

“Yes sir,” he said.

“Get it fixed, Chief,” Ivanova said as she headed through the open bulkhead. She rubbed her hands to warm them up, wondering what else was going to go wrong.

“Yes sir,” the Chief barked. He threw a stern look at two technicians standing off to his side. Quickly they began removing panels from the walls to inspect the exposed bundles of circuitry and wiring that lay

hidden behind.

# FIFTEEN

On the way back around, Graydon steered the party past the small-arms munitions lined with ABPro-34 Assault Rifles, G29X

Gause Rifles and Heavy PPGs, and through the living quarters and operations rooms used by the company of EarthForce Marines seconded to the *Titans*.

Waiting there to greet them was Captain Henry Dorland. He stood ramrod straight, staring directly ahead as he saluted the General first. Somehow he had managed to have his hair cut even shorter than Lefcourt's. His pink scalp glistened under the harsh lights.

"Captain Henry Dorland, sir," he said introducing himself.

"At ease Captain," Ivanova said, letting him know who was actually in charge of the vessel.

"Captain Dorland commands the Marine detachment assigned to the *Titans*," Graydon explained to Senator Feldon.

"And how many marines do you currently have aboard the ship?" Feldon asked.

"One-hundred-and-twenty men, sir," Dorland replied.

"But we have the facilities to carry a total of eighty thousand troops into combat if the situation requires it,"

Graydon informed the Senator.

"Eighty thousand," Senator Feldon said. "Very impressive,"

He turned to Vathek and was surprised to find that his aide was no longer accompanying him.

"Mister Vathek was taken ill, sir, and returned to the shipyard facility," Ivanova diplomatically informed him.

"Yes," Feldon said, trying to recover himself, "very impressive indeed. And how many crew did you say?"

“Twelve-hundred men, sir,” Graydon replied even though she hadn’t mentioned the exact figure before.

As they continued their way forward, Graydon escorted the Senator through the kitchens and dining halls, pointing out the recreational areas used by the crew during the precious hours of leisure time when they were not on duty or asleep in their bunks.

“Regular exercise is mandatory for all EarthForce personnel who spend extended time in zero gravity,” Graydon explained as they looked in on the gymnasiums. “Even though we boast gravimetric technology aboard the *Titans*, crew are still expected to keep themselves fit and healthy.”

Much to Graydon’s chagrin, Feldon made a point of looking at Lefcourt’s barrel chest as she made her point, making her hurry them along to the ship’s libraries, which contained an expansive range of vids and texts for the crew’s entertainment. The Senator chuckled when he found Rebo and Zooty listed in the library archive, which caused Ivanova and Mitchell, standing behind Feldon to look across to one another and shake their heads.

*Life is absurd enough without those two clowns getting in on the act,* Ivanova thought to herself as they continued on.

“The common rooms for the officers and crew can easily be reconfigured to hold special events,” Graydon explained as she

showed them into one such room that was laid out with an assortment of tables and easy chairs, and screens on the far walls.

“You hold many special events?” the Senator asked.

“The larger ships usually have quite a surprisingly full social calendar,” Lefcourt interjected, “which helps to crew to fill what can be considered the monotony of extremely long voyages. Everything that can keep morale high we aim to provide.”

“You need good morale to run a good ship,” Senator Feldon said to Ivanova who was unsure how to interpret his meaning.

Doctor Evan Benton had given up on waiting for the inspection party to come his way. There was no discernable point in keeping the doctors and nurses under his command standing in line in the *Titan*’s

MedLab while there were still supply cartons that needed to be unpacked before their departure. While his staff finished stocking the cabinets, Benton sat at his desk updating his database with medical histories of the crew. Doctor Stephen Franklin of Babylon 5 had recently sent the records of the *Titans* new Captain. Benton was engrossed in the last entries of her report when he heard Graydon enter the medical facility.

“And this is where the crew come when they need to be fixed back together again,” she said.

With the Maintenance Department further back down the corridor, Benton surmised it was a lame segue by Graydon who appeared to be running out of steam as a tour guide. Even the inspection party showed signs of flagging. Senator Feldon still appeared interested, although the knot of jaw muscles that clenched and unclenched, causing a slight tremor on either side of his face, suggested this was simply pretence. Benton was more interested in his new Captain. Going through the motions of introducing his team of doctors, nurses and medical assistants, he kept an eye on Ivanova who returned salutes, but seemed to show little interest otherwise.

“Although primarily used as operating rooms,” he explained, showing off the six hermetically sealed Isolabs “the facilities mean we can treat patients who need to be effectively quarantined from the rest of the crew. Or if the situation should arise, a different species that requires an alternate atmosphere.”

“Hopefully you rarely get to use them?” Feldon said.

“Well, the crew are subject to much the same wear and tear as the ship,” Benton told the Senator.

Leaving the nurses to direct the Senator to the Rest & Recovery Ward, where beds were available to accommodate one hundred crewmen, Benton sidled up to Ivanova.

“Captain Ivanova, care to be our first patient?” Benton asked.

“Oh, you’re good,” Ivanova replied.

The ache in her head had grown, drumming a beat against the back of her eyeball since they had passed through the kitchens where Feldon had taken his sweet time sampling all the dishes being prepared for the crew. Ivanova had found herself

distracted, gently massaging her temple as her eyelids fluttered closed to ease the pain.

“If I don’t tout for business we just sit here surrounded by a lot of empty beds. And your medical file doesn’t list you as having a squint.”

“It’s just a headache,” she told him.

“And when did you first notice the symptoms?” Benton asked.

“Not long after coming aboard,” Ivanova said.

“Ah, the pressure of responsibility, made manifest.”

He looked around to see that they were alone then went to the dispensary and returned with a small hypospray. He loaded a cartridge and shot the contents straight into Ivanova’s neck.

“Well, that should do it for now. Stop by if you need anything else,” Benton said as Nurse Farber escorted Senator Feldon and General Lefcourt back into MedLab.

Eventually they passed the officers quarters and entered the red-hinted corridor that lead to the bridge of the *Titans*. Graydon slowed her pace, dropping back until she was bringing up the rear so that the senior officers could arrive first.

“Captain on deck!” Berensen announced as Ivanova escorted Senator Feldon onto the bridge.

At their posts the crew immediately broke off from their work and stood to attention. Ivanova looked around at the faces staring straight ahead and wondered if their expressions would have been any different had she come alone and not with an EarthForce Senator and a high-ranking General.

“So, this is where it all happens,” Feldon said. He looked toward the large screen that filled most of one wall of the bridge that displayed boxed scanner readouts, a graphic of the Cyrus System and the seven planets orbiting the G6

V sun, and included a column of monitors that displayed the views fore and aft of the *Titans*.

“Very impressive indeed,” Feldon told Ivanova.



“Thank you, sir,” Ivanova said, smiling as the pain in her head slowly ebbed away.

As Lefcourt and Mitchell steered themselves away to talk to the crew and examine the upgraded consoles that circled the back of the bridge, Ivanova found herself alone with the Senator. He stepped up to the captain’s chair ahead of her on the raised central dais.

“May I?” he asked.

“It would be an honour,” Ivanova said

“A fleet of this magnitude will certainly help protect Earth’s interests now that we have become part of this new Interstellar Alliance,” he announced as he settled into the chair.

For a while he seemed to forget where he was, gently swivelling from side to side as he became lost in his own train of thought. Ivanova and the crew around her stood quietly waiting. It was only when the monitors switched to port and starboard views of the ship and images of the *Apollo* floating alongside and the distant shipyard rushing to complete the next

trio of Warlock-class Destroyers flashed up in front of him that the Senator seemed to come around and remember where he was.

“Yes, very impressive indeed,” he told Ivanova as he stood up. Across the bridge Ivanova saw Berensen press another button and flip the screens back to the original fore and aft views.

“An honour to meet you all,” the Senator said to the bridge crew. He licked his lips, showing he was more than ready to sample any refreshments on offer.

“Well Captain, I don’t think we should take up more of your time, now that you have a ship to launch” Lefcourt told Ivanova, saving her from having to ask the Senator to leave.

“Yes,” Feldon grudgingly agreed as they ushered him off the bridge.

“Thanks,” Ivanova whispered to Graydon. “That was above and beyond the call of duty. Take a breather while I see them to the door.”

“Thank you, Captain,” said Graydon who actually smiled at her.

# SIXTEEN

“Well, Captain Ivanova, it was good to meet you at last. This ship is certainly one to be proud of,” Senator Feldon said as they stepped back into the central landing bay.

“Thank you sir. It was a pleasure to meet you,” Ivanova replied, shaking his hand. Feldon looked around, suddenly realising that his shuttle had already departed.

“Senator, allow us to escort you back to the facilities,”

Lefcourt said. “We should pay a visit to the Shipyard Commander now that we’re here.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind,” Feldon said.

“If you’d like to board the shuttle, we won’t keep you a minute,” Lefcourt told him.

Once Senator Feldon had disappeared inside the shuttle Ivanova and Mitchell let out a sigh of relief.

“It can be a trial sometimes, I know,” Lefcourt told them,

“but once you make a good impression, you’ve got an Earth Alliance Senator on your side of the table.”

“What happened with his aide?” Mitchell asked. “It looked like he was about to freak out back there.”

“He thought the ship was screaming at him. Or something like that,” Ivanova said, still unsure of what to make of Vathek’s behaviour.

Lecourt sighed.

“That’s telepaths for you,” he said and neither Ivanova nor Mitchell could think of anything to add.

“Well Captain, I’m still very envious. Good hunting,”

Mitchell said as he shook Ivanova’s hand.

“Thank you sir, and thank you for the ride,” she said.

“Keep the wind at your back and have following seas,”

Lefcourt told her as he shook hands with Ivanova.

“I’ll try sir,” she replied.

“Good luck, Susan,” Lefcourt said as he turned towards the shuttle. Ivanova waited until they had entered the shuttle and the steps retracted before leaving the landing bay. Berensen was waiting for her outside. He handed her the keycard to her private quarters.

“Captain, all your baggage has been taken to your quarters,” he said handing over the keycard that would allow her access.

“Thank you Mister Berensen,” Ivanova said. “How close are we to finishing the final preparations?”

“The Quartermaster reports that the final shipment of supplies has been unloaded and everything is accounted for,” he said.

“Remind me, Mister Berensen, when are we scheduled to ship out?” Ivanova asked.

“There is no set launch time, sir. I believe it is left to the Captain’s discretion.”

“Is there anything else you need to do here?”

“With the Captain’s permission, I think almost everyone on board has been here long enough,” Berensen explained.

“Contact Shipyard Command and inform them we’ll leave in two hours. Before you do that, make sure all the section chiefs are happy with that arrangement,” Ivanova told him. Berensen saluted and turned on his heel. Alone in the corridor, Ivanova leant against the corridor and rubbed the back of her neck. She felt weary. Maybe it was from the long journey and the unexpected pomp and ceremony, but she suspected there was more to it than that. Before the headache started, before Vathek began his one-man meltdown, there had been something else troubling her.

Ivanova looked down at the cross-hatch design of the deckplates. She felt the pit of her stomach tighten as the sense of unease washed over her. Like the armoured cladding on the exterior of the ship, it reminded her of something she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

She crouched down, spread her fingers out as her hand hovered over the floor. Suddenly there was a sense of prickling cold creeping into her fingertips. A slight pressure tickled the back of her eyeball. Feeling almost light-headed when she stood up, Ivanova headed for the elevator, wanting to get to her quarters as quickly as possible.

“Captain on deck!” Berensen called out as Ivanova stepped onto the bridge.

“As you were,” she quickly replied before they could break off from their work.

Ivanova stepped on to the central dais. She ran her hand across the back of the Captain’s chair as she looked around at the bridge crew. She had played her ace by coming onboard with General Lefcourt but now it was just her and the crew. Whatever they thought about her, Ivanova knew she had to allay any doubts or fears as quickly as possible.

“Mister Breck, ready when you are,” she said turning to the Communications Officer. He pressed a sequence of buttons on his console and nodded back to her.

“This is the Captain,” Ivanova announced. “When a new ship is ready to head out on its first mission, its traditional for the Captain to give a speech.”

As her voice echoed throughout the ship, Ivanova paused for a moment and looked around the bridge. After what she had inferred from Wynant on the journey to the *Apollo*, she wondered how the ship’s crew would react to her speech. Would the section chiefs she had met during the tour watch the men and women under their command and pay attention to their reactions? Following behind Senator Feldon and General Lefcourt, Ivanova had seen a few glances pass between crewmembers and the odd raised eyebrow. But none of them had angrily shaken their heads or spat on the deck.

“Some new Captains look to the past and recite old poetry to find meaning in what lies ahead for us, Ivanova continued. “I prefer to look to the future and see this as a new beginning. This is a new warship, the first of its kind, but I pray that we have put behind us all the wars that we will see in our lifetimes.”

Ivanova saw some of officers nodding to themselves.

“We’re about to embark on a journey together to see what the *Titans* can do and what we, as her crew can do. We have to trust in this ship and we have to trust in each other. It takes time to earn trust, but I hope, with us all working together, it will not take long. Thank you.”

As Breck broke the link, Ivanova took a breath and stepped forward to examine the graphic of the Cyrus system.

“Mister Maddison,” she said to the *Titans* navigator as she walked over to his station, “is our course plotted?”

“Course plotted and confirmed, Captain,” Maddison assured her.

Ivanova leant in close to confer with Maddison who nodded excitedly as he listened intently. Ivanova beckoned Berensen over and informed him of the alteration to their planned route.

“That’s a nice gesture,” Berensen said.

“Then let’s show them what all their hard work has produced,” Ivanova said as she walked back to her chair. She looked over to Berensen before she sat down and nodded to him.

“Let’s get going, Mister Berensen.”

“This is the *Titans* to Cyrus Shipyard Control,” Berensen announced once Lieutenant Breck opened a channel, “requesting permission to launch on a heading of two-seven-six.”

“Cyrus Shipyard Control to *Titans*,” a voice said over the intercom, “heading two-seven-six confirmed. You are clear for launch.”

“Godspeed, *Titans*,” a different voice, which Berensen recognised as Debra Strickson, said.

“Thank you Cyrus Control,” Berensen said, “*Titans*, out.”

“Helm ahead full,” Ivanova said as she returned to her seat.

“Aye, Captain,” he said. “Helm, forward full.”

Ivanova settled back in the chair as the star system graphic before her was replaced by a live feed that showed the *Titans* effortlessly sweep around the *Apollo* and head toward the Shipyard Control facility. The curve of the Gas Giant the shipyard orbited on the outer fringe of the system came into view and with it the orbital stations that provided the living quarters for the men and women who toiled away on the ships constructed here.

On the screens she watched the flanking Starfury escort break away as the *Titans* cleared the defence grid surrounding the shipyard's perimeter. Ahead of them lay the blackness of space. Ivanova had read her orders back on Earth. Twenty-four hours after departing the shipyard, the new Warlock-class Destroyer would begin its shake-down program in earnest, testing the *Titans* and its crew to the very limits.

"Activate Jump Engines," Ivanova ordered.

"Jump Engines on line, Captain," Berensen informed her.

"Proceed," Ivanova said.

As the small-scale Vortex Generators onboard the *Titans* reached full power, the energy waves produced focused on a point far ahead of the ship. A burst of light pulsed in the darkness as the fabric of space was rent open to form a passage into the altered dimension of hyperspace. The energy blossomed yellow and white as it radiated outwards creating a cone of rippled light that rapidly drew the *Titans* in. The monitor was suddenly filled with a boiling redness that ranged bright scarlet to deep crimson as darkened veils of cloud raged around them, backlit by the infrequent pulses of energy discharges.

"Beacon confirmed and locked-on," Maddison said. Ivanova nodded.

"Very well, Mister Berensen, you have the bridge. Mister Breck," she said turning to her Communications Officer, "notify your Simulations team that we will convene in the briefing room at oh-eight-hundred hours."

"Aye, Captain," Breck said.

"I'll see you in the mess after your shift and we can start to put together a schedule."

"Yes sir," he replied.

Space was the most unforgiving of environments. To ensure the survival of any ship in an emergency, whether in space or the even harsher environs of hyperspace, it was vital for its crew's reactions to be as fast and practised as possible. Working in concert with Lieutenant Breck, who also doubled as the *Titan's* designated Simulations Supervisor, and his team of Simulations Assistants, drawn up from a cross-section of officers and enlisted ranks from throughout the ship, Ivanova would decide the best way to put the crew through a repeated number of drills and tasks. Before the *Titans* reached its designated testing grounds on the outer fringe of the Sinzar System, Ivanova and the Simulations team would block out a schedule designed to test everyone's determination and mettle.

Ivanova knew that something as straightforward as abandoning ship was not a simple case of getting all the crews to the life pods. The shuttles and Starfuries had to be launched with whatever supplies were available. In some instances, to stop the ship from falling into the hands of an enemy who could potentially use it to their advantage, auto-destruct sequences would be programmed by the senior officers prior to their departure. Although, given the cost of something like the *Titans*, such a scenario would only be used under the most extreme circumstances. A more likely turn of events would see a series of lockdowns initiated, with the restart sequences requiring EarthForce security passwords.

In total the drills would continue for the next three to four months at the very least. Some of the common drills and emergencies outlined would require only a portion of the ship's complement to go into action, while others would include the full crew. There were also specific Combat Drills for the EA Marines and the Starfury pilots, although to make them appear as real as possible, the participation of crewmembers would be eventually required. Quite possibly the first couple of drills would be scheduled as trial runs but after that Ivanova expected them to be sprung at any time during the ship's four-watch rotation. Heading to her quarters to review the twenty-two standard drills the crew were set to perform, Ivanova felt the sense of unease return. She stopped in her tracks and looked back down the corridor to see if there was anyone else experiencing the same sensation. Instead she found herself alone. Ivanova fought off the impulse to race back and seek solace in the company of the bridge crew, instead searching for a rationale to the phenomenon. She stood under a ventilation grille, she reached up to investigate whether the sudden chill was simply the result of incorrectly programmed climate control. As she reached up to the ceiling her fingertips felt like they had at

once been scored by a metal edge. In her quarters, Ivanova sat down on the bed and, without thinking, pulled the blanket around her. Less than a day in command and she was wondering whether she had made the right decision. What was worse was the fact that she was actually having such doubts. In her past life Ivanova would have considered such thoughts as nonsense and brushed them aside. Now they seemed to be taking root inside her head, leaving her unable to deal with them.

“Am I making the right decision?” she had asked Stephen Franklin in her quarters back on Babylon 5. He had been sitting at the table, reviewing her charts while she was curled up on the bed, much the same way she was now.

“Babylon 5 does have a lot of negative associations right now,” he had said considering his answer, “so a change would be good for you.”

“But captaining an Earth Alliance warship? It’s going to seem antiquated after commanding a White Star.”

Even though the Warlock-class was state of the art, even during the tour of the *Titans*, Ivanova could not help feeling that there was no comparison beside the combined Minbari and Vorlon technology of the White Stars.

“Well, you get a chair to sit in,” Franklin had replied, fumbling for an answer.

“A *chair*?” Ivanova had been amazed by his reasoning.

“Here at Command and Control, you have to stand at the console throughout your shift. On the ship you’d get a sit down.”

“If I stayed here and took over from Sheridan, I’d have a chair and a *desk*.”

Now, as then, she burst into a sudden fit of laughter as a result of Franklin’s ludicrous line of reasoning. Except this time, as her laughter abated, Ivanova was surprised to find tears welling up in her eyes. Her shoulders heaved and as Ivanova wiped her cheeks she felt a chill spike the air around her. How long would it be, Ivanova wondered, until she too started to hear the screaming?



# SEVENTEEN

Ivanova was first in the briefing room, but only just. Breck appeared as she was pouring herself a welcome mug of hot strong coffee. Seeing him arrive she poured one for him, then topped up her own mug again before sinking down into her seat.

They were just into the third week of the emergency simulations, and last night, during the fourth watch, Breck had run a surprise Fusion Reactor Leak Drill. Because every member of the crew had to be practised at the drills, members of the simulations team would be dropped from the roster and expected to take part. That included Ivanova, who had no prior knowledge of the emergency simulation and had not been amused by the disturbance.

For the first day they had started out by scheduling the emergency drills in advance so that the crew knew what was expected of them. During these trial runs the element of surprise was not an issue, neither was the time taken to complete each simulation was a factor. As Ivanova expected, Breck had planned a simple Emergency Evacuation. With his team monitoring the progress, the reactors had been shut down and sealed off, the armoury locked down, and the crew walked through their escape routes. On the bridge, the designated officers had used their keycards in sequence to authorise the auto-destruct sequence. This was followed by an Emergency Power Loss Drill. The different sections of the ship found themselves having to keep critical systems running by using their own localised power reserves until the grid was repaired and brought back online.

Soon Breck and his team were simultaneously running drills that required the attention of only certain sections of the crew. Ivanova had personally gone down to watch the maintenance crews dislodge a Starfury that the pilots had purposefully jammed in the launch mechanism causing a bottleneck in the central landing

bay. At the same time, as part of the ongoing Weapons Drills, the interceptor teams were kept busy by an already launched Starfury, piloted by Lieutenant Michael Oliver, the leader of Beta Squadron, randomly firing simulated projectiles at the *Titans*.

After that the crew had to deal with an atmosphere loss where, to simulate the ship's air escaping into space, a mild toxin that caused the same effects as tear gas was introduced into the air supply and forced through the vents. As well as seeing how fast the crew could get into their environment suits or find the nearest breathing units, the Simulations team paid great attention to how quickly repairs were carried out to contain the vessel's vital air supply.

Once the crew became adept at facing the tasks ahead of them, Breck and Ivanova decided to mix it up a little. Prior to another Atmosphere Loss Drill, scheduled just as the shifts were about the change, environment suits were removed from the emergency lockers and the air tanks for a selection of the breathing units were drained.

During a Fire Drill, which was potentially one of the most nightmarish situations for a crew to face, the built-in chemical sprayers were switched off and a stronger toxin introduced to simulate not just the loss of air but also the possibility of chemicals given off by burning certain materials. Adhering to the strict mandate that if a fire cannot be contained within a set time the damaged sections had to be sealed, the fire crews had to decide how many unconscious crewmembers they could before they were cut off from life support.

"Check the personnel rosters, let's see how the enlisted men and warrant officers cope when the section chiefs are in the gymnasium or in their bunks," Ivanova had said when they first started charting the program.

"See who has got leadership potential amongst the nomcoms?"

Breck replied.

"We've all done these drills on previous ships. I don't want the crew to be thinking if its fourteen-hundred hours it must be a hull breach drill."

"We can see to that," Crawley told her.

"Good. And once we've worked out the timetable, I'll want to see you separately to schedule additional drills that not everyone in the team has prior knowledge of. If your Simulation Assistants only observe the performance then they aren't participating. In the event of an actual

emergency I want them up to speed on following correct procedures. Both of you as well. If the worst happens it may save all our lives.”

“It works for me,” Breck said. Crawley nodded in agreement.

Although the crew were performing admirably through the steady progression of tasks, Ivanova was beginning to feel she was on the ragged edge. Roused from her sleep to deal with the simulated reactor breach was bad enough. What galled her most was it had happened on one of the few nights she had managed to get a decent sleep. She might have slept soundly on this occasion only because she was simply tired out from all the previous nights,

which had found her jolted away, the blue silk pyjamas she had bought in St. Petersburg soaked black with sweat. There had been dark and terrible dreams where she had felt herself constricted by fibrous appendages, black as midnight, which wrapped themselves around her. She had reached to touch her cheek, adamant that gauze veils had been draped across her face until she was breathing the swathes of material in and suffocating herself. Once awake and gulping air down into her lungs, she could feel the tingling sensation the materials left on her skin.

The first night it had happened, Ivanova had pulled on her robe and padded across the room to the com station to speak to Benton face-to-face rather than use her link. Once activated, the screen displayed the Earth Alliance logo above the *Titans* crest. As she reached to bring up the on-screen options the familiar graphics had suddenly flared into a swirling mass of illegible text and unrecognisable symbols. She turned her face away from the screen and for a moment saw her shadow thrown back across the room in hard relief before the images dissolved into blackness.

The few nights the dreams hadn't managed to reach down far enough to violently rouse Ivanova from her deep slumber, she had still never managed to wake up feeling fully refreshed. She needed a shower every morning. She needed the coffee. It worried her that a day might come when she would need to rely on stims just to run fast enough to keep up.

“I suppose we have you to thank for last night's entertainment,” Ivanova said as she hastily refilled her mug. All she could remember

clearly was stumbling from her quarters after hurriedly getting dressed, checking on the chromatic tab attached to her uniform that had been specially adapted to register levels of the same mild toxin, used in other scenarios, that was now employed to stand-in for leaked radiation.

Once Ivanova got to the bridge she had allowed Graydon to oversee the operation while she watched the crew from the various shifts work together to ensure that the breach was contained. Berensen had been there as well. She remembered seeing a look of concern of his face, directed at her.

“You look tired,” Berensen had mentioned, days before when they were seated together in the Officer’s Mess. “This must seem very different for you compared to Babylon 5.”

“Dealing with new and different personalities is a lot easier than dealing with new and very different races,” Ivanova explained. “And having to deal with some old races. Some very old.”

“It was difficult to begin with,” she said. “Take the Minbari, for instance. When I was transferred to the station I had to put my personal feelings aside, which was difficult to begin with. Like a great many people, I lost family in the EarthMinbari War.”

Ivanova had looked up then as Graydon and Maddison arrived almost simultaneously for breakfast. The room was beginning to fill up and the kitchen staff was circling the tables serving

breakfasts. Ivanova carried on, wanting as many of them to hear what she had to say.

“It would have been so easy to hate them for what they did, but I had to put my differences aside. You can’t stay hostile because you once fought against each other. And in time I came to see that the Minbari were a very spiritual people and found out that they weren’t that different from you and me.”

“So you’re saying that we should just forgive and forget in a situation like that?” Graydon said.

“Forgive, yes. If you can.”

Ivanova hoped then that she had managed to get her point across. Whether it had worked or not, she was still uncertain. As members of the Simulations team arrived Ivanova wondered if she could every

forgive Breck.

Harriet Crawley was certainly not as forgiving. Amongst their numerous Combat Drills, the marines had practised boarding actions, requiring them to defend key areas of the *Titans* from an enemy that had boarded the ship, before ultimately driving them from the vessel.

To simulate live rounds fire, each marine was outfitted with a vest that would deliver a mild electric shock once they were targeted by the opposing forces. Based on the strength and accuracy of the hit, a roundal on the front of the vest would indicate the extent of the injury inflicted. In the marines' briefing hall, once the men were divided into intruders and defenders and the armourers had checked that the weapons to be used in the practise had their plasma caps removed, the Quartermaster's staff issued the marines involved with the vest.

"So as not to place undue demands on sickbay you will be wearing one of these," Captain Dorland said, taking a vest and holding it up for everyone to see. "To demonstrate I need a volunteer."

Dorland had looked Breck straight in the eye. Ivanova turned to the marines and saw smiles break across their faces as the lieutenant responsible for putting them through the surprise drills eagerly stepped forward and shrugged on the vest.

"I'm sure we can sit here all day and explain the science involved," Dorland said as he checked the setting on the slender battery pack. "What happens is something like this."

He raised one of the modified pistols, aimed and fired. Breck jerked as the burst of electric current jolted through him but bravely stood his ground.

"The object, therefore, is not to get shot," declared Captain Dorland. He altered the setting on the battery pack and fired again. This time Breck yelped as he was hit by a stronger charge. The roundal on the vest glowed bright red and stayed red.

"I'm afraid you're dead, sir," Dorland announced. "I suggest next someone points a gun at you, you step out of the way."

During the first simulation, which saw them guarding engineering and the hanger bays only the marines were issued with the vests. Ivanova had been making her way back to the bridge

when a voice had bellowed "Make a hole!" and a squad wearing green

armbands had raced past her toward the landing bays, ready to repel the red-banded invading forces. For further simulations, crew working in designated sections of the ship had been issued with vests. In no uncertain terms Dorland had explained that if the ship was ever boarded, every member of the crew was a target. Soon the invading force were given more men and more targets to take. Flash charges had been handed out, which would overload the vest settings and light up the roundels instantaneously.

Forewarned of the action, Doctor Benton had the MedLab staff ready to receive actual casualties. Sure enough, a number of overenthusiastic marines either limped in on their own or were carried in, leaving the nurses to treat muscle strains and any number of broken bones.

One unit, designated alien invaders, had gone so far as to pull up deck plates and work their way through the crawl spaces. The bridge crew had been surprised when three marines came crashing through the ceiling. Ivanova had even stood and applauded their ingenuity. In return the marines shot her while they lay sprawled on the floor, waiting for the medical staff to arrive.

While Breck and Ivanova had been shot once, Harriet Crawley, monitoring the combat simulations, found herself repeatedly on the receiving end of weapons fire and flash grenades. Jolted by the electric shocks, she stumbled blindly into the bulkhead, splitting her lip.

Ivanova had reviewed the results of the first round of test with Dorland and Marine Lieutenant Lindsey Garland, the assigned simulations assistant, and was pleased by the performance. Wondering if they could do better, she had let slip on purpose that after the Nightwatch security officers had been shipped off Babylon 5 Sheridan had replaced them with Narn warriors. She wasn't surprised to see an added ferocity to the fighting in the next scheduled simulation. By then Crawley had taken to carrying a PPG of her own.

“What’s on the agenda today?” Ivanova asked as she took her seat. Rather than run through the list from start to finish and cycle around they had decided to make random selections to keep the crew on their toes.

Breck studied his checklist, glancing up briefly as Jack Durden, an Engineer’s Assistant, and Gillian Bruhl, one of Benton’s MedLab nurses

who had been co-opted for the duty, slipped into the room and took their places around the table.

“A Hull Breach Simulation scheduled for fourteen-hundred hours. At nineteen-hundred, a Lost Starfury Drill,” he announced once Captain Dorland and Lieutenant Oliver arrived. In the event of a hull breach, simple micro-punctures and minor breaches would be quickly repaired by maintenance crew in environment suits, using plastic-foam as a temporary sealant. For more serious damage, sections of the ship would be sealed to isolate the breach. Although hull breaches were not as dangerous

as a fire on the ship, if the breach was large enough to vent a critical amount of air into space it could represent a serious threat to the structural integrity of the ship. For the second, one of the fighters would be flown out and disabled in space. Pilots and crew would have to work in concert to retrieve the Starfury before the pilot’s life support fails. Ivanova mulled over his suggestions.

“What about bringing the Jump Failure Drill forward?” she suggested, catching the expressions from around the table. Jump failures occurred when either a ship failed to form a symmetrical jump point due to problems with the vortex generators or the energy waves were disrupted by a gravitational anomaly in local hyperspace. The backlash of energy could inflict massive damage on the ship. Even if it avoided the potential huge stresses on the superstructure, key electrical systems would surely be disrupted.

“It’ll be a fail, I know, because we’d be leapfrogging ahead of hull breach drills and gravity failure. But I’d like to see how big a fail.”

Before anyone could add their opinions the lights dimmed and Ivanova was alarmed to feel a shudder go through the ship. Her body felt light and was alarmed to see globules of coffee rise out of the mug, which lifted one edge off the table.

“Gravity’s gone,” Durden said before the ship shook again and the floating coffee splashed down onto the table.

“Captain to the bridge,” Berensen announced over the intercom, his voice rising above the hiss of static. As the emergency lighting kicked in, Ivanova looked at Breck.

“I haven’t ordered this,” he explained. Breck turned to Harriet Crawley who was equally at a loss to explain what was happening.

The hatch only opened part way but Dorland and Oliver put enough weight against it to make room for everyone to get out.

“Get back to your stations,” Ivanova ordered as she ran to the bridge with Breck in pursuit.



# EIGHTEEN

“We’re experiencing a near total system failure,” Berensen explained as Ivanova arrived on the bridge. There was an acrid smell in the air and the readouts on the console screens were flickering on and off.

“Still nothing to do with me,” Breck said as he raced to the communications station.

“Engineering has managed to get the Gravitic drive system back on line and life support is still operating at near enough to one hundred percent, but the engines are inoperable at present,” Graydon announced. “All weapons systems are also down.”

“With the power fluctuations that’s not a bad thing,”

Berensen observed.

“An overload in the particle beam cannons is certainly not what we want right now,” Ivanova said. “Did we register any spikes or surges prior to the systems going out?”

“No warnings of any kind, Captain,” Graydon said.

“The lights dimmed and then everything went out,” Berensen confirmed.

“So, we’re dead in the water,” Ivanova said, “but still alive.”

“That’s about it,” Berensen agreed.

“Any reported injuries?”

“Gravity wasn’t off long enough before the system kicked back in to produce any serious casualties.”

Ivanova looked relieved at the news. She approached the flickering schematic of the *Titans* with Berensen keeping in step beside her.

“Have MedLab dispatch staff to key installations, ready to treat any injuries immediately. Once they are in place, seal off every section of the ship.”

As Berensen turned to carry out her instructions, Ivanova returned to her chair. She winced, feeling like pins had been stabbed into her forehead.

“Put me through the Engineering,” she told Breck.

“Aye, Captain.”

“Chief, how are you doing back there?” Ivanova asked.

“I don’t know what game she’s playing, but we should have the grid back up and running in less than thirty minutes,”

Sheehan said.

Ivanova nodded as the screens around her suddenly went blank. Through the rising static that filled the speakers it was just possible to hear him amend the time to an hour.

“What if that had happened while we were in hyperspace?”

Ivanova asked. She clutched the mug of coffee in her hands for warmth and looked at the faces around the table. Everyone was cold but she could feel it deep in her bones. Everyone knew how challenging it was to navigate through hyperspace, which was why ships needed the beacon system and Jump Gate transfer points. It was not somewhere to go wandering about in. If the *Titans* lost power and drifted off the wire, it was more than likely that they would be lost forever.

“We ran system-wide diagnostics twice,” Sheehan said. “So far we cannot find anything to suggest what triggered the fault.”

“So it’s conceivable that it could happen again?”

“Anything’s possible,” Sheehan told her. “Components breaking down I can fix. But we’ve been collecting data on temperature fluctuations and problems with the lighting that nobody in my department can explain.”

His admission made Ivanova sit up and take notice.

“Where have these occurrences been taking place?” she asked.

“The instance in Engineering you saw. After that the phenomena appear to be spread at random in localized areas across the ship.”

“Are you trying to suggest that the ship is haunted?”

Graydon enquired which provoked laughter from some of the officers seated around the table.

“That is not what I’m trying to suggest,” Sheehan replied, annoyed at the remark and the reaction it provoked. He was relieved to see that Ivanova was not finding it funny either.

“This isn’t just a case of someone accidentally wiring the systems incorrectly. Earth Force technology I can deal with. This is something else altogether.”

“Alien technology?” Ivanova asked, eager to hear what he had to say.

Sheehan looked over to Berensen before he replied. Ivanova noticed that some of the other officers, shifting uneasily in their seats, exchanged glances. It was like they shared secret and were wondering who would divulge it.

“When the *Titans* was berthed at Cyrus Shipyard, operatives from EarthForce came aboard to finish the installation of the central processor,” Sheehan admitted.

“All other work stopped and the crew were shuttled off,”

Graydon added. “Even Commander Sunetra was at a loss to tell us what was going on.”

“And was this something they did to every ship or just this one?” Ivanova asked.

“It could have been just this one, it could have been all four,” Berensen answered for her.

“There was talk that they had come from a research facility orbiting Uranus,” Maddison said.

“And what does that mean?” she asked.

Nobody said it but Ivanova was sure they must have had an inkling that the men who had taken over the *Titans* belonged to Earth Alliance’s Black Projects Division. The thought made her shudder. If that was the case it could only mean that the ship was hardwired with Shadowtech.

If she mentioned the name now, Ivanova expected to be met with a lot of blank faces around the table. It was ironic that amongst most of EarthForce, Babylon 5 was infamous for seceding from the Earth Alliance and then taking the fight back home as Clark's presidency turned into a reign of terror. Very few humans knew about their involvement in deciding the outcome in the Shadow War, which raged across the galaxy.

"So what do we do?" Graydon asked. "Return to Cyrus Shipyard and say, sorry it doesn't work. That would be a kick in the teeth for morale."

"We could try Proxima," Maddison suggested. Already Berensen was shaking his head.

"I doubt they have the facilities to deal with his. And if they did, word would still get back," Berensen said.

"So where do you suggest is the best place we go to deal with this?" Ivanova asked him.

Berensen looked over at the star charts on the screen.

"The only place we can go to have this dealt with without making too big an issue is Epsilon Eridani," he said.

It was certainly not the answer Ivanova was expecting and she was taken completely by surprise.

"Babylon 5?"

With the engines back on line the *Titans* punched a hole into hyperspace. From the Sinzar System, the journey to Epsilon Eridani would not take long, but there was still the very real danger that the ship could lose power again. In the event of another systems wide failure the *Titans* would drift off the beacons. It was a risk they would have to take. Although nobody expressed any doubts outright, Ivanova could feel the tension in the air.

Before they jumped from normal space, Ivanova had already formulated a plan of action if they ran into any problems.

"Worst-case scenario, we employ a variation of the tactic used to rescue the *Cortez*," she explained to Berensen and Graydon in the briefing room.

One of Earth Alliance's mighty Explorer-class vessels, the *Cortez* had spent five years out on the Rim, mapping unexplored regions of space and constructing new Jump Gates for the survey teams that would follow. After stopping off at Babylon 5 to resupply, the ship had lost its navigational systems and begun to drift off the hyperspace beacon system.

Ivanova moved the folders from the table and collected the mugs that had not been cleared away.

"Hyperspace," she said pointing to the table. She piled the folders together and set them down on the far end of the table.

"This is the *Titans*."

She gave it a slight nudge.

"Without any power, it'll take a while before we drift off the beacon. But since nobody knows we're here, nobody is going to come looking for us. So this is the plan."

She set the cluster of mugs down in front of the files.

"The forty-eight Starfuries leave the *Titans*," Ivanova explained.

She selected a mug and pushed it away from the files.

"The first fighter will advance one thousand kilometres toward the Epsilon Eridani Jump Gate and hold position."

She picked up a second mug and slid it past the first one.

"The second fighter will advance a further one thousand kilometers from the first. The third fighter, another one thousand kilometers, and so on," she said as the mugs were slid along the table eventually forming a line.

"Creating a lifeline," Berensen observed.

"Exactly," Ivanova said as she held up the mug furthest from the files. "With the final Starfury racing ahead to Babylon 5 to bring help."

"That is just beyond insane, if you don't mind me saying,"

Graydon replied.

"That may be," Ivanova said, "but its been tried and tested."

“Then we’ll go with it,” Graydon agreed, “but its still beyond insane.”

“Then let’s hope we don’t have to put it into practice,”

Berensen said.

With only a few hours before they reached Babylon 5, Ivanova returned to the briefing room along with the key members of her crew.

“In a little while we should find out what’s causing the malfunctions aboard the ship,” Ivanova told them as they sat around the table. “But before that happens, for you to understand the potentially lethal danger we are in, I need to tell you about the Shadows.”

“Shadows?” Dorland said. His puzzled expression, mirrored in the faces around him, only confirmed to Ivanova that none of them knew what she was talking about.

“They have a name, but its one that we couldn’t hope to pronounce. So for eons they’ve simply been known as Shadows. Anyway, this is what I know, although there are others who can tell the story better than me,” Ivanova said.

“The Shadows were one of the ancient races, even older than the Vorlons some say. Like the Vorlons, they wanted to help in the evolution of the younger races that followed, but through chaos and war rather than order and discipline.

“For a long time the two races co-existed, despite their diametrically opposed philosophies. But over the course of time they forgot the true nature of their mission and turned it into a fight for dominance and power.

“Every thousand years their philosophical differences boiled over into a war that engulfed the whole galaxy. The last time this occurred the Vorlons sided with the Minbari and the Shadows were eventually forced to retreat to their home world of Z’Ha’Dum. The Shadows had allied themselves with some of the younger races, inciting them to war or simply using their worlds for strategic military bases.

“Sometime in the distant past, Mars was used by the Shadows as a base of operations. Less than ten years ago, in 2253, an Interplanetary Expeditions mission discovered it, one hundred metres below the

surface of Syria Planum. What they uncovered beneath the Martian soil was a dormant Shadow vessel. Almost a week later, a second Shadow ship appeared and cut it loose. IPX

had planted a homing beacon on the ship. Although they lost contact when the ships jumped into hyperspace, the company sent out long-range probes to try and pick up the beacon's signal. Eventually they found it and traced it back to the source. A research vessel called *Icarus* was dispatched. There they awoke a terrible evil."

"What happened to them, to the crew?" Maddison asked.

"They were either killed or merged with Shadow vessels to function as their central processing units, which was as good as being dead."

"What do these Shadows look like?" Graydon asked, looking ill at ease.

"Your worst nightmares come to life. I heard one of Babylon 5's Starfury pilots described them as big as death and twice as ugly after he encountered them.

"Where are they now, these Shadows?" Berensen asked.

"Gone now, far beyond the rim," Ivanova assured her.

"Although it's clear that their terrible legacy still remains.

"So you're saying they're to blame for what happened back on Earth?"

"I don't know all the facts, but its possible, yes."

"And there are people on Babylon 5 who can deal with this?"

Graydon asked.

"If it is Shadow technology, yes," Ivanova confirmed.

"You're saying now that it might not be?"

"I'm saying that it's more than likely. It would certainly explain Vathek's behaviour. Having been allied to Vorlon technology in the past, I have to admit that I've found aspects of this ship quite unsettling."

"But what if we discover this is something else all together?"

“Then we find another way to deal with it,” Berensen stated firmly.

“There’s one final thing to consider,” Ivanova said as the officers got up to leave. “EarthForce employing Shadow technology is something the other races obviously don’t know about. We’ve just been invited into this new Interstellar Alliance, and the other races, in particular the Minbari, the Narn and Centauri would be less than impressed to know that the Earth Alliance was using their ancient enemies technology. Some of them may hold us in great stead for what we’ve done, especially since Sheridan’s plan of action in the Shadow War brought many of the alien races together like never before. But I can guarantee that if this gets out, Earth will be cut off and left isolated and alone. I know this is a heavy burden to put on you, but not a word of this must get out.”

“You want us to keep this from the crew?” Graydon asked.

“No,” replied Ivanova, “I’m just saying we don’t tell them about it. Or anyone else.”

## **BABYLON 5**



# NINETEEN

Captain Elizabeth Lochley stood at the observation window of Babylon 5's C&C. She had just returned to the command deck after another heated debate with Sheridan and was not in the best of moods.

From the moment she received her transfer orders, Lochley thought it odd that she had been chosen as the new commander of Babylon 5. In transit to the station, just after the New Year celebrations, it had nagged at her continually while she studied the station procedures and personnel files. The first chance she

had, Lochley questioned Sheridan as to why, with Babylon 5

remaining independent, an EarthForce officer had been given control of the station.

She understood his desire to use the appointment to try and heal the rifts caused by the Civil War. Trying to come up with her own conclusions, Lochley had in fact already considered it as a viable option. Which was why she told him that her being in charge of the station meant just that. If he simply wanted a commander to act as a mouthpiece for his decisions, with all due respect he could find himself another puppet. To that end they had agreed that while Sheridan would make the political decisions on behalf of Babylon 5 and the Interstellar Alliance, the day-to-day running of the station was hers alone. Almost immediately Sheridan had broken his word by offering sanctuary to a group of telepaths, tired of their nomadic existence, travelling from one world to the next looking for a place they could finally call home. At least their leader, Byron, had come to her first. Tall, with a narrow, chiselled face and long flowing hair, he was not unattractive. But Lochley was put off by the arrogance of the man. While his followers saw him as a prophet, in her eyes he was simply another rogue telepath. While they were happily ensconced in Brown Sector, she had continued to voice her continued concerns to Sheridan on an almost daily basis. More telepaths were arriving to join them. Although they offered to earn their keep, Lochley knew the PsiCops would come for them eventually and she would be the one left to clear up the mess. Right now she didn't feel like standing around and monitoring the traffic moving in and out of the station.

"Captain, we've got a ship coming through the Jump Gate,"

Lieutenant Corwin informed her. “The identification code is Earth Alliance, but...”

Lochley looked out at the blazing cone of blue and white light that rippled inside the Jump Gate array. At first she thought it was the Psi-Cops, just as she predicted, but the size of the ship that suddenly appeared astonished her.

“Open up a frequency,” she instructed.

“We’re being hailed.”

“This is the EAS *Titans* to Babylon Control,” Maddison announced over the com speaker, “Requesting to be patched through to President Sheridan, priority one.”

“Babylon Control to Titans, I’m sure you realise that the President is a very busy man...” Lochley said, not happy with being pushed around or stepped over in the chain of command quite so openly.

A face appeared on the BabCom screen above the console, matching her grim and determined look. Lochley wondered if she had not glanced into a mirror by mistake.

“Captain Ivanova?!” Corwin spluttered.

“I’m sure he’ll be able to find a couple of minutes in his schedule for me,” Ivanova said.

“Susan, well this is certainly a surprise,” Sheridan said as he appeared on the *Titans*’ bridge monitor. “I didn’t think you’d be missing us all so soon.”

“I just happened to be in the neighbourhood and thought I’d swing by,” she said, knowing Sheridan wouldn’t buy that for one minute. “Truth be told, I was trying to keep a low profile. Which is not easy when you’re carting around sixty-seven million metric tons of warship.”

“So what can I do for you?”

“I was hoping you could find time in your schedule to come over and take a look at the ship.”

Ivanova knew that would get Sheridan’s attention and she could see

the almost imperceptible change in his expression. Like her, Sheridan was not wildly enthusiastic about all the pomp and ceremony that came with the job and viewed it as a necessary evil. She did not doubt that he could read between the lines and understand there was far more to it than that.

“That’s a gracious offer,” Sheridan said trying to muster up enthusiasm as the frown that creased his forehead softened.

“I’ll get a ship prepped for launch and be right over.”

From the shuttle Sheridan marvelled at the sheer scale of the *Titans*, which filled the cockpit windows as he lined up on his final approach. As the tiny ship hovered between the spacelocks, waiting for air to be pumped in and the atmosphere to equalise with the hanger bay that lay beyond the thick metal doors, the initial sense of wonder trickled away. Bathed in the glow of the red warning lights, he began to feel a sense of unease. By the time the shuttle had touched down all that remained was a deep sense of foreboding lodged in the pit of his stomach.

He saw Ivanova step into the launch bay to welcome him. Out of the hatch, he hurried down the steps to greet her and suddenly stopped. His foot wavered in mid-air as he felt strangely reluctant to step down onto the deck of the landing bay.

“John, its good of you to come over at such short notice,”

Ivanova said. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Sheridan said, forcing himself to step down onto the deck.

As they walked toward the hanger bay bulkhead, Sheridan turned and looked back at the shuttle.

“It was the oddest sensation, like someone had just walked over his grave,” he told her as they stepped out of the hanger and was surprised that Ivanova didn’t find the suggestion at all unusual. If anything she seemed more relaxed than she had appeared on the com-screen.

“So, this is the *Titans*,” Sheridan announced, trying to sound encouraging as they made their way along the corridor.

“The new Warlock-class Destroyer. The first of its kind.”

“Well, she’s quite something.”

Ivanova noticed him vigorously rubbing his hands together.

“Cold?”

“A little, yes,” he replied looking around. “Maybe someone left a window open.”

*He can feel it too*, Ivanova thought. Although she could sense his discomfort, she felt pleased that it hadn’t been her imagination playing tricks with her all this time. As she led him through the ship, Ivanova noticed Sheridan glancing around warily as if something was not quite right. She picked up her pace. With Vathek’s reaction to the ship clear in her mind, Ivanova wanted to get to her quarters and out of sight as quickly as possible. It would not look good for news to circulate that the President of the Interstellar Alliance was onboard and having a complete breakdown.

“Quite a ship,” Sheridan repeated to himself, distracted by the growing sensation that something wasn’t right. Outside her quarters, Ivanova opened the door and allowed Sheridan to enter first. She was just about to follow him inside when she saw Graydon standing at the end of the corridor leading to the bridge. Ivanova nodded to her and Graydon nodded silently back.

“What the hell is going on with this ship?” Sheridan asked as she locked the door behind her.

He was pacing about like a caged animal wanting to break free.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh come on Susan, from the moment I arrived onboard I’ve had the urge to get right back on the shuttle, and get the hell out of here. So are you going to admit that something is wrong here or am I going to turn around and do just that?”

“I know exactly what you mean, which is why I needed you to come over here. There’s just one more thing I still need you to do.”

She stepped over to the com station and instructed the computer to stand by to archive guest data. The screen glowed with the same familiar Earth Alliance logo above the *Titans* crest.

“Sheridan, John J. President, Interstellar Alliance,”

Ivanova announced as Sheridan stared suspiciously at the screen.

“I really don’t know what you’re playing at here but this has gone on far enough,” he said angrily.

“John, place your hand on the screen so that the computer can recognise you,” she said but Sheridan was already turning to leave.

“Please, it’s the last thing I want you to do. After that you can go back to Babylon 5.”

Sheridan stood by the door, keeping his distance. She could sense his reluctance but finally his resolve broke and he walked towards her.

“This is all you want?” Sheridan asked. Ivanova nodded. Cautiously he flexed his fingers and pressed the palm of his hand against the screen. Even before flesh made contact with glass, the logos had dissolved into the same swirling mass of unrecognisable shapes and symbols. They boiled with such fury that the screen shut down.

Sheridan wavered on his feet like a man coming out of a trance. He looked as if he had woken up in unfamiliar surroundings and was trying to find clues that would help him work out where he was and how he had got there.

“Susan?” he said, his voice barely a whisper, as he saw her standing beside him.

“Don’t tell me it’s what I think it is,” Ivanova murmured. Sheridan blinked and shook his head to clear his thoughts. He knew now what was making him feel so unwelcome.

“Shadowtech,” Sheridan said, confirming her suspicions.

“Goddamn EarthForce Black Ops,” Sheridan snarled as he reconvened the command staff, back in his office on Babylon 5. “I ought to kick their asses for this.”

“I think you can,” Ivanova said. “But only if we get to watch.”

“I’ll bring the popcorn,” Garibaldi offered.

“Okay, knock it off,” Sheridan told them. He shook his head. “I don’t

know how we ever got anything done around here with you two children.”

Ivanova and Garibaldi exchanged sly grins but kept quiet. Ivanova felt good being back on Babylon 5. She had known that one day she would return, although this was much sooner than she had expected. Suddenly finding herself by the multitude of different races had come as something to a shock, but with so much to concern her, she hadn't let the feelings she last associated with the station get to her.

“You're absolutely sure it's Shadowtech?” Franklin asked.

“No doubt about it.”

“Before the Titans launched we gave an EarthForce Senator a guided tour of the ship,” Ivanova said. “He had an aide with him who was straight Psi Corp. Before long he went...”

“Completely buggo?!” Garibaldi suggested.

“That about covers it. He had to be taken off the ship.”

“I'd say that's unequivocal proof that the two main elements in the universe are hydrogen and irony,” Franklin chuckled.

“I'm sorry, but as someone who wasn't involved in the Shadow War, you're going to have to clue me in on some of this,”

Lochley said. In reviewing that station's records references to the Shadow War had come up but details were sketchy in places. Almost from the moment she had been called to Sheridan's office Lochley realised that she was hopelessly out of her depth.

“Shadowtech is an incredibly advanced organic technology that, as far as we can tell, can interface with any other technology it encounters. It's like it *wants* to be used,”

Franklin explained. “Well over a year ago, after we had broken away from Earth, we intercepted a ship that was part of a Shadow convoy.”

“We were told that the ship contained weapons,” Sheridan added. “What we found instead were humans sealed in cryogenic chambers.”

“They were Psi Corps, rated P11 and P12.”

“Telepaths?” Lochley said, with perhaps a little more venom than she

would have liked. She looked at Sheridan, hoping that all this wasn't going to perversely tie in to Byron's crowd. Ivanova smiled at Lochley's outburst. They had only exchanged little more than pleasantries when Sheridan introduced them, but Ivanova immediately understood why he had appointed her to take over the running of Babylon 5. She may have the diplomatic skills required for a job like this, but it was obvious to Ivanova that Lochley was more than prepared to shoot first and shake hands later.

"All of them had cyberweb implants attached to their head and linked to their cerebral cortex," Franklin continued. "During my examination of one of the telepaths we had managed to revive, she became hysterical and tried to merge with the station computers."

"So the Shadows used telepaths?" Lochley said.

"No, the Shadows were fearful of telepaths. We used them aboard the White Star fleet to help disrupt the Shadow ships and destroy them," Sheridan told her.

"We could only assume that agents of the Shadows infiltrated Psi Corp in the first instance to prevent human telepaths from ever being used against them. The implants dampened their psychic abilities and they were probably being shipped out to be merged with a Shadow vessel become its living central processor," Franklin said.

"Another thing the Shadows hated were the Vorlons. Maybe from commanding the White Stars something of their fragrance rubbed off on me a little," Ivanova said, managing to find a way not to reveal her latent telepathic abilities. "I could sense something about the *Titans* was very wrong almost from the beginning and kept having violent nightmares. Which is why I had no choice but to come here and get John to confirm it. And then see if we could sort it out."

"What about your crew?" Garibaldi asked.

"The command staff know. After the problems we had with the ship I couldn't keep quiet about it any longer," Ivanova said.

"If you need to bribe them to keep quiet, I bet you I can dig up some juicy dirt. Just write down their names and serial numbers, and include an unusual predilections."

"That's a sweet gesture, Michael. I'll keep that in mind for a later date," Ivanova said.

“Once I explained to them about Shadowtech, I happened to add that the Interstellar Alliance wouldn’t be at all pleased if they found out.”

“It’s going to be a sensitive issue, but one that we’ll certainly have to address further down the line,” Sheridan said.

“I know President Luchenko understood the benefits of signing on, but some of the Joints Chiefs in EarthForce saw it as a *fait accompli*.”

“Would that have been before or after you filled their sky with over a thousand armed White Stars?” Garibaldi said. “That might have made think you were piling on the pressure. Not that they didn’t deserve it.”

“It was worth it to see their faces. But if we start ordering EarthForce to stop construction of their new, top-of-the-line warships and open up all their Research and Development facilities to Interstellar Alliance inspection, they might decide that we are interfering too far into their internal affairs.”

“So what do we do right now?” Ivanova asked. She looked at Franklin and Garibaldi sitting side by side on the sofa, Lochley alone in an armchair. All of them had blank expressions on their faces, unsure of what the answer was. Maybe there was no answer to be found here and she would have to return to Cyrus Shipyard after all. She looked over at Sheridan and saw the grin on his face.

“I think I may have just the answer,” Sheridan smiled. “But first we need Lyta Alexander.”



# TWENTY

All the years Ivanova had served on Babylon 5, Docking Bay 13 had been assigned the designated berth for the Vorlon Ambassador Kosh and off limits.

“Why are we here?” Ivanova asked. The meeting had broken up. Sheridan had outlined the basis of his plan once Lyta had arrived. It appeared to be a long shot to everyone but she was prepared to give it a go. As everyone left Sheridan’s office he called Lyta back to speak to her alone and asked Ivanova to wait outside for him.

Ivanova wondered what else Sheridan had up his sleeve. He wasn’t prepared to tell her immediately. Lyta was smiling when she passed her in the corridor. Whether that could be interpreted as a good sign was still debatable. As Sheridan eventually escorted her to the docking bays without explanation, it felt like their earlier roles were suddenly reversed. With a sense of foreboding prickling her skin, Ivanova wondered if this was payback for calling him onboard the *Titans*.

“This used to be—“ Ivanova said, interrupted by Sheridan holding up a finger to stop her right there. He punched a code into the access panel and watched Ivanova’s reaction as the door slid open.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” she exclaimed, astonished by what she saw.

As the Shadow War reached a critical juncture the crew came to the realisation that contrary to what they had been led to believe, the Vorlons had in fact no interest in humanity. By then a vast armada that included a Vorlon Planet Killer was sweeping through the system, destroying any world that had been touched by the Shadows. Deciding that he could no longer be trusted, Sheridan had announced that the new Ambassador had to go. It was easier said than done. Ulkesh had been successfully led into an ambush, but even after a heated battle Babylon 5’s tactical squad had only succeeded in splitting open the Vorlon’s encounter suit and forcing the enraged creature out into the open. The odds were only eventually tilted in their favour when a

splinter of Kosh, who had secretly resided in Sheridan after the original Vorlon Ambassador had been killed by Shadow agents, emerged and forced his replacement, Ulkesh, out of the station.

Ivanova had been in Command and Control when they engaged the Vorlon. As the fight raged on, the Ambassador's ship had suddenly come alive and torn itself loose from the magnetic moorings. She had ordered the space-locks opened before it caused any more damage to the station. The Vorlon ship had burst free from Babylon 5 as the glowing embodiment of Kosh forced Ulkesh out of the station.

She remembered watching as their essence rippled across the surface of Babylon 5 and, still intertwined, they coalesced into the departing Vorlon vessel. The resulting explosion lit up the darkness of space with such ferocity that she was not surprised the image was not burned into her retinas. Both Vorlons and the ship had been destroyed. Which didn't explain the presence of the Vorlon ship sitting comfortably on the rail locks in front of her.

The first ship, cast in yellow and green hues, had gracefully followed its master to its death. The deep red colouration told her this was definitely the ship of Ulkesh.

"Didn't this go boom?" she asked. "I think I remember that."

"After the ship blew up I had salvage go and pick up the pieces to bring back here."

"And this seemed like a good idea to you?" she said quietly.

"I thought we could get a chance to discover something about the Vorlons," Sheridan said. "And why are you whispering?"

Ivanova jabbed her finger toward the Vorlon ship.

"Because...", she said.

"After the Vorlons went beyond the Rim, all sensors indicated that the ship had simply stopped."

"So how did it get from being in lots of tiny pieces to this?"

"All told, there were about half a dozen large chunks recovered. Except the next time I got a chance to check in down here there were five bigger pieces, then even bigger four, then three," Sheridan explained.

"It was rebuilding itself?"

"And regenerating all the parts that had been destroyed."

Ivanova could not help but notice the admiration in his voice.

“And you didn’t find that unusual?”

“Well, yes. But it is Vorlon after all. Do you want to come in?”  
Sheridan asked as he stepped onto the ramp that led down to the ship.

Ivanova shook her head.

“I’ve got to get back to the *Titans*,” she replied. “I won’t wait up.”

In C&C, Lochley stared through the observation dome at the *Titans* floating silently in space. Her hands balled into tight

fists, she folded her arms against her chest, to stop herself chewing at a nail in frustration.

Whether the plan Sheridan had mapped out would work was anyone’s guess. A few elements were clarified for her when she asked what the risks would be to the station if things did not go according to plan. Otherwise, feeling unqualified to add any constructive suggestions, Lochley had simply watched and listened.

Still trying to digest the sudden rush of information about the Shadows and the Vorlons, Lochley had returned to the command deck just in time for Sheridan to contact her with an addendum to the plan. She was less than happy to discover what had been in one of the docking bays all this time. Now almost an hour had passed since she watched Ivanova’s shuttle head back toward her ship and still there was no word from Sheridan. As she waited for his call, Lochley found herself feeling increasingly angry. Not because Sheridan had trooped off down to Docking Bay 13 without an armed escort, but because during the Civil War, when Sheridan and everyone here on the station had been branded as renegades and traitors, she had fought on the side she believed was right. Now she had discovered that side had been infected by an alien sickness that had tainted everything EarthForce had stood for. Standing, restless in the command centre, there was no one for her to take her anger out on. Lochley saw the light blink on Corwin’s console, saw his hand go up to his earpiece. *This better be it*, she thought.

“President Sheridan for you on Channel 4,” Corwin announced.

She turned to the Bab-Com screen, ready to receive his transmission

when Corwin informed her it was audio only.

“Mister President, are you all right?” Lochley asked. To begin with all she could hear was an unusual hiss of static that rose and fell as it moved back and forth across the acoustical range with a strangely melodious effect.

“Everything’s fine here,” Sheridan replied, sounding like he was talking to her from far away, across the distant reaches of the galaxy. “I’m inside the ship.”

“What’s it like?” Lochley asked. Even the command staff looked up from their consoles, eager to hear his answer. It took a long time coming before Sheridan disappointed them all by announcing there were no words to describe the interior of the Vorlon vessel. There was a sense of wonder and awe in his voice that made her feel more than a little envious.

“So, is the ship going to play ball?” Lochley enquired. Sheridan still wasn’t sure. While Lochley waited for a definite reply she listened as the static became more like a whisper, rising and falling across the harmonic scale. It was a crazy thing to think but as she waited for Sheridan to get back to her, Lochley would swear the ship was singing. Whether it was to him or to her she could not be sure, but it definitely sounded like soft, gentle singing. Crazier still, it sounded very much like it was singing one of her

grandmother’s favourite tunes. Lochley knew the song. It was *Pennies from Heaven*.

“I think it’s going to do it,” Sheridan eventually answered. “I think it would like something interesting to do.”

“He’s talking about the ship, right?” Lochley asked Corwin who looked as perplexed as she obviously did. Her first day on Babylon 5 had confirmed that the place was a madhouse and nothing so far had refuted that claim. In fact each new day seemed to provide more evidence to the fact.

“Did you say the ship would like something interesting to do?” she asked. It did not surprise her at all that Sheridan told her not to ask.

“Is everything ready to go?” Sheridan asked.

“Is Lyta Alexander aboard the *Titans*?” she asked Corwin.

“Her shuttle is already en route,” he informed her.

“Ready when you are, Mister President,” Lochley said.

“Open Bay 13, and let’s get this thing up and running,”

Sheridan said, his voice sounding even more distant than before.

“Bay 13 open. All other traffic is clear,” Corwin confirmed.

As the Vorlon ship passed through the docking portal, Lochley leaned across the console, almost pressing her face against the glass to get a good look. This she had to see.

Ivanova’s latent telepathic ability had made her perceptive to Shadow technology, while Sheridan was sensitive to the Shadowtech from unknowingly carrying part of Kosh’s essence inside him. If Ivanova and Sheridan had felt a sense of dread stepping aboard the *Titans*, Lyta Alexander was almost overcome with blind panic even before the shuttle transferring her to the ship touched down.

After her transfer to Babylon 5 as the station’s first resident commercial telepath, Lyta had scanned the Vorlon following an attempt on his life. Almost immediately she had been recalled to Earth by the Psi Corp who was interested in what she had learnt from the encounter. Guessing that the experiments she was forced to endure would culminate in her ending up in a row of glass jars, she escaped and went underground. Drawn to the mysterious Vorlons, she had eventually been granted the privilege of visiting their homeworld. There her telepathic abilities had been increased beyond measure. Returning to Babylon 5 to take on the role of Kosh’s diplomatic aide, she had even carried its consciousness in her mind on the occasions the ambassador wished to travel incognito. She was almost the closest thing to a Vorlon left in the galaxy now. Even before her shuttle had cleared Babylon 5 and was on its approach to the *Titans* she could sense a dark, ugly presence waiting for her. As the tiny shuttle entered the ship and made its way through the space-locks, Lyta felt ready to claw her way out of the ship. Once the shuttle had settled onto the landing bay her panic abated. Instead she felt something else. It was like the tide had turned and it was the ship that was fearful.

Ivanova waited for Lyta to exit the shuttle.

“We haven’t got much time,” Ivanova told her as they hurried down

the corridor toward the smaller Flight Bay 7.

“Are you okay with this?” Ivanova asked as she helped Lyta into the pressure suit that was waiting there for her.

“If I say no, do we have time to think of something different?” she asked.

“Not really,” Ivanova said, hurriedly checking the pressure seals.

“Then let’s get it done,” Lyta sighed. “I hate wearing these things,” she added as the drab grey space suit was tightened around her. “Couldn’t you have picked me out a better colour?”

As the seals were tightened on the helmet, Lyta noticed that the deckplates running down the middle of the bay had been pulled up and removed. A heavy insulated frame supported a line of computer relays that had been spliced into the exposed tangle of thick, coloured cables. They rose up from the floor, undulating like a glowing metal spine.

“I bet that took some explaining?” she said.

“Not as much as you would think,” Ivanova shouted through the faceplate. She jerked her thumb in the air. “I’ll be up on the bridge, Good luck.”

Lyta weakly gave her the thumbs up back. As the door locked shut behind Ivanova, Lyta hurriedly attached the safety cables to her belt and stepped back against the wall, wondering how long she would have to wait.

Ivanova reached the bridge just in time to see the Vorlon ship approaching the *Titans*.

“Initiate lockdown throughout the ship,” Ivanova said. She turned and saw that all the bridge crew were staring at the screen in awe. It reminded her of the first time she saw the Vorlon ship comes through the Jump Gate. She had considered turning off the viewscreens on the bridge but decided that if they were to understand what would soon happen, this was something they needed to see. Since the Vorlons had left the galaxy and headed beyond the rim, they would never get another opportunity to see this in their lifetimes.

“Mister Berensen,” Ivanova said firmly. “Initiate the shipwide

lockdown.”

Berensen’s head snapped around to face her. His fingers danced across the console.

“Lockdown confirmed,” he said, turning his attention back to the screen.

“Hanger doors open.”

“Aye Captain.”

It was a sentient ship, created using advanced biotechnology. More than just a vessel for the Vorlon pilot, it was designed to be a companion, existing in a symbiotic relationship. With its long sculpted tendrils protruding from the front of the ship, from some angles it looked like an elegant cephalopod. From others angles, the bulbous organic look reminded Ivanova that

once she had wondered what would grow if the ship was planted in deep, rich soil. The shifting red hues and warm rust-coloured blotches that shifted across its surface made her wonder whether it had a hull or a skin. The ship’s wings, extended from the back of the vessel, folded down like closing petals as it headed into the forward section of the *Titans*.

“It’s beautiful,” Graydon said.

And deadly, Ivanova thought. No one should be seduced by the look of the craft. The power of the Vorlon Death-Ray was formidable. The fury unleashed by the larger Vorlon dreadnaughts was as terrifying as anything the Shadows could produce.

“This could get rough,” Ivanova warned her officers.

## TWENTY-ONE

Lyta took long measured breathes to keep herself calm and focused. She kept her eyes fixed on the warning lights. Once they flashed red she looked across the hanger as the large doors slid apart and the Vorlon ship appeared. Lyta thought she had put this episode of her life behind her but obviously it wasn’t going to go away.

She had been more than a little surprised to discover that the Vorlon

ship was still in Babylon 5's docking bays. When the first Kosh had been murdered by the Shadows, through channels the Vorlon government had requested that his personal effects be placed inside the vessel. Once that was done, the ship, a living extension of Kosh, left the station on its last journey, unfolding its wings as it flew into the heart of the sun to rejoin its master.

Lyta had assumed that the ship's could not survive without its master, but here it was, sliding gently into the bay. The ship hovered over the metal frame before delicately lowering itself down onto the computer relays. Once it was properly attached, absorbing itself tightly into the deck, it would create its own interface and the battle would begin in earnest. Personally Lyta felt glad to have it there with her. She had seen the *Titans* on the monitor in Sheridan's office and marvelled at the size of the ship. When Sheridan began the briefing her first thought was that she was expected to go onboard alone to combat the foe that lurked within the massive superstructure. Ultimately the Vorlons may not have had the best interests of the younger races at heart, but it was reassuring to have the ship there with her.

The hanger lights, which had been glistening on the curved surface of the Vorlon ship flickered briefly and went dead plunging the hanger into darkness. Out of the blackness a faint glow pulsed from within the Vorlon ship. It fluctuated as she felt a roaring wind blast through her, snapping at the safety harness.

The plan was to guide the Vorlon ship's consciousness deep into the ship to seek out the black heart of the Shadow technology but Lyta found that she had to concentrate as hard as

she could just to keep up with the Vorlon. Its tendrils slithered around the weaving maze of conduits. Energy crackled around it and through it as the Vorlon surged on, deep into the computer systems where the evil had taken root.

On the *Titans'* bridge Ivanova felt the vibrations first. The information scrolling up the screens suddenly dissolved into swirls of gibberish. The ceiling lights glowed intensely then burnt out. She knew the Shadowtech would not go down without a fight. There was the distinct danger that it would overload the fusion reactors, which was why they had moved the *Titans* away from Babylon 5 to what was hopefully the minimum safe distance. As the metal groaned around her, barely standing up to the stresses inflicted upon it, Ivanova wondered if the ship wouldn't simply be torn apart. If this did not work there will be a lot of explaining to do, Ivanova thought. At least



she would not be the one to have to do it.

The ship rocked violently. Ivanova gripped the armrests of her chair, trying desperately to hold on. The rush of G-forces came out of nowhere and it felt like the *Titans* was being spun around in a whirlpool. She heard Graydon scream, Berensen shouting for everyone to hold on. Pushed against his console, Maddison lost his grip and was flung over the railing. He skittered across the floor of the bridge, his arms flailing, and crashed into the wall.

In the launch bay Lyta sensed they were close to the essence of the alien consciousness. She could feel it now, a dark, hateful rage building up in the very heart of the machine. The Vorlon could sense it too. Their quarry was near and it surged ahead through the twists and turns, eager to find it. Lyta had doubted that they would get the Vorlon ship onboard in the first instance but Ivanova had assured her the space-locks could be overridden and had remained true to her word. She felt a sudden tug on the harness as the series of space-lock doors opened again, all at once this time, bypassing the safety protocols. The air in the hanger bay roared out into space as the Shadowtech tried to rid itself of the enemy presence that had dared to come aboard.

Although distracted for a moment, Lyta knew that both she and the Vorlon ship were not leaving until their job was done. She could feel the Shadowtech screaming in her mind as she sensed its rage.

*Scream all you want, she thought. I want to hear you scream louder. I want to hear you scream in pain.*

The Vorlon stabbed deep into the core of the Shadowtech. The two mortal enemies were locked in combat for one last time. The light and dark entwined, lunging and slashing at each other. Lyta parried with her own strokes, stopping the Shadowtech conscience's from accessing the ship's systems to gain an advantage or set off a chain reaction that would destroy the *Titans* rather than let the Vorlon take over. *You don't frighten me any more*, she spat as the Shadowtech thrashed and struggled against her.

In that instant she could sense its wavering fear which was all she needed to press on with her attack. *This one is for Kosh*, Lyta thought as she felt the Vorlon connect with her as it suddenly reared back and with one final, deadly determined lunge tore right through the heart of the Shadow with a fiery vengeance.

The raging maelstrom died down as deep howl roared through the *Titans* one last time. The echoing vibrations of its death rattle gradually faded and finally it was over. In the darkened hanger bay Lyta took a deep breath. With the power out, she could just make out the faintest of glows in front of her as the consciousness withdrew into the Vorlon ship. Although she could not see it, she felt its rhythmic pulses inside her head, singing to her in a harmonious language she had almost forgotten.

“I miss him too,” Lyta replied, choking back a tear. The underside of the Vorlon ship burnt brightly as, through the interface, it restored power to the *Titans*. As the space-lock doors rumbled shut and she heard the whisper of air being pumped back into the hanger bay, Lyta collapsed back against the wall, hanging limp from the safety lines like a discarded marionette. As the lights came back on she unhooked the safety cables and started to break the seals on the pressure suit. Pulling the helmet off over her head, Lyta was astonished to see the side of the Vorlon ship iris open. Just for a moment she expected to see her Kosh making a miraculous reappearance. Instead Sheridan stood in the opening. When he saw Lyta, Sheridan smiled triumphantly and waved to her. She raised her hand to wave back but instead pitched forward and passed out on the hanger bay floor.

On the *Titans* bridge Ivanova breathed a sigh of relief. The acrid smell of burnt metal hung in the air but she was pleased to see the lights flicker hesitantly and back on. Most of the screens returned to normal and the com channels burst to life relaying a babble of overlapping status reports coming in from across the ship.

“Damage report,” Ivanova ordered.

“Fires from systems shorting out on D and E decks but they’ve been contained,” Graydon announced. “The Chief reports that for a moment back there it looked like the reactors were going to go critical.”

Ivanova turned and looked at her, concerned.

“But everything is back well below the red line,” Graydon continued reading from the console screen.

“That’s always good to hear.”

“Some obvious disruption to various systems but they appear minor. The maintenance crews are already on it and starting to run full diagnostics.”

“There was an atmosphere loss in the hanger bays,” Berensen added.

“Which ones?” Ivanova asked, concerned for Lyta.

“Bay seven, but its been compensated for.”

Ivanova nodded. As they suspected, the Shadow technology had tried to get rid of the alien intruders. The Vorlon ship had obviously managed to stay put and, she assumed, Lyta. She wanted to get down there and check for herself.

“I’d say that worked,” Ivanova said to Berensen as she got up out her chair.

“The ship appears to be in one piece,” he said.

“What about the crew?”

“Cuts and bruises and a few fractured bones reported so far, but nothing serious.”

“That’s good,” Ivanova nodded.

Across the bridge Lieutenant Maddison rolled over, holding his ribs as he coughed. Ivanova knelt by his side and helped him sit up with his back to the wall.

“Stay where you are,” she instructed as he tried to stand up.

“Medical help is already on the way,” Graydon announced. Doctor Benton had co-opted Captain Dorland’s marine detachment and before long two well-armed marines in full body armour arrived.

“So, was this kind of thing typical when you served on Babylon 5?” Berensen asked as he watched the marines lift Maddison onto the stretcher.

“Like you wouldn’t believe,” Ivanova smiled.

“So what do we do now?” Graydon asked, dabbing at the smudge of blood on the side of her temple.

“You’re going to report to MedLab with Lieutenant Maddison,” Ivanova told her. She looked over to Breck who was pressing his hand

to the sides of his jaw and running a finger inside his mouth to check whether any of his teeth had come loose.

“Mister Breck, what do you say to that Jump Failure Drill now?”

“Piece of cake,” he replied.

“I don’t appear to have broken my shiny new ship,” Ivanova said as she escorted Sheridan back to his shuttle.

“That’s always a good thing,” he told her. “It seems more warmer and inviting, I have to say.”

“The interior temperatures running hot,” Ivanova laughed. She knew what he meant. The chill had gone. Even after what they had been through to purge the system, she felt more relaxed than she had been. “And some of the communication channels have got themselves in a scramble. But no, there’s nothing that we can’t not fix. I guess we were lucky this time.”

“That’s good. And its good to see you again, Susan. You know you’re always welcome back here.”

“If I find I’m lacking any fun and excitement, I’m sure I’ll stop by,” Ivanova told him as they reached the central landing bay. “Next time I’m in the area, I’ll take you for a spin in it once we find out what it really can do.”

“It’s a fine ship you’ve got,” Sheridan said.

“I’ve got a good crew. And they’re gradually coming around to my way of thinking,” Ivanova said with a grin. “How is the presidency?”

“It’s quite a learning curve. But with Londo and G’Kar no longer at each others throats, it means I’ve got the time to concentrate on the more important matters,” Sheridan replied.

“Although Captain Lochley thinks it’s a bad call, I’ve just given sanctuary...”

He stopped and shook his head.

“I don’t want to bore you with the details. What can I say, it’s Babylon 5,” he explained. “I hope it all works out for you, *Captain*.”

“And for you, *Mister President*,” she replied, amused by his formality. “And thanks again for your help.”

Unexpectedly for Ivanova, Sheridan hugged her as they stood beside the shuttle.

“You take good care,” he whispered in her ear.

As the hatch closed behind him, Ivanova wished she had had the chance to properly thank Lyta for all her help. When Ivanova got down to Hanger 7 Sheridan was already carrying the unconscious telepath out into the corridor and gently laying her down on the floor.

A nurse soon arrived with a pair of stretcherbearers in tow. A cursory check revealed that Lyta was suffering from a combination of stress and exhaustion. She was given a shot to help her sleep. As the nurse returned to assist the minor casualties coming in to MedLab, Ivanova instructed to take Lyta on ahead to the shuttle.

Although Sheridan had instructed her to seal off Hanger 7

she opened the hatch and leaned against the bulkhead watching the ship. Maybe it was down to the acoustics of the hanger but Ivanova would swear she could hear an almost musical hum keeping time with the gentle throb of the exposed systems. She was about to turn away when the mottled pattern swam across the surface of the Vorlon ship, breaking into pieces to form a line of symbols.

“I’m sorry, I can’t read Vorlon,” Ivanova said. “But thank you for what you did.”

The symbols rearranged themselves into a different pattern that floated gently upon the surface of the ship.

“I’m going to go now,” Ivanova explained, knowing that if the ship was anything like Kosh the message was probably be something impenetrably obtuse. “I’ll close the door and lock it behind me. Nobody will disturb you down here. If you need something, just whistle.” She pointed to her head, hoping the ship would understand.

Standing in the corridor Ivanova locked the entrance to the Flight Bay with a command string code that even the most dedicated hacker would have trouble opening. Now all she had to do was to see that the repairs were finished so that the Titans could get back to the Sinzar System before anyone noticed their absence.

“Dear diary, today I had a conversation with a Vorlon ship. Tomorrow I hope to feel better,” she muttered to herself as she headed for the bridge, wondering whether the nurse could give her a jab of something particularly potent as well.

## **TITANS**

### TWENTY-TWO

The incessant beeping reached into Ivanova’s dreams and dragged her from her sleep. The numbers on the clock came into focus, shining through the darkness: 04:47. It was just over two months since the *Titans* had been purged of the Shadow influence. The ship had returned to the Sinzar System for a final week of drills before jumping to the Orion System, on the other side of Proxima, to continue with a further round of simulations.

With the alien intelligence gone, Ivanova had found herself sleeping soundly during the nights. Her dreams were peaceful and untroubled. The only blip had been a couple of surprise drills organised from Breck. He soon decided to alter his existing schedule after Crawley took over and purposefully set off the alarms hours after he had retired to his bunk.

“Ivanova,” she snapped sharply into her link, hoping Breck had not changed his mind.

“Sorry to wake you, Captain,” the watch communications officer apologised. “You have an incoming priority call from EarthForce.”

Ivanova reached for the lights. Blinking in the sudden brightness, she pulled on her uniform jacket and tried to look alert.

The EarthForce logo on the com-station changed to a Gold Channel graphic. Ivanova quickly ran her hands through her hair to chase out any tangles before activating the screen. General Bowden appeared, sitting behind his desk. His face looked flushed, as if he had just retired, the sore loser, from a heated argument.

“Captain Ivanova, I hope I haven’t woken you,” Bowden said. A barely contained smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, accentuating the

deep creases etched into the sides of his face. She had seen him briefly at EarthDome before her meeting with General Smits and Luchenko. Typically, he had been barking orders to an aide who had looked relieved for the brief respite when Bowden caught sight of her crossing the main atrium. She was reminded that Garibaldi once described Bowden as looking like a bulldog that was chewing on a wasp. When Ivanova had seen him glaring at her, she had saluted and kept walking. Ivanova knew full well that he had timed the call perfectly to interrupt her sleep. She could only hope that he was being inconvenienced considerably as well.

“Not at all, General,” Ivanova replied straight-faced. She could feel her heart thumping in her chest and wondered if Bowden had somehow gotten word of their little diversion and what they had done to the ship.

“Good,” he said, frowning momentarily. “Well, I have an assignment for you, as long as you think you and your crew are up to it.”

“We’re ready,” Ivanova replied. “The crew are well trained and well prepared.”

Bowden stared at her for a moment then sat forward and rested his forearms on the desk, bringing his face closer to the screen. It may have been a trick of the light but Ivanova thought she could see the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching.

“The new President of the Interstellar Alliance has requested EarthForce’s assistance,” Bowden explained with an air of distaste.

“At Babylon 5?” Ivanova asked. Bowden shook his head.

“You’re not going back there just yet,” he told her.

“Sheridan will contact you and update you on the situation. EarthDome has assured him that the *Titans* is at his disposal until the situation is resolved.”

“Situation?” Ivanova asked, knowing Bowden wasn’t going to bother explaining it to her.

“Just remember whom you’re working for now,” Bowden reminded her as he terminated the link.

Ivanova showered quickly. She was getting dressed when the

communications officer routed through the second call.

“Mr President,” Ivanova said as Sheridan appeared on the com-screen.

“Captain,” Sheridan nodded back. “Now that we’ve got the formalities are over and done with, how is the ship?”

“Much better, thank you. And we got back to the testing ground without anyway noticing we were missing.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said.

“How are things with you?”

“It’s a steep learning curve, but I think we’re getting there. Captain Lochley thinks I’ve made a few wrong calls that will come back to bite me, but so far so good.”

“General Bowden said there was something we could help you out with.”

“Bowden called you? I bet he was pleased to reveal I had come cap-in-hand to EarthForce,” Sheridan said. “We had new alien race come through the Jump Gate a couple days ago.”

“Hostiles?” Ivanova asked. Sheridan nodded.

“Very. Delenn surmised they were the advance wing scouting for likely independent worlds to invade.”

“For likely you mean soft and vulnerable,” Ivanova observed. “They must have come in for a surprise.”

“It wasn’t so one-sided. They bloodied our nose a little,”

Sheridan explained, “but we’re still on our feet. The Gaim had a tussle with them and at least warned us of their possible arrival. We’ve had a few reports come in of overdue convoys since, but no confirmed sightings.”

“And you need us to track them down?”

“You don’t have to get right in their faces, just find out which corner of the playground they’re from.”

“I understand,” she said.



“I would have sent the Rangers out to track them down, but the White Stars have already engaged them in battle.”

“Which would make it difficult to extend any kind of olive branch,” replied Ivanova, understanding the situation.

“Exactly. A taskforce will immediately send the wrong message, but one ship that can stand up for itself might be able to make the difference. I’ll transmit all of the information we currently have. There’s footage from Starfury gun-cameras and Babylon 5’s drone bots, along with Steven’s autopsies of their boarding party. Patrols from the Alliance worlds are on alert and hopefully you’ll get their latest updates, so you won’t be blindly searching the whole galaxy.”

“We’ll get the job done,” Ivanova assured him.

“I knew I could count on you, Susan” Sheridan said. “I lobbied the Joint Chiefs for the best ship they had at hand. They obviously decided that was the *Titans*.”

“It would have been different if you had asked them for their best Captain,” Ivanova countered.

“When they get over their prejudices, the Chiefs will find out that the two go hand-in-hand,” Sheridan assured her. “I’m sorry if it seems like I’m putting you in harm’s way again.”

“We can handle it. And we’ll certainly observe First Contact Protocol if the opportunity arises.”

“Help will be at hand if you need it,” Sheridan said. “Good luck to you.”

The Jump Gate blazed to life. The alien fleet emerged, a swarm of fighters buzzing around the larger warships. They broke off, engaging the squadrons of Starfuries that were moving to intercept. The fighters twisted and turned, evading the streaking arcs of fire from the plasma cannons. Bright clouds of gas blossomed against the blackness of space as ships taking a direct hit disintegrated and the atmosphere inside briefly ignited.

As one of the alien ships came into view the image froze. Seated around the table in the Briefing Room, the officers of the *Titans* got

their first clear view of the alien craft.

It was small and sharp. There was something insect-like about it, as if a beetle had been forced to squeeze out of its shell and this was the split remains. The front of the ship was concave with a large plasma cannon that resembled a sharp stinger fixed in front of what they assumed was the cockpit. Behind the cockpit the hull narrowed in the middle before sweeping out as it split in two so that the tail of the ship reminded Ivanova of a pair of antelope horns. Before they tapered away to a point, wings curved out from either side of the tail section with what looked like further plasma weapons attached to each end.

“This is who we are looking for,” Ivanova announced. “A so far unidentified alien race. Obviously hostile. A scouting party and subsequent larger fleet attacked Babylon 5, mistakingly

assuming it was a soft target. The Interstellar Alliance has asked for help in finding this species’ planet of origin and EarthForce has assigned the task to us.”

“How old is this footage?” Berensen asked.

“Two days,” Ivanova informed him.

She looked over at Lieutenant’s Michael Oliver and Andrew Rowland, the *Titan*’s Starfury squadron leaders as the footage continued. Sitting side-by-side, both men studied the battle played out on the monitors intently. Ivanova glanced back at the screen, interested to see them paying close attention to the alien fighters’ manoeuvring capabilities.

“Lieutenant Rowland, any thoughts?” Ivanova asked.

Rowland took his eyes off the screen. He swivelled his chair around to face Ivanova. His brow was knitted into a frown. Ivanova could just make out a pale scar that ran up the side of his forehead and disappeared into his close-cropped hair.

“I’d be interested in learning the kill ratio,” he said. She had asked his opinion first because she had gathered that he was the more talkative

of the pair. Apparently she had been misinformed.

“Of Babylon 5’s Starfury squadrons?”

Rowland’s eyes disappeared into dark slits as he shook his head.

“Of the alien fighters they engaged,” he said.

“Are your pilots up to the task if we encounter these ships?” she enquired provocatively.

“They’ll stand and fight their ground,” Rowland replied, accepting her challenge. “And win.”

Ivanova gave him a thin smile.

“We’ll stay at combat readiness,” Oliver interrupted, trying to make up for his colleague. “And increase the drills. We can also incorporate the footage into the flight simulator AI to get a jump on any tricks they may have up their sleeves.”

Rowland weighed up his partner’s suggestion and nodded.

“Okay then,” Ivanova said.

“And we can reprogram the drones for gunnery practise,”

Breck added.

“Captain Dorland, your opinion?” Ivanova asked turning to the Marines Commander. She had noticed him listening avidly to the discussion, although he seemed more interested in how she stood up to Rowland.

Dorland pulled himself closer to the table. He smoothed his hand across the nape of his neck as she turned from the monitors to Ivanova.

“They may decide they can carve us up with their lasers, alternatively they may want to take the ship,” he confirmed. “Can you slow it there,” he said, indicating to the screen. Graydon directed a small remote control at the screen and they watched as the footage, this time taken by one of Babylon 5’s camera-bots, revealed a small, horned breaching pod as it homed in on the station.

“We find ourselves in harm’s way, my marines are combat ready. They’ll be stationed around the ship ready to defend the

primary systems,” Dorland assured her. “Of course one of Mike’s flyboys may want to use the pod for target practise before it reaches the hull, if they aren’t otherwise engaged.”

Oliver gave him a casual salute.

“We’ll see to it your men don’t have to interrupt their rack-time,” he told Dorland with a grin.

“So, now all we have to do is find them,” Ivanova said.

“They came through the Jump Gate, so they’re obviously using the beacons,” Graydon observed.

“The larger ships as well,” Berensen added, “so maybe they haven’t got the power to generate their own jump points.”

“Contact EFJCM and find out which of the Explorer-class ships are on active service, where they are, and the course they are currently taking,” Ivanova told Graydon. “Find out how far out into the rim they have gone and the exact locations of all recently-activated Gates.”

“You’re thinking Jump Gate Construction and Maintenance might have fast-tracked their way into our sector?” he asked.

“Unwittingly, maybe. Get copies of their mission logs to see if they give us any clues,” Ivanova instructed.

“They could have accidentally opened the door, and whatever race this in came in looking for rich pickings,” Berensen said.

“They could have indeed. Mister Maddison, what have you gleaned from the information?”

The *Titans* navigator took the small remote passed to him and pointed it at the screen. The footage of the battle raging outside Babylon 5 was replaced by a detailed graphic of the galaxy. All the known systems were highlighted with the borders of each race’s territory outlined.

“The Gaim Intelligence encountered the aliens on the fringes of their

home territory here in the N'chak'fah System,”

Maddison said, pointing to the left of the centre of the screen, where a sun glowed brighter than the rest on the display. “The next reported attack was at Babylon 5 in Epsilon Eridani.”

The Epsilon star grew to the same intensity as he activated the remote.

“We’ve had no reports of sightings or incursions from the Markab which is down here, bordering Earth Alliance space, nor from the Narn Regime or Centauri Republic.”

“That doesn’t mean any of these alien races haven’t encountered this species. They simply might not have survived to report the attack,” Captain Dorland said.

“Exactly right. So the ambassadors aboard Babylon 5 are contacting their homeworlds to make sure every outpost and colony is still untouched, and all their warships and transports are in one piece.”

Maddison used the remote to zoom in on the graphic so that the Gaim Intelligence bordered the left side of the screen and Epsilon Eridani was on the right. Joining the two locations was a narrow band of neutral space.

Based solely on these two encounters, the alien race obviously came down this corridor, past the Sh’lassan Empire.”

“What’s there?” Berensen asked.

“The Mitoc System, Gamma 7, Sin’talith, Coriana--”

“The Coriana System?” Ivanova interrupted him. The officers around the table turned and looked at her. Maddison put down the small remote and turned towards her.

“The Coriana System, yes why?”

Ivanova waved his enquiry away.

“I’m sorry, no, it’s nothing. Please continue.”

Gradually everyone turned back toward the Maddison.

“And,” he said pointing, “Sector 49. But the EarthForce garrison there have detected no hostiles.”

Ivanova nodded. Sector 49 contained a Jump Gate and a lump of barren, frozen rock. That was all that remained after the sun in the system expanded, some eons ago, to a Red Giant and consumed whatever inner worlds had been circling it. The only value of the system was a strategic one. Before the Babylon Project was initiated, Earth Alliance used Sector 49

to establish a military base, monitoring incoming traffic from the Epsilon System. It was an uninspiring detail. In the Academy she remembered a drill sergeant haranguing the squad and telling them, “Foul-ups get the 49!” Whoever was sent there was rotated back after six months because it was so dull. After Babylon 5’s secession from the Earth Alliance, the garrison was massively expanded.

“So do we ignore Sector 49?” Ivanova asked.

“Oh God, yes please,” Graydon muttered in a way that made Ivanova glance over and wonder whether she should have read her personnel file more closely.

“Foul-up,” Berensen muttered, half jokingly.

“Okay then,” said Ivanova, “We head up this corridor toward...”

“The Hyach Gerontocracy,” Maddison announced. Ivanova nodded.

“All right then,” she said. “Let’s go hunting.”

## TWENTY-THREE

Ivanova knew that the search would be a long, drawn out process. They were hunting for a new alien race across the vast reaches of space. It was not going to be easy. This was a game of hide-and-seek that could stretch across the infinite. The course had been plotted and the *Titans* had left the Orion System, heading out between Beta 9 and Markab territory. She could sense the excitement of the crew, but knew all too well that if results were not forthcoming it could easily turn into pent-up frustration. It was the waiting that would get to them. She had felt the same anxiety when she had been dispatched to find the First Ones. At least in those instances they had a rough idea of the area to cover. Here the boundaries were limitless. Back then she had Marcus to accompany her. Whether he was annoying her or amusing her, at least he had kept her occupied.

On the next occasion she had been assigned Lorien as her guide. Ivanova could still remember how frustrated and useless she had felt. Sheridan had decided the time had come to put an end to it, once and for all. A vast armada of every conceivable alien vessel was amassing at Babylon 5, the biggest fleet ever assembled, all preparing for the final showdown with the Shadows and Vorlons.

When he had ordered Ivanova to seek out the last remaining First Ones so close to the time of engagement, she had questioned his motives. Thinking that it was his way of keeping her out of the fight, it had brought back painful memories of when her mother, drugged by the sleepers, told her to wait with the neighbours next door. Sofie Ivanova had promised she would come for her later in the day. Except she had not. Although Sheridan promised her that she would be there for the final battle, it had still nagged at her as they travelled through space on what seemed like a hopeless cause. Even worse, while she paced the bridge of the White Star fretting, Lorien had sat impassively, biding his time. Ultimately he had been right. They had eventually found the last of the First Ones and persuaded it to join the fight.

To keep the crew on their toes, Ivanova told Breck to continue scheduling the emergency simulations, concentrating now on hull breaches and combat drills. Reading the reports from the simulation assistants, Ivanova had been pleased by the results. It would be easy to brag, given that she had the most powerful and advanced ship in the Earth Alliance fleet at her disposal, but this time she had the crew to back up any claims she made. They would track down the aliens and they would emerge triumphant.

Ivanova sat eating dinner in the Officer's Mess when Graydon pulled up a chair across from her.

"We've received the logs from the four Explorer-class ships on active service," Graydon announced as she set an electronic reader down on the table.

"Anything?"

Graydon shook her head.

"Nothing. They haven't encountered any new species. And there are no reports from the survey teams following in their wake. No new Jump Gates have been erected this side of the rim in the last eight months. So unless they took the long way around, this race has come

from somewhere else.”

“At least we know,” Ivanova said. She pushed the food around the plate, not feeling very hungry but not knowing what else to do.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Graydon said, looking around the room before turning back to Ivanova, “In the briefing room, deciding on our route to take, you... *reacted* at the mention of the Coriana System.”

Ivanova looked up from the plate and nodded.

“Yes.”

“I was just wondering what it was?” Graydon asked, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

Ivanova put down the cutlery and pushed the plate towards the files.

“Coriana VI was where we made our stand against the Shadows and the Vorlons,” Ivanova announced. As soon as she said it, it seemed like the rest of the bridge officers had descended on the Mess. Taking their places around the table, they all seemed eager to what she had to say.

It did not surprise her. Ivanova remembered when she was first assigned to Io and having to come to terms with the routine and the same faces day in and day out. Although the officers of the *Titans* were experienced, hardly any of them had anything like the experiences and encounters with alien races she had. If purging the Shadowtech from the *Titans* had not been such a priority, and their presence there to keep kept as low profile as possible, Ivanova would have liked to have rewarded the crew with a tour of Babylon 5 to open up their eyes to the world she had lived in. Instead they made do by listening to her stories, through the telling, Ivanova had found a way to connect with the crew that she had not thought possible. She was pleased to see Lieutenant Commander Graydon included amongst them.

“The war had taken a frightening turn. The Shadows and the Vorlons were not engaging each other directly,” Ivanova said.

“Instead each were attacking worlds the other had influence. And their destruction was complete. The Vorlon’s had massive planet killers; ships that could unleash an energy discharge so powerful it could vaporise a planet’s crust.



“As for the Shadows, theirs was perhaps the most terrifying thing I have ever seen. A black cloud would enshroud the planet,”

she said, cupping her hands around an imaginary globe in front of her. “From it, thousands upon thousands of missiles would be released. Dropping down toward the surface, they would burrow miles underground to the very core before they detonated, blowing the planet up from the inside.”

She looked around at the faces. The plates remained untouched.

“I know some of you aren’t fans of John Sheridan, or me, and what he did. But before that, when the enemy was out there amongst the stars, he united the races. Many were too weak on their own. No one species could have taken on the Shadows or the Vorlons and even hope to survive.

“And to show their gratitude, they joined forces again to help him take back Earth because they believe in us. We belong out here amongst the stars. And we need all the help we can get.”

“And Coriana VI?” Graydon said, trying to steer her back to the story.

“It’s a low-technology world that was easily susceptible to the Shadows who quickly established a base there. Six billion people lived there, none of whom deserved to die, simply because they had become pawns in this terrible conflict.

“From intelligence reports we surmised the Vorlons would make Coriana its next target. Sheridan tricked the Shadows into

thinking we had established a secret base there. Both sides arrived and there we were, slap bang in the middle.”

“What happened?” Maddison asked.

“Oh, we won,” Ivanova said. “We had the last of the First Ones on our side, the last of the ancient races that had evolved long before either the Shadows or Vorlons came into being. When, millions of years ago, their race had left the galaxy and gone far beyond the Rim, one or two had stayed behind, hidden away from all the different alien species that followed.”

“So you beat these Shadows and Vorlons?”

“Not exactly. They were persuaded that we didn’t need their guidance

anymore. That we didn't need *them*."

Ivanova looked around at the looks of confusion growing on their faces.

"I don't want to get into a debate about it. We won. Be happy about it."

"I suppose you had to be there," Graydon said.

On the bridge Ivanova sat and stared at the screen in front of her. If they were in luck, the watching game should be over soon enough. They had travelled through hyperspace, bypassing the Sh'lassan Empire and Coriana System. Coming up was their first viable hunting ground.

"Approaching the beacon for the Sin'talith System, Captain," Maddison announced.

"Activate jump engines," Ivanova ordered.

"Aye, sir. Jump engines on-line," he replied.

"Jump back to normal space," Ivanova said. She watched the monitors as the raging inferno of hyperspace was replaced by the cold tranquillity of space.

"Anything?" Ivanova asked Breck. The communications officer looked preoccupied as he stared at his console.

"Lieutenant Breck, any contacts?" she repeated. This time he looked up from his screen and shook his head.

"So signals as yet, Captain."

"Check with the military outpost at Sin'talith III"

Berensen suggested. "They're supposed to monitor traffic through the system, maybe they've seen something."

"It's worth a shot," Ivanova agreed.

"This is the EAS *Titans* to Sin'talith III," Breck announced as he opened a channel. "Are you receiving, over? EAS *Titans* to Sin'talith III, please respond."

Breck looked at Ivanova and Berensen, a puzzled expression on his face.

“This is the EAS *Titans* to Sin’talith III outpost, please respond, over,” he repeated. “EAS *Titans* to Sin’talith III outpost, please respond.”

He paused, listening to the empty silence.

“EAS *Titans* to Sin’talith III outpost, are you receiving, over?” he tried a third time. Met with silence, Breck pulled off the headset as Ivanova and Graydon joined Berensen around his station.

Breck shook his head. “Nothing,” he said.

“How many people manning the outpost?” Ivanova asked.

“About one hundred,” Berensen replied.

“Maybe they’re at lunch?” Graydon suggested. Her smile fading when she saw the look Ivanova gave her.

“We’ve got multiple contacts!” Maddison announced, as a wavering line of symbols suddenly flashed up on his screen.

“Alien raiders?” Ivanova asked as the information was relayed to the main screen. She stared at the scattered line of red dots that curved in front of the *Titans*.

“Unsure,” Maddison replied. “There are low-level power spikes but I’m not reading any life signs.”

“I’m not getting any recognition signals,” Breck added.

“Maybe they’ve got some sort of cloak in operation that is disrupting our sensor sweeps,” Berensen said.

“Set condition one across the ship!” Ivanova barked.

“Red alert!” Graydon’s voice echoed throughout the ship.

“This is not a drill! We are at red alert!”

Ivanova returned to the captain’s chair as the graphic flashed up on the screen.

“How far?” Ivanova asked.

“The bogeys are holding formation at thirteen-hundred kilometres,” Breck replied, consulting the screen.

“This could be their first wave of attack,” Berensen suggested.

Ivanova folded her arms and looked at him, grim faced.

“Forward batteries powering up,” Graydon announced.

“Launch Starfuries,” Ivanova instructed.

“Alpha Squadron, immediate launch,” Graydon barked over the intercom, “Repeat, immediate launch!”

The Starfury wing powered away from the *Titans*. The fighters closed into a tight formation as they turned on an intercept course.

Piloting the lead Starfury, Oliver activated the fighter’s smart targeting computer. As the on-screen contacts flashed closer, he powered up the Pulse Cannons.

“Time on target, five minutes. Alpha Squadron, weapons-free on my command.”

On the *Titans* bridge Ivanova looked from Graydon to Berensen as they listened to Oliver calmly relayed the instructions to his pilots.

“Any movement from them?” she asked Breck. Breck shook his head.

“No change. Some minor power spikes, but they’re still laying low,” he replied.

“Well, we’ll know soon enough,” Ivanova said.

As he raced toward the target, Oliver looked through the cockpit and saw the dark shapes drifting before him blot out the stars. On the targeting computer he saw the graphic shapes gradually rotating. His finger ready to depress the trigger, instead he hit the manoeuvring thrusters, pulling up as tiny lumps of debris bounced against the struts of his Starfury.

“Alpha Squadron, break off,” he instructed. The tight formation spread out around him, arcing up over his ship and then banking around.

“Keep a perimeter and be on the lookout for any bogeys. Moyer and

Felstein, you're down with me."

Two Starfuries spun themselves about using the pivotal thrusters and headed back towards his ship. Before him floated the remnants of a convoy. Traversing the debris, Oliver gauged there had been eight freighters in total with an escort of possibly the same number of fighters. Sparks fizzed from the exposed propulsion units. The computer screen picked up the waning power signal from a freighter's reactor. The attack had been quick and merciless. Cargo pods floated amongst the shards of hull, scorched by close-quarter weapons fire.

"Alpha Squadron to *Titans*. Negative on hostiles. Repeat, negative on hostiles," Oliver announced. A short burst from the manoeuvring thrusters slowed his progress. Oliver's Starfury drifted over the length of the debris field. The spotlight mounted under the cockpit danced over the shifting metal plates that had been blown from the ships by the explosive decompression.

He saw fighters that had been torn in two, their charged pulse cannons glowing faintly in the dark as they leaked plasma. Cockpits were blown open. The spotlight illuminated the markings on the stunted wings that hung from the ragged hulls. A body cartwheeled gently through the wreckage. Oliver activated the starboard foil thrusters to swing the Starfury around. He stared at the thick, mottled skin of the frozen Narn pilot as it lazily drifted past his cockpit.

"*Titans*, this is Oliver. Whatever happened here is over. It looks like a convoy and escort crossed paths with these aliens. The markings appear to be Narn."

"Lieutenant, we've got something over here," Oliver heard in his headset.

He piloted his ship over the broken remains to where Moyer and Felstein's Starfuries were tipped upside down, pointing towards the darkened hull of a fighter craft. Their searchlights were directed at the patterned hull that was definitely not Narn. Oliver immediately recognised one of the alien fighters. As Moyer and Felstein moved their ships back to allow him the space to manoeuvre, he carefully positioned his Starfury directly over the alien craft. A small grapple extended from the base of the Starfury. Manipulating the controls, Oliver gently grasped a metal strut on the torn metal edge of the fighter.

"Let's get this back to the barn," he said.

The alien fighter was mounted on magnetic grapples and carefully moved into the landing bay. Ivanova and Berensen had waited patiently as a damage control team in environment suits checked the ship. When it was given the all clear they stood to

one side, watching as the deck crew swarmed around it, gently lowering the ship to the deck. Oliver and Rowland walked around the fighter, examining it from close range. They had repeatedly reviewed the footage from Babylon 5 and reprogrammed the flight simulator, now they had an opportunity to examine their enemy up close.

The ship was virtually intact. One of the wings had been torn away and there were holes gouged in the tail section but the main fuselage looked unscathed. Ivanova stepped forward, watching the pilots. She was more interested in seeing it through their eyes. They crouched down to examine the weapons, absently smoothing the hull as they held on for balance. Oliver rolled onto his back and slid under the ship to continue his examination while Rowland stepped over the tapered wings, kneeling to inspect the thrusters.

“Let’s get the cockpit open,” Rowland called out to the deck crew.

Cutting equipment was wheeled out as Oliver appeared from the other side of the ship. The maintenance crew carefully cut into the cockpit canopy. Each piece they removed was laid out on the deck. Oliver climbed up onto the ship and scabbled around on his hands and knees, trying to get an angle so he could see inside.

Ivanova watched from the deck, stepping to the side so that she had an uninterrupted view. As the enclosed cockpit was partially revealed she saw the pilot. His head lolled to the side, encased in a silver helmet that reflected Oliver’s face and the roof of the landing bay above him.

“Doctor Benton, report to the main landing bay with a medical team,” Ivanova said into her link. She stepped around the maintenance crew and stood right in front of the fighter, looking up at Oliver.

“How does it look in there?” she asked.

Oliver placed his hands firmly on the hull and leant forward, looking straight down in to the cockpit. He borrowed a pencil torch from one

of the maintenance crew and swept the light around, picking up the details.

“Some of the tactical displays appear more or less intact,”

he said, giving a running commentary of his findings. “On the main control panel, it looks like some of the metal bracings have been torn out. And there are long shards of a framework that looks like they belonged to a different vessel altogether.

“So what do you think happened?”

Oliver knelt back on the hull and brushed his hands.

“At a guess I’d say one of the Narn escorts clipped his wing. The pilot lost control of the ship and was unlucky enough to be hit head on by debris from one of the transports.”

Ivanova nodded and walked around the ship. She signalled to Benton as he entered the landing bay with two assistants.

“What about the pilot?” Ivanova asked.

“He’s pretty banged up,” Oliver said, looking back into the cockpit. “He’s been skewered straight through the lower abdomen

and pinned to the seat. Where the frame is buckled from the impact his right hand has been crushed between the supports.”

Ivanova looked over at Benton as he approached the fighter.

“Doctor?”

“I have the original autopsy footage from Babylon 5, but it certainly wouldn’t hurt to have first hand experience.”

“Okay then, doc,” Oliver said. “We’re going to need cutting equipment if you want to get him out. I can’t guarantee we’ll have him out in one piece, but we’ll try our best.”

Ivanova and Benton step out of the way as a portable gantry was rolled into place. Oliver stepped off the fuselage onto the platform beside Chief Petty Officer Lewis Mitchell, the head of the Starfury Maintenance Crew.

“Here’s a little something different for you Chief. What do you think?”

“I think we need to get everyone who doesn’t need to be here the hell out,” he said gruffly.

Mitchell knelt down and looked into the cockpit.

“Before we dig him out,” he said, referring to the alien pilot, “I’d like to take the fuselage apart so we can see what’s under there. Before we start firing up any more cutting equipment I’d like to make sure we’re not slicing through an injector relay.”

“You’re the boss,” Oliver said.

Mitchell stood up and leant against the gantry railing, looking down at his men.

“All right, we’re going to move this down to Flight Bay 3. I want full quarantine procedure. We’re going to take this apart slowly and carefully.”

He hurried down the ladder and walked over towards Benton.

“Doctor Benton,” he said, wiping his hands with a cloth,

“I’m sorry you’ve been called down here prematurely but it’s the ship we’ve got to carve up first. We’ll call you when you can collect the body.”

He ran the cloth across his forehead and nodded to Ivanova, turning back to the fighter.

“Okay, let’s do this,” he announced, as the crew pulled the gantry away.

An overhead crane rumbled across the ceiling, stopping directly above the alien fighter. The Deck Crew unwrapped wide, padded slings that were looped under the wings and fuselage and attached to the winch dangling above them.

“I’ll call you from MedLab,” Benton told Ivanova. She watched him follow his attendants out of the hanger and was about to leave herself when Berensen wandered over. They watched the fighter as it was carefully manoeuvred across the bay. The crew gently lowered it down onto a platform that was just large enough for the ship and the deck crew as they huddled closely around it. On instructions from Mitchell, the platform began to sink below the deck.



“Mister Mitchell certainly has a unique attitude,” Ivanova commented.

“Usually he’s just annoyed at the pilots who bash up his Starfuries. And the officers who send the pilots out to bash up his Starfuries. But if you want a job done, he’ll get it done.”

“As long as we get our job done,” Ivanova said. “Have we heard anything back from the Narn governing body about their convoy?”

“Captain Ivanova to the bridge,” Graydon announced over the intercom before Berensen could answer. “Captain to the bridge.”

“Jump point just opened,” Graydon informed Ivanova as she stepped onto the bridge.

“The aliens?” Ivanova asked.

Graydon shook her head.

“It’s a Narn Cruiser.”

Ivanova settled into her chair and looked at the G’Quan Heavy Cruiser that appeared on the main screen. Once the backbone of the Narn militia, few of the Cruisers remained operational after the Centauri’s brutal assault on the Narn homeworld almost three years ago. The ones that survived had done so only because they had been out on deep space patrols when the bulk of the fleet was lured into a trap and destroyed at the same time Centauri warships ringed the Narn home planet and bombed it from orbit using Mass Drivers.

Ivanova looked at the brightly coloured irregular geometric shapes that patterned the ship’s sleek hull, leading down to the two sharp prongs, between which were housed the twin-linked particle laser cannons.

“The ship is hailing us,” Breck informed her.

“Put them through,” Ivanova instructed.

The face on the ship’s commander filled the main screen. The Narn stared straight ahead, the red eyes burning through the screen.

“This is Warleader Ke’Tal of the star cruiser *N’Tek*,” he announced.

“Captain Susan Ivanova of the EAS *Titans*,” she replied.

“You are hunting the alien aggressors that attacked Babylon 5. Citizen G’Kar informed our government that the attack took place.”

Anyone unfamiliar with the race may have been intimidated by the directness but Ivanova merely took it in her stride.

“Well, we haven’t had any luck yet. I’m afraid we were too late here,” she explained.

“The convoy from Markar was reported overdue and no contact was received.”

“The attack looks fresh so we can’t be far behind. You’re very welcome to join us on the hunt,” she offered. Ke’tal snorted at the suggestion.

“Our ships are massing at our borders. They will pay dearly for what has happened here. We will contact you if we discover them. Then *you* are welcome to join us in battle.”

He broke contact.

The screen reverted to the *N’Tek*. Ivanova watched it turn away. As the cruiser headed away from the *Titans* it opened a jump point and disappeared into hyperspace.

“Well, it looks like it’s just us after all,” Graydon said to Ivanova.

“Any luck contacting the Sin’talith III outpost?” Ivanova asked Breck.

“Still no contact.”

“The control of the base is shared by the Interstellar Alliance. Any idea which race is currently on rotation?”

Breck shook his head.

“I suppose we’ll soon find out. We can’t stay here any longer. Drop a marker buoy and get us back on course.”

“Aye, Captain,” Graydon said. “At least we know we’re heading in the right direction.”

“The information came at a cost, for the Narn at least.”

Ivanova stood up and leant against the railing. The Narns, she knew,

would not think twice before exacting their revenge for what happened here.

“I don’t know what’s going to be worse for these aliens,”

she confided to Graydon, “whether we get to them first or the Narn.”

## TWENTY-FIVE

Once the *Titans* slipped back into hyperspace, on course for the next star system, Ivanova was summoned to the MedLab. The alien pilot had been successfully removed from the fighter and Benton was preparing to conduct an autopsy within the confines of one of the facility’s Isolabs.

Ivanova stood in front of the thick partition that separated her from the operating table. Through the glass she watched the doctor and his assistants stand around the body. All of them were wearing breathing masks and protective clothing. Cameras mounted on the ceiling were directed at the table below them and multi-angle views of the alien appeared on a bank of monitors.

It lay spread out on the operating table. The hand that had been crushed in the cockpit had already been removed, probably in the Flight Bay and the stump was already expertly bandaged. The uniform, Ivanova noticed, was similar to that of the shock troopers who had invaded Babylon 5. It was a deep rust red that reminded her of dried blood. The sleeves were ribbed, with gauges sewn into the forearm.

The helmet tapered back to a point so that standing up it would have resembled a curved teardrop. The faceplate was silver and reflected the ceiling lights. A close-up on the monitor showed hairline fractures and pockmarks that distorted the reflection.

“We’ll start with the helmet,” Benton announced. Marilyn Farber, one of the nurses assisting him, carefully felt around the seal of the helmet. She depressed a stud that her

fingers had located and the helmet suddenly loosened. A puff of gas seeped out through the narrow gap. Nurse Angela Daley quickly held up a sensor and examined the readings.

“Thirty parts methane, ten parts carbon monoxide,” she announced. “That’s a particularly heady brew.”

Benton nodded.

“Okay, carefully now,” he insisted.

Benton and Daley reached under the alien’s shoulders and lifted the torso up from the table so that Farber could gently pull the helmet free.

She carefully set it down at the far end of the counter beside the table. Ivanova had to wait for Farber to move out of the way before she could see the alien properly.

“Hello, mister ugly,” Benton murmured.

The alien’s skin was the colour of faded ochre. It was mottled with deep crimson blotches, some no bigger than liver spots. At first Ivanova thought they might be bruises from the impact but as one camera zoomed in on the face she saw that the marks were faintly marbled with streaks of pearl white and grey that overlapped the lighter skin.

The skin was stretched tight over lumps of bone that looked like sheets of rock that had been broken up from being dropped on top of one another. The nose was a blunt ridge. The chin jutted forward with a deep cleft that made it look, like two separate points. The mouth was thin with narrow, dark purple lips. Benton tried to prise the jaw apart.

“We’re going to have to break the jaw to get a good look inside,” he announced.

For the time being he contented himself with pulling the lips back. The teeth were pearl grey and grew irregularly from the almost black gums.

“Fierce looking little suckers,” he added, “and one with a very different view towards orthodontics.”

In his last moments of life the alien had coughed up blood with speckled the lips and dried a deep indigo on the chin.

“Get a swab of that,” he instructed Nurse Daley who reached for a testing kit behind her.

“Height is one-hundred-and-ninety-two centimetres and it weighs just under one-hundred-and-fourteen kilograms,” Benton announced, speaking toward the microphone that hung from the ceiling.

As he recorded his initial findings and observations, Ivanova looked at the helmet resting on the counter. At first she had thought it was decorative but judging from the angles displayed on the monitors it was purely functional. Separate ridges that began on the brow, just above the eyes, curved in toward the top of the forehead, overlapped and then continued out along the sides and top of the skull, building up off the sides of the skull to create two twisted horns that gradually tapered to a point as they curved back behind the head.

“Okay, lets lift him up to document this,” Benton said. They pulled the alien into an almost sitting position while the

head was turned from side to side making sure that the cameras saw both views.

“They look like horns that had been put on backwards,”

Graydon said as she stepped into the MedLab. Benton looked through the glass, considering her verdict before he helped lay the alien back down on the table.

“Lieutenant,” Ivanova said. “What’s our status?”

“We’re on course for the Gamma 7 system. We finally got through to the Mining Syndicate representative.”

“And?” Ivanova asked.

She watched Benton peel back the alien’s eyelids with his fingers. He turned the head toward the nearest camera. Both Ivanova and Graydon shifted their gaze to the monitor where the eyeball filled the screen. The eyeball was gold and flecked with crimson. A broken blood vessel had left a tiny dark indigo smudge in the upper right corner. The pupil had reduced to a tiny black dot.

“He told us that they hadn’t seen anything. Any hostile aliens that do come their way had better watch out. Apparently they’ll be tossed headfirst into the nearest active volcano. Oh, and we aren’t especially welcome there.”

“Is that what you inferred from the conversation?”

“No, he said it outright.”

Graydon watched as the pilot’s uniform was carefully cut open. The sleeves were removed first revealing elbow joints that had lumps of bone jutting out at odd angles. The glove was pulled off the existing hand revealing long jointed fingers that by comparison seemed exceptionally delicate.

“What are the sensor capabilities like on Gamma 7?”

“Pretty limited,” Graydon said. “They’re stuck on that rock, only interested in ships that bring supplies or come to take away the Quantum-40 and whatever else they’ve dug out the ground. Everything else can go straight to hell from the sound of it.”

“So the aliens could have easily passed through the system unnoticed.”

“Or stayed in hyperspace. Or not come this way at all.”

“There’s always that. Do you think we’re still on the right course?” Ivanova asked, turning away from the operation to fix her gaze on Graydon.

“We won’t know until we find out. This could all be a complete waste of time. They could have doubled back on us or taken a sharp turn into Brakiri or Descari space. But none of the other races have reported further sightings or attacks. Maybe they came, they saw, they didn’t get to conquer and decided to go straight back home.”

“And stay there? The Narn were a peaceful agrarian race until the Centauri turned up and enslaved them. If these aliens came out looking for a fight, its doubtful they’ll hang up their gloves and forget about the whole thing.”

“If we start changing course, we’ll have to get the proper authorisation to cross into the various territories.”

The alien’s abdomen was already torn open by the metal that had impaled it. Benton fired up a saw and cut open the chest. As he peeled back the layer of skin and muscle, a piece of the large lattice of bone that approximated the ribcage snapped away and he casually passed it to Nurse Daley.

He peered in at the arrangement of internal organs that were caked in the inky-black blood.

“Massive trauma to the vital organs,” he announced.

“And that’s what killed him?” Ivanova asked over the intercom.

“That’s the thing with vital organs, the clue is always in the name.”

Ivanova looked at Graydon who just shrugged.

“He’s like that with everyone,” she said.

“It’s not just me?” Ivanova asked.

“Not this time,” Graydon said, looking through the glass.

Ivanova stayed long enough to watch Benton enthusiastically poke around in the open chest cavity before the first of the organs were lifted out and weighed. She returned to the bridge to continue the waiting game. Graydon might have been right, that the attack on the Narn convoy suggested they were on the right course.

She stared long and hard at the graphic on the screen in front of her. After Gamma 7 there was the Mitoc System, and then Krish in the Cascor Commonwealth. Next came the Hyach Gerontocracy and after that the emptiness of uncharted space. She wondered how far they could keep going.

The more she looked at the screen, the more the alien attack on Babylon 5 did not make sense to her. There were far too many worlds to conquer before Epsilon Eridani. Why make Babylon 5

their target? The answer had to be there in front of her but somehow she just could not see it.

Ivanova looked around the bridge. Everyone stood quietly at their station, monitoring the progress of the Titans as it headed through hyperspace. Lieutenant Breck caught her attention. He appeared to be repeatedly keying information into his system and frowning at the results. She watched him for a moment then, spun around and turned to Berensen. He too was watching Breck with a puzzled look on his face.

“How long until we reach Gamma 7?” she asked. Berensen turned to her but it was Lieutenant Maddison who answered.

“Fifteen hours at present speed, Captain.”

She stood up and walked toward the screen. Berensen crossed the bridge to join her.

“Captain?” he asked.

“Something here doesn’t sit right,” she confided. “But I can’t figure out what it is.”

“What’s not right?” Berensen asked.

Ivanova shrugged. Perhaps not all the pieces were on the board yet, and those that were she could not fit together.

“I’ll know it when I see it,” was all she could say.

## TWENTY-SIX

Ivanova was finishing her lunch when the call came through her link.

“Captain, we’ve got a contact,” Berensen announced from the bridge.

“How many ships?” she asked.

“One.”

“One?”

“Just the one,” he confirmed.

She wiped her mouth with the napkin and headed for the bridge. The *Titans* had dropped out of hyperspace less than thirty minutes ago. Over breakfast, Ivanova had consulted with Berensen and Graydon about their next move. The representative of the mining colony at Gamma 7 had been abrupt but maybe that was just a front.

Ivanova did not doubt that if they found themselves in trouble, an Earth Alliance destroyer in the vicinity would be the first ship they would contact. The Narn convoy had likely been destroyed because they had crossed paths with the retreating aliens. In such a situation, Ivanova figured, it was a coin toss as to who fired first. The question remained, what were the aliens doing travelling in normal space? If they were hopping systems like the *Titans*, surely it would be better to



stay in hyperspace and catch up with them?

Ivanova had personally contacted Gamma 7 to enquire whether they were expecting any transports in the near future. The mining representative was humouring her, she could tell, but it was important to find the answer. The next shipment of Quantum-40

was not due for another eleven days, which meant unless the aliens decided to launch an assault on the colony itself, there should be nothing there for them.

Graydon suggested they ignore the system all together and Ivanova was inclined to agree. It was Berensen who recommended that they cover all the ground so as not to have to double back on themselves and Ivanova could see his point.

“Can we get a visual?” Ivanova asked as she entered the bridge. “I’d like to see if it had ‘bait’ painted across the hull in big letters.”

Having mulled over the idea of ignoring the Gamma 7 System altogether before rejecting it, Ivanova had hoped that they would find some evidence of the aliens. Not to break the monotony, but only to weigh favour to her theory that the aliens were not so much retreating as leading the *Titans* by the nose. It may be a paranoid fantasy on her part, but with sleep escaping her and her brain active, she had come to the possible realisation that the aliens were letting them catch up.

They had two days head start on the *Titans*. By the time they had reached the Sin’talith System, the aliens should have been long gone. But the autopsy report from Benton inferred that

the alien pilot had been less than two days. The aliens were not running. They were dawdling. What Ivanova wanted to know was why?

The screen changed to the blackness of space. Amongst the stars was a small cruiser.

“It matches the ships that attacked Babylon 5.”

“How long has it been there?”

“Unknown,” Berensen said. “When we jumped back to normal space it was initially hidden from our sensors by one of the gas giants in the system.”

“Any energy spikes?”

“Negative, Captain,” Berensen said.

“If they had a faulty fusion reactor that was slowing them down, I could probably fall for that,” Graydon muttered from her console.

Ivanova shook her head.

“No, you still wouldn’t fall for that,” she said. “So they’re just... tootling about like they’re out for a Sunday drive? How long before they reach the jump gate?”

“At there current speed, nine hours.”

“Maybe we should pull up alongside and ask which direction they’re heading?” Ivanova decided. “That would certainly save us some trouble.”

She turned to Breck and nodded. He punched a series of buttons on his console.

“This is the Earth Alliance Ship *Titans* to unidentified vessel,” he announced.

A hiss of static came back through the intercom. Through it sounds rose and fell.

“What is that?” Graydon asked.

“This is the Earth Alliance Ship *Titans* to unidentified vessel, please respond,” Breck continued. The noises grew louder. To Ivanova it sounded like a rasping clatter, unlike anything any she had heard before.

“Are we having difficulty establishing contact?” she asked.

“We have established contact,” Maddison said.

“They are Var Krelec,” a voice finally replied. “I am H’Lan. I am... an intermediary. I can translate.” The words came out slowly. Each one sounded like it was caught in his throat, as if he was fighting for breath after an asthma attack. Ivanova turned to Berensen, surprised that they had made a breakthrough.

“H’Lan, I am Captain Susan Ivanova of the EAS *Titans*,”

“*Titans Iva-no-va*,” the breathless voice announced in a way that made her wonder whether Var was the name of the alien ship and Krelec its captain.

She sat, waiting for him to continue but he said nothing else.

“We were concerned about your ship. Are you having difficulty with your propulsion drive?”

“H’Lan. Engines problem. We have... repaired.”

*My god, this is hard work*, she thought. Ivanova looked from Berensen to Graydon.

“We belong to an alliance of many different worlds and races, working in co-operation to better ourselves,” Ivanova explained. “It is our duty, once we make contact with new races, such as the Var Krelec in this instance, to see if a connection can be made to foster relations and trade.”

Ivanova rubbed her temples while she waited for a response. Berensen turned to Breck

“We accept... your invitation,” H’Lan. “We come to you in our planet ship.”

*Planet ship?* Graydon mouthed.

“Their shuttle, maybe,” Berensen whispered. Breck looked up from his console.

“They’ve broken contact,” he informed them.

“Well, that went well,” Ivanova said.

“Did they just invite themselves over?” Graydon asked incredulously.

“You know, I think they did,” Ivanova asked. “Sheridan hoped it was possible to try and make contact with them rather than simply go looking for a fight.”

“After they gave Babylon 5 a pasting?”

“He knows not to always go on first impressions.”

Ivanova climbed out of her chair and turned to Graydon.

“Ready to act the diplomat, Lieutenant?” she asked. Graydon looked stunned.

“Me?”

“You’re familiar with First Contact Protocol?” Ivanova wondered.

“Yes, but I’ve never had to put it into practice.”

“Well, now seems as good a time as any,” Ivanova said.

“The alien cruiser is launching a shuttle,” Berensen announced.

On the screen Ivanova watched a small, bulbous shape drop away from the cruiser’s underbelly.

Ivanova turned to Berensen.

“Mr Berensen, you have the bridge,” she said. “Direct them in to the main landing bay. If anything happens to us, you have my permission to unleash hell. In fact, lets make it a direct order.”

Exiting the bridge, Ivanova contacted Captain Dorland. Since the discovery of the Narn convoy, marines had been posted around the ship. By the time they reached the landing bay a whole squad of marines were waiting outside both entrances. Dorland assigned troopers Martin Lippard and Andrea Ballentine as personal protection for the two officers.

“They’ll be stationed just inside the bulkhead,” Dorland explained before Ivanova could veto the idea. “I know you want it to be strictly one-on-one but who’s to say they don’t come with bodyguards.”

“By the door,” Ivanova relented.

“I thought we were out here to kick their asses anyway,”

Dorland muttered as Ivanova and Graydon stepped into the landing bay.

The noise was also deafening. Shutters were being hurriedly brought down in front of the Starfuries to separate them from the front of the landing bay and the sound was echoing around the confined space.

“Everything sorted out in case they want to take a guided tour?”

“They’re not going to see the Starfuries for obvious reasons. Benton bagged the alien pilot. He said it was either going into storage or down to the mess hall kitchen. Rowland and Oliver have the craft stowed and Landing Bay 3 is locked down.”

“If they do want a look around they only get the edited highlights. Anything of military value gets missed off the itinerary.”

“So they’re not getting out of the hanger?”

“I’m not sure they should even be allowed in the hanger,”

she decided as the space-lock doors started to part. “It seems pretty convenient that they’re here, don’t you think?”

The shuttle resembled a bulbous, elongated version of the fighter. Ivanova was happy to see it came without the weaponry. The split at the back was more stunted. The curved wings came out of the roof and twisted down to join the side of the fuselage. Ivanova felt happy that she had agreed to Dorland’s suggestion. As the hatch slid open, the first two figures off the shuttle wore the crimson armour and tall helmets of the shock troopers that had invaded Babylon 5. The soldiers took a step forward then moved to their sides, flanking the open hatch with their backs to the hull. Both held lances with pointed glass bulbs at the tip in which bursts of flame sparked and merged. A further two soldiers followed behind them, taking two steps forward before fanning out to the side. They dropped their arms to their sides so that the base of the lances rested on the deck.

“How many do you think they have in there?” Graydon muttered, echoing Ivanova’s thoughts.

Those were the last of the honour guards. Slowly a figure descended from the shuttle. It swayed with the gait of a punchdrunk boxer just up off the canvas, and Ivanova wondered if it was used to a different gravity.

It wore a broad rust-coloured chestplate patterned with etched

symbols that appeared to be inlaid with gold. Attached to the top corners of the chestplate, a dark robe that was finely detailed around the edge was draped over shoulder pads that were shaped like the horns curving back over the alien pilot's head. Although the robe was long and flowing, hitching it up over the horns meant that it barely managed to scrape the floor. A wide sash of gold and crimson encircled its waist, covering up part of a dark environment suit that was ribbed vertically and patterned with gold and crimson embroidery that created a subliminal Y-shape running down its arms and legs. Rust-coloured knee-high boots covered the feet. The hands were gloved and running along the fingers, which were more slender than the pilots, were interwoven metal threads that caught the light.

A large metal brace, surrounded by a high collar, rested on the shoulders. On top of the brace was a large clear helmet that was faintly tear-shaped. The helmet seemed to be filled with a swirling gas. Bursts of light sparkled inside, moving almost haphazardly as if they were borne on a wind and being swirled around. As the figure moved, Ivanova saw there actually was a pattern to the motes of light. They gathered and separated almost at random, but when they joined together the lights resembled a pair of glowing eyes.

The figure that stepped out from behind its shadow looked as if it was from a different race altogether. It was short and slender to the point of emaciation, wearing plainer robes that were wrapped repeatedly around its body in an effort to give it some bulk.

The head looked almost too big for the body. Wisps of long hair the colour of straw flowed back over its head although the hairline had receded to reveal a broad forehead. Ivanova thought one side of his face was in shadow because of the way he held his head. When he turned she saw that his face had been severely burnt sometime in the past and the flesh was dark and leathery.

"Welcome aboard the EAS *Titans*, I am Captain Susan Ivanova," she said taking a step towards them.

The slender figure had positioned itself in front and to the left of the swaying alien.

"I am H'Lan," he said and nodded.

“This is my Executive Officer, Lieutenant Commander Amelia Graydon.”

“H’Lan,” she nodded.

H’Lan raised his right arm toward the alien standing behind him.

“Var Krelecz,” he explained.

“Var Krelecz,” the emissary said. As it spoke random symbols on the chestplate glowed.

Ivanova turned toward the Var Krelecz emissary who took a wavering step towards her.

“We are honoured that you accepted our invitation to come aboard,” Ivanova said.

This time a chattering noise rattled from inside the helmet, directed toward H’Lan as best Ivanova could tell. In tandem, the symbols on the breastplate were illuminated with different colours.

“You show great... humility,” H’Lan said once the emissary fell silent. He looked around to gauge their reactions at whether he had said the right word or not.

The chattering noise started again.

“And honour,” H’Lan added uncertainly.

“At least it’s not as cryptic as Vorlon,” Ivanova murmured to Graydon.

The chattering stopped immediately. The sparkles of light spun angrily around the helmet before they coalesced into two narrowing glowing eyes that fixed on Ivanova.

“Voch’Kolan?!” the emissary announced, its voice an echoing rasp.

“You know of... Vorlon?” H’Lan asked, warily.

“Good hearing,” Graydon hissed as she stepped closer to Ivanova.

“Voch’Kolan?” the emissary repeated, the rattling in its helmet growing louder and more agitated.

“You know Vorlon?” H’Lan asked again, growing more suspicious.

“I’ve encountered the Vorlon in the past, yes. The nature of our work means that we trade with numerous races,” Ivanova tried to explain.

The Var Krelec emissary ignored her. He raised his arm, tentatively reaching out into the air, as the glowing eyes shifted around the helmet, searching for something.

“Voch’Kolan?” it rattled, the symbols gleaming on its breastplate. The helmet quivered as the lights separated into tiny filaments that swirled angrily around. Ivanova heard Graydon catch her breath. She looked at the shock troop escort. Although they remained impassive throughout, she could sense that the marines standing at the bulkhead were getting itchy trigger fingers.

The lights inside the teardrop helmet slowed. Their intensity diminished. The Var Krelec emissary lowered its head. The rattling in the helmet was subdued, directed solely at H’Lan who stepped towards him and held out his arm. The emissary used it as support as he slowly turned around and headed back toward the shuttle.

“Is that it?” Graydon asked Ivanova.

“H’Lan?” Ivanova asked, but the translator ignored her. He hung his head and for a brief moment Ivanova thought she saw him shake his head.

Ivanova was about to take a step toward them when the lights in the landing bay started to flicker.

“Now what’s happening?” Ivanova said.

The room dimmed. The aliens ignored the change in the lighting.



Ivanova heard the PPG caps charging in the marine's pistols. Without turning around she stretched her hand out behind her, fingers splayed to tell them to stand down. The Var Krelecz emissary was at the steps the shuttle when the room was plunged into darkness.

"Graydon to bridge, we've got a power loss in the main landing bay. What's going on down here?" she said.

"We're registering it. No explanation yet," Berensen said over the link.

"I thought we'd got rid of this crap," Graydon growled.

"Let's just stay calm," Ivanova told Graydon. Just as she was wondering what to do the lights blinked back on.

Directly ahead of Ivanova, H'Lan was climbing up the shuttle steps. The four soldiers now fanned around him, their backs to her.

"Where's the Var Krelecz emissary?" Ivanova asked. "Did he get onboard the shuttle?"

"I didn't see," Graydon replied. She turned around to the marines. They looked just as confused.

The shuttle hatch slid shut.

"Did he get on the ship?" Ivanova asked. Graydon shrugged.

"Do you want to hold them here?" she suggested.

"And do what, search their ship?"

They felt the vibration as the shuttle's engines powered up.

"Hanger control. Open the space-lock doors," Ivanova said into her link.

Ivanova and Graydon headed toward the bulkhead. The hatch slid open and the marines waited for them to go through first. Ivanova allowed Graydon out before her. She stopped in the bulkhead, watching the shuttle gently lift up off the deck. Ivanova looked around at the Starfuries, turning to look in the empty corners of the hanger. There was a feeling that didn't sit right with her. She shook her head and stepped out of the hanger. The marines followed right behind her and the hatch slid shut.

“That could have gone better,” Graydon observed after Dorland had left with the marines.

Ivanova looked around the corridor, distracted.

“You know, the last time I had to do something like this, the ambassador for that species expected sex afterwards.”

“Oh, nasty!”

“Exactly.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

“Captain on the bridge,” Berensen announced as they returned from the hanger.

Ivanova went straight to her chair and looked at the screen.

“The shuttle has left the Titans, returning to the alien vessel,” Berensen informed her. “How did it go?”

“Well, they were here and then they left,” Graydon said. Berensen looked at Ivanova, noticed she seemed preoccupied.

“Captain?” he asked.

Ivanova watched as the shuttle circled the Var Krelec cruiser and disappeared into the hull.

“They’re Var Krelec,” she said. “That much we know.”

“Var Krelec,” Berensen repeated, glancing at Graydon. “And they’re from?”

“That didn’t come up in conversation,” Ivanova said. “Any explanation for the power loss?”

Berensen shook his head.

“The Chief is working on it but all systems appeared as normal.”

“It was a localised anomaly?”

He nodded.

“So far as we can tell.”

“The alien ship is powering up,” Graydon informed her.

“It’s moving off. Heading toward the Jump Gate.”

“Let it go, for now,” Ivanova said, her eyes fixed on the screen. “Take us on a heading of two-three-five, Mister Maddison.”

“We’re not following them?” Graydon asked.

“Not right away. Keep them within sensor range. As they get toward the Gate, alter course to intercept.”

She spun the chair to face Berensen.

“If we make it too obvious, they may not take us where they want us to go.”

“Captain?”

“We’ve been hopping through the systems, looking for these aliens and suddenly there’s one of their ships? It just seems too convenient.”

“There’s little for anyone here. Either you’re buying from the Mining Syndicate or you’ve got no business here.

“You think they were waiting for us?”

Ivanova nodded.

“Coming aboard was just a sham, wouldn’t you agree?” she asked Graydon.

“They didn’t appear to have any real interest in being here,” Graydon confirmed.

“It wouldn’t have achieved anything,” Ivanova said.

“And they weren’t too happy about the Vorlon reference.”

“Vorlons?” Berensen asked.

“Voch’Kolan, they called them,” Ivanova explained. “Maybe they had a run in with the older races some time ago.”

“Or maybe they fought for the other side in the war,”

Graydon suggested.

Ivanova nodded. The Shadows may have left for the rim but they had left many of their helpers behind.

“So now what?” Berensen asked.

She watched the ship on the monitor.

“How long until the ship reaches the Jump Gate?”

“At its present speed, seven hours now,” Graydon said.

“We give it just enough of a head start so that we’re out of its sensor range. If it jumps to hyperspace, we follow.”

“And then what?”

“Then, we see where it lead us.”

“They’re running out of road,” Ivanova said to Graydon. They sat in the Mess, neither of them hardly touching their food. Instead, Ivanova pored over a portable display, examining the planets in the remaining systems of the neutral corridor. With Berensen extending his shift and Graydon coming off earlier than usual, there was time for everyone to get some rest before what lay ahead.

“The waiting game won’t continue for much longer,” Ivanova said. They both knew that service life was made up of the boredom of routine followed by punctuated bursts of action. The time for action would come soon enough.

Ivanova yawned and rubbed her eyes as the plates were being cleared away. When Graydon suggested that she get some sleep Ivanova didn’t argue.

Before turning in, Ivanova visited the bridge one last time. The watch

shifts were changing over. Bernsen vacated her chair as she arrived. They stood before the main screen where the two officers stared at the two diverging symbols. Green for the *Titans* turning toward the mining colony, red for the Var Krelec ship heading for the Jump Gate.

“The Var Krelec has slowed its progress,” Berensen said.

“Perhaps it wants to make sure it doesn’t get too far ahead and lose us,” Ivanova replied. “Let me know if they deviate even slightly from their course.”

She looked at Berensen. For once even he seemed concerned. Turning to leave, Ivanova was surprised to see Breck still at his station, once again staring intently at his console.

“Lieutenant, you’re still here?” Ivanova asked as she leaned against the rail.

Breck’s head jerked up with a start. He had a hunted look on his face as if he had been caught red-handed.

“Captain,” he said breathlessly. “I was waiting up to see if there were any reports from the Alliance ambassadors.”

His fingers keyed a sequence on his console and Ivanova noticed a scrolling list on one of his screens blink off.

“And is there... anything from the alien ambassadors?”

Ivanova asked.

“They’re still taking their sweet time about it, which obviously means their governments have nothing out of the ordinary to report.”

“Otherwise they would be screaming for help by now.”

“Exactly. Except of course the Narn, but they seem to be taking the matter into their own hands.”

“That’s Narns for you,” Ivanova said.

“If you say so, Captain,” Breck said.

They stared at each other in silence, Ivanova interested in whatever Breck was hiding, Breck looking like he hoped that she would go away.

“After we got rid of the Shadowtech we were getting some interference on the gold channels. I just wanted to make sure everything had been sorted and we were ready.”

Ivanova did not buy his explanation for a minute. Rather than call him up on it, she simply looked him in the eye and nodded.

Heading back to her quarters, Ivanova turned and saw Breck lingering outside the bridge with the marines. He caught sight of Ivanova, looked as if there was something he wanted to discuss with her but unsure of how to broach the subject.

“Captain,” Graydon said, surprising Ivanova who quickly spun around to face her. “Still up and about?”

“I was just taking one last look at our friends’ position.”

Ivanova turned back toward the bridge and saw that Breck had gone.

“Call me the moment they stray from their course,” Ivanova said as she headed for her quarters.

Ivanova was woken by a burst of bright light that briefly washed over her. She sat up, bleary-eyed. Her hand brushed against the files she had been reviewing the night before and left on the bed. They slid off the bedspread as she shifted under the covers.

“Lights, dim” she ordered and the wall-mounted lights either side of the bed came to life. Ivanova glanced at the clock: 01:19. She had been asleep for less than two hours and wondered what had woken her up. She brushed an errant strand of hair from her face, looked around her quarters. Her jacket was slung across the back of the chair, her trousers lay in a heap on the floor beside her boots.

She brought her hand up to her mouth, to talk into the link but realised it had not been a voice that had woken her. There had been something else. Ivanova felt the same as she had back in the landing bay, realising something was not right, but not knowing what it was.

Ivanova shuffled the papers together and placed them on the shelf beside the bed. Reaching for the pages that had fallen onto the floor, she glanced at her trousers again. She had looked at them only moments ago. The difference now was the footprint pressed into the

material. There was someone else in the room with her. Now she could feel its presence. Ivanova lunged out of bed. She reached to activate her link but it was too late. It felt like hot needles stabbing into her jaw. The muscles in her cheek went into spasm as the bolts of energy jolted through her body. Her legs began to go numb but she remained upright. Something unseen was holding her up, gripping her tightly around the neck. As the next jolt of energy coursed through her the Var Krelec ambassador appeared in the room before her.

The robe had been removed. She could see that the sash was missing too. Too late, Ivanova realised that instead of an envoy they had sent an assassin. She tried to grab at him but her arms twitched uncontrollably. There was a smell of burning flesh in her nostrils from where the link had shorted out and was melting into her hand. She could feel the heat from the metal threads covering his glove against the skin of her neck. The helmet moved in closer to her face as the Var Krelec gripped her throat tighter. The glowing eyes widened, shifting from side to side as it closely examined her reaction to the jolts of pain. The layers of light flickered faster in an orgasmic rush. It was enjoying watching her suffer. The Var Krelec spun around and shoved her hard against the wall. Ivanova knew she should have been dead by now. She looked at the glowing eyes as they narrowed. It was taunting her, studying her, gauging her pain threshold. It would keep her alive long enough to understand the limits of the human physiology. When it knew what it wanted she would die. By then Ivanova suspected she might welcome it.

She tried to claw at the alien but it casually slapped her arm away with the insulated gauntlet of its free hand before a further burst of energy wrenched her head back. As her body relaxed for the shock she looked around the room. She needed something to fight the alien with but most of her meagre belongings still remained in the storage containers. Then she saw it, the one thing she needed. Somehow she had to reach it.

With what strength she had left, Ivanova flung herself at the alien. She angled to the right, hoping the creature would use the momentum to deflect her, swinging her into the wall rather than expelling more effort to counter her offensive movement. If there was one weakness left to exploit it was the Var Krelec's overconfidence.

Ivanova was thrown to her right as planned. Her head cracked against the wall but she knew at that very moment that she wasn't going to die.

Her hand grabbed for the small metal cylinder on the narrow shelf. It rested on a shallow polished mahogany stand, one she had had specially made the afternoon before leaving St. Petersburg for her appointment at Earthdome. A sudden burst of energy rippled through her arm. Her knuckles smacked against the cylinder, knocking it from its mount but she clamped her fingers tightly around the cold metal.

The glowing eyes swum to the left, growing brighter in intensity as they suddenly became interested in her acquisition. They glowed brighter as the alien sent another burst of energy coursed through her body. Ivanova felt the air jerk out of her lungs as her diaphragm contracted. As her arms jerked she cried out in rage as well as pain. A flick of her wrist activated the miniature air compressor that extended the Minbari fighting pike, the weapon of the Rangers, to its full fighting length. Two metres in length, one end of the pike snapped hard against the wall. The other end speared the alien. The energy suddenly dissipating and Ivanova felt her whole body relax. Too weak to stand, her legs gave out and she dropped to her knees. Her head cracked against the wall as she slumped to the floor. The alien towered over her. The glove that had closed tightly around her neck now hung at its side. The alien wavered then toppled over, landing hard beside her like a tree felled in the forest. The energy coursing around the glowing bowl gradually diminished after the metal pike had been driven right through the helmet. With the other end of the pike digging into the floor, the Var Krelec's head hung in the air, its neck awkwardly wrenched back from the limp body. Cracks appeared in the helmet as the energy slowly coursing around inside diminished and faded. Rolling onto her side, Ivanova pawed at the back of her hand, trying to activate her link that wasn't there. In its place the flesh was seared and she scratched at the wound, unable to comprehend that the sliver of metal had been burnt from her skin.

"This is Ivanova to security," she murmured to herself, "I need a detail in my quarters now."

Almost immediately she heard a voice calling her name. It sounded muffled and indistinct, trying to rise over a dull throbbing beat that echoed around her skull. Her head wobbled as she looked around, sucking in her breath.

"And bring a doctor with you," she added. Ivanova tried to push herself to her feet but her limbs felt spongy and unable to push themselves firmly off the floor. After a second attempt failed she lay on her side, sucking in deep breaths.



“Go ahead and let yourself in,” she said as her quarters grew darker around her.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

The thumping ache in her head subsided. The voices that were once a jumble of noises finally became more clear.

“Pulse is weak and her breathing is shallow,” Ivanova heard.

She felt a thumb gently push her eyelid open, flinched as a glaring beam of light shone directly into her eye.

“Reflexes are good,” the voice said as she jerked her head away.

Gradually Ivanova opened her eyes. She was lying in a bed in the MedLab. Nurse Farber smiled down at her.

“Doctor Benton, your patient is awake,” she said. Ivanova remembered coming around briefly on the floor of her quarters. She had looked up to find a quartet of marines standing over her. Dressed in full body armour, with their helmet visors pulled down over their faces, they pointed their PPG

rifles toward her.

“How are you feeling?” Benton asked as he appeared at her side.

“I’ve felt better,” Ivanova croaked as she slowly sat up.

“Well, I should hope so,” Benton told her as he checked her pulse.

She tentatively touched the bandage that swaddled her neck.

“Your throat is going to be sore for a while. Keep the bandage on as long as you can. It would be better if you refrained from speaking for a while, although I can’t see that happening,” Benton said as he glanced at the monitors above her head. “By the way, who’s your friend?”

Ivanova looks puzzled until Benton moved aside and she saw the twisted body of the Var Krelec emissary lying on the operating table in the Isolab. The fighting pike remained speared through the helmet, which had faded to a dull brown.

“It was a hell of a job getting him in through the door with that stick in his head.”

“Minbari fighting pike,” Ivanova said.

“Whatever you say.”

“So, how are my vitals?” she asked.

“You got pretty cooked,” Benton said.

“And that’s your expert opinion?”

“No, my expert opinion is, you’re damned lucky,” Benton replied.

Ivanova sat up. She was still wearing her silk pyjamas.

“After something like this, I’d prescribe a couple of days rest so we can observe you, but I doubt that’s going to happen.”

“You’ve got that part right,” Ivanova said. She instinctively reached to activate her link but found her right hand covered in a gel salve.

“You’re going to need a new one once the skin is healed. Maybe you should let someone else deal with your calls today,”

Benton said.

Ivanova glared at him. She swung her legs off the bed and managed to stand up. The floor was cold. She hopped on her bare feet until Nurse Farber handed her a pair of hospital slippers.

“And I said no visitors, but who the hell listens to me anyway,” Benton said.

Ivanova looked up and saw Berensen waiting by the door.

“Commander,” Ivanova said, drawing his attention away from the alien body.

“So, that’s the Var Krelec,” Berensen said.

“Tricky big bugger,” Ivanova nodded, her voice cracking.

“It had some kind of personal cloaking device Her arms ached as she tried to pull on a robe Nurse Farber had found for her and Berensen stepped forward to help her put it on. Ivanova sat back down on the bed and reached for a glass of water to sooth her dry throat.

“What’s our status?”

“Two marines are dead. They were guarding the landing bay and failed to check in. Captain Dorland found them. They looked like they had been electrocuted.”

“That would have been about right. The alien had some kind of personal cloaking device, so he could have gotten past anyone on its way to me.”

“It blew out a bulkhead on Corridor D. The fragments of the device it used are being analysed.”

“Any particular target?” Ivanova asked. Berensen shook his head.

“It just seemed to be a diversion. Damage was minimal. The rest of the ship is being checked. Graydon tried to contact you but got no response so she sent a tactical team into your quarters. Found you and our friend over there.”

“I think we can assume it’s not my friend. What about the alien ship?”

“It took off and made a run for the Jump Gate.”

“How long ago?” Ivanova asked.

“Two hours. We formed a jump point and are following it through hyperspace. I took the liberty of informing the Narns.”

“That’s good,” Ivanova said as she stood up.

“How are you?”

“She needs to be kept in for observation,” Benton called out.

“Not listening to him,” she said as they passed through the open doorway.

Ivanova left Berensen at the door to her quarters.

“I’m not sure this is the appropriate dress, I’ll be along in a minute,” Ivanova said. “And I need a new link.”

Her quarters were in disarray. There was a stain on the carpet from whatever had seeped out of the alien’s helmet after it was skewered by the pike.

Ivanova washed her face at the sink. She ran a hand through her hair and brushed away the tiny lumps of shrivelled and burnt hair that were stuck between her fingers. She carefully peeled away the bandage and examined the ugly red welts that ran under her chin and down the side of her neck.

“Thank you, Marcus,” she whispered her herself. This was the second time he had saved her life. They had found a space onboard Babylon 5 and he had happily shown her a few basic moves. It was nothing too fancy for a beginner, but enough for her to get the job done.

“Grip it firmly,” he had told her once she had the shortened pike in her hand. She had burst into fits of laughter. She remembered he blushed.

“If you’re not going to take this seriously,” he had admonished her. She had collected herself and apologises. Standing there, she was trying to wipe the smile of her face. Marcus held his arm about, his hand gripping and imaginary pike.

“Give it a firm shake, but don’t tug it,” he instructed. She collapsed into fits of laughter again.

“I’m sorry,” she said, tears running down her face. He threatened to walk out again, but she begged him to stay. Once she had got over the giggles, she had the technique down and swung it back and forth, parrying.

Ivanova finished buttoning her jacket as she stepped out into the

corridor. She was surprised to see Lieutenant Breck standing outside. He clutched a file to his chest, looking around warily as if he was concerned anyone would see him there.

“Lieutenant,” Ivanova said. She started toward the bridge then stopped when she saw that he was still rooted to the spot.

“Do you want to see me?” Ivanova asked.

Breck opened his mouth to speak but then looked back up and down the corridor, unsure of whether this was the ideal place to talk.

“Make your mind up because now really isn’t a good time,” she said.

“It’s important,” he told her.

Ivanova sighed as she walked back to the door of her quarters.

“All right. Inside,” she ordered as the hatch slid open and she stepped back to allow Breck in first.

“I think we have a problem,” Breck said.

“With Lieutenant Commander Graydon?”

Breck looked surprised by her suggestion. He shook his head

“No, sir. No. At least I don’t think so.”

“It seems to me that the two of you haven’t exactly been seeing eye to eye recently.”

It had become obvious to Ivanova that the two officers had not been on the best of terms of late. She had tried to remember when it first started. Exercising in the gym Breck would disappear once Graydon arrived and neither of them seemed to eat at the same time in the Officers Mess. On more than one occasion Ivanova had noticed the Lieutenant quickly finish his meal and take off as soon as his senior officer sat down at the table. The one time she commented on this, after Breck had almost bowled over one of the serving staff as he hurried out of the room, Graydon casually glanced over her shoulder and said “I think we received more reports from the Interstellar Alliance Ambassadors detailing recent incursions across their borders.” It was becoming the standard excuse both of them were

using to fob her off and Ivanova was not going to take it any more.

“So what’s the problem?”

Breck gingerly peeled the report away from his chest and looked down at it. Just as Ivanova thought he was about to hand it over he wrapped his arms back around it to and began pacing around the room.

“Time is a factor here Lieutenant. If there is something you have to get off your chest, I suggest you do it now.”

Breck stopped still and took a deep breath.

“Since we left the shipyard I’ve been getting odd readings on the com system. To begin with I wasn’t sure what it was so I ran diagnostic tests but they came up empty. And then, when everything started playing up, I thought it was the Shadowtech technology playing tricks with me. But after we left Babylon 5 it continued to happen.”

“What happened?”

“I continued to pick up faint echoes of unauthorised transmissions off this ship. I mean, before I thought the channels were simply shifting out of phase. But after Babylon 5 I recognised that they were actual transmissions.”

“Have you been able to isolate the com-stations being used to send the messages?”

“Not so far. It’s even possible that they were using a portable to patch into the system. Which at a stretch could be used from a Starfury flying in close proximity,” Breck explained.

“So it could be anyone amongst the crew?” Ivanova said, thinking out loud.

“That’s what I thought at first, but after Babylon 5 it became clear that these were priority communications, which only senior officers have access to.”

“Gold Channel?” Ivanova replied and Breck nodded.

“Obviously someone else could have been granted access. But they’d have to have been logged in initially. And there’s no evidence of that happening since the ship was launched.”

“Then what about before?” she asked. “Before the system went

online?”

“Already fed straight into the mainframe software? It’s more than possible,” Breck agreed. “Sort of covert operation, standard issue.”

“A hangover from the old EarthGov regime, maybe. Like whoever installed the Shadowtech but just a different department.” Ivanova suggested.

“Neither of them knowing about the other.”

“It’s not a regular, scheduled occurrence, so it’s not like they are sending standard updates. I mean they could have buried those in the crew’s outgoing vid-mails.”

“Instead it’s something important enough to risk sending immediately. Are they getting a reply?”

“Not that I can gather. At least not for every one. When the signal bounces back its usually within an hour.”

Much to Ivanova’s relief, Breck finally handed over the file. She flipped open the cover and scanned down the pages.

“This starts practically from the commencement of the training mission,” she said, astonished.

“To begin with the times are pretty irregular.”

“That’s the trouble with covert operations, they never operate to a set timetable,” Ivanova observed.

“I suppose you’re right,” Breck agreed. “But soon a pattern starts to emerge.”

He stood beside Ivanova and pointed out the times listed on the page.

“Transmission times vary between seven and eighteen hours after the event, but these were sent not long after we discovered this Shadowtech, discovered the convoy debris and the alien fighter, and came into contact with the Narn warship. After first contact we had two more transmissions in rapid succession, and then a final one only an hour ago.”

“And the two in between?” Ivanova asked.

“Heading to, and then leaving, Babylon 5.”

Ivanova sighed as she looked up from the report. Breck waited patiently with a look of abject defeat on his face.

“So who do you suspect?”

Breck shook his head.

“I’ve checked the duty rosters against the times of transmission. Not everyone can be accounted for some of the time. But no one was off duty during all the outgoing transmissions. They could have put a time delay on the outgoing message, but…”

“They need to get the information out immediately and get a response,” Ivanova agreed. “What about Graydon?”

“She was on the bridge for--”

“No,” Ivanova interrupted him, “I mean why the sudden antagonism between you two?”

“She discovered what was happening. The Lieutenant Commander suspected you and thought I was dragging my feet in identifying you as the culprit.”

“Me? Well, I suppose that makes sense.” Ivanova said.

“You’ve tried everything to track down the source?”

“Every trick I know,” Breck explained with a hangdog expression. “Whatever’s being used to camouflage the point of origin, its cutting edge technology I’m not privy to.”

He shook his head.

“So what do we do next?” Breck asked Ivanova.

“We keep this to ourselves,” she told him. “I want you to put in a call to Babylon 5.”

Breck visibly perked up at the mention of the station. His posture straightened as he listening intently.

“You need to speak to President Sheridan’s head of covert intelligence, a man named Michael Garibaldi.” Ivanova continued.



“Tell him Duck Dodgers has gone south for the winter.”

“And he’ll know what that means?” Breck asked.

“I sincerely hope not,” Ivanova confided with a smile.

“Explain to him there’s a party you have to urgently attend and you need an icebreaker to get you in on the conversation.”

“An icebreaker,” Breck repeated, trying to hide his confusion.

“He’ll know what you mean. And you’ll understand when it arrives,” Ivanova reassured him. “Then you can go to work.”

Breck nodded and turned to go. Ivanova keyed open the hatch.

“And Lieutenant Breck,” she said as they stepped into the corridor. “Contact him right now. And let me know the next time this happens.”

## TWENTY-NINE

One of the ship’s maintenance crew was waiting on the bridge to fit her with a new link. Graydon smiled when she saw Ivanova return to the bridge.

“Captain,” Graydon said.

Ivanova nodded as she sank down into her chair. One of the ship’s maintenance crew was standing to attention, waiting for her. As he fitted her with a new link, bonding it to her skin using the molecular adhesive keyed to her own DNA sequence, Ivanova looked over at Graydon.

There was a spy in their midst, reporting back to EarthForce. Graydon may have suspected Ivanova, and as an outsider coming in to take over the ship, she was the obvious suspect. Ivanova could vouch for herself, but could Graydon she wondered. What if it had been an act, haranguing Breck to deflect the suspicion away from her? If it was one of the officers, whom else did they have working for them?

“All done,” the maintenance crewman said. Out of instinct, Ivanova looked at her right hand, then quickly switched to her left where the thin square of metal was bonded to the back of her hand.

“Okay, that’s going to take some getting used to,” Ivanova smiled, looking up at Berensen beside her. The crewman saluted and left the bridge.

“What’s the situation?” Ivanova asked, turning her attention to the screen.

“The Var Krelec ship is ahead of us, on course for the Mitoc System. It’s making good speed but still making sure that it’s within our sensor range,” Berensen said.

“How far before it reaches the Jump Gate beacon?”

“Just under two hours at present speed.”

“Good,” Ivanova said, “That gives us enough time.”

She carefully rubbed her neck and looked at the screen.

“At least we know why they came aboard,” Graydon said. Ivanova nodded.

“And there’s one more thing. We were contacted by Warleader Ke’Tal,” Graydon added. “The Narn are on their way.”

In their locker rooms the Starfury pilots were calmly changing into their flight suits.

“How long before we know?” Rowland asked Ivanova. He held his helmet in his left hand and absently drummed his fingers against the visor.

“Soon. They’ve been leading us along so much. This must be where it ends. I don’t know how many we’ll be facing.”

“More than attacked Babylon 5?” Oliver asked.

“It’s likely,” she replied.

Rowland nodded, grim-faced.

“That’s good odds,” Oliver smiled.

Before they walked towards the launch bay, Ivanova looked back at pilots Tolly and Kutzov who were checking the seals on each other’s environment suits. She had been introduced to them briefly during the tour the *Titans*. Tolly was from Moscow. Kutzov came from Tula, south of the city. Once they were satisfied that all the seals were fastened they picked up their helmets and knocked their fists together.

“Stalingrad!” they murmured in unison and nodded.

They turned to the fighter bays and saw Ivanova lingering by the hatch, saluting curtly as they stepped past her and headed to their Starfuries.

Ivanova remembered hearing at the Academy how, in the last days of the Earth-Minbari War, before taking off to join the ranks of the ships that would take part in the Battle of the Line, Russian pilots would salute each other in such manner. It was not meant as an act of bravado or an idle boast. Their faces would be dour as only a Russian’s could be. Many knew that they would not be coming back. But like the Battle of Stalingrad centuries ago, they would not give up. It would be hard and it would be bloody. It was accepted that they were the last line of defence to halt the invading Minbari fleet that had swept through the solar system, but they would not surrender their homeland or their home planet without a fight. Jeffrey Sinclair had once told her that his family had been fighter pilots since the Battle of Britain. Looking back over the photo albums with Rabbi Koslov, Ivanova had discovered that a very distant relative had been a tank commander at the Battle of Kursk, almost three hundred and twenty years ago.

Ever the historian, Koslov had explained that although it was one of the shortest battles, the engagement at Kursk was still considered to be largest tank battle in history.

“Of course, warfare is different now,” he told her as they pored over the photographs.

“It was the summer of 1943,” he said, pronouncing the date very carefully. “The Nazis had unleashed their Blitzkrieg on the Soviet Red Army and nearly made it all the way to Moscow. But our infamous Russian winter set in. It had stopped the little Frenchman and would

do the same again.

“The Nazi lost two-thirds of their tanks within the first five days. By the time it was over, our victory marked the end of Germany’s offensive during the Great Patriotic War.”

Koslov tapped the photograph with his finger. The woman was short and squat, dressed in a uniform that was tight around her. Her hair was tied up in a bun and even in the faded monochrome picture the rows of medals appeared to gleam on her chest.

“So there you go,” Koslov said. “Anna Spetzroyka. Her husband was a printer in Yaroslavl. Not born to fight, but there when her country needed her.”

He shook his head and chuckled to himself.

“Somewhere there may even be a picture of her smiling.”

“I want all my pilots back,” Ivanova told Oliver as she watched the pilots being secured into their fighter cockpits and running through the pre-flight check.

“Yes sir,” he saluted.

Ivanova returned the salute.

Toward the back of the hanger Rowland was climbing up the ladder into the cockpit of his Thunderbolt Starfury.

The marines made a hole for Ivanova as she made her way to the bridge. They were dressed in full body armour, passing around assault rifles and heavy PPGs as they lowered the visors on their helmets and stood ready.

While they helped defend the ship from any enemy incursion, the Titans, Ivanova had decided would go on the offensive. With the Mitoc System devoid of life, it was an obvious staging post for the Var Krelecz. Ivanova had cursed herself for not seeing this sooner but the

steps they had taken to get here had proved that the race was hostile and could not be reasoned with. It was better to have learnt that now, before it was too late.

Ivanova had hurriedly convened a tactical briefing in the time they had left. While none of them knew for certain what lay waiting for them once they dropped back to normal space, the obvious answer was the remains of the Var Krelecz attack fleet. How large it was remained to be seen.

The Starfury squadrons would launch before they left hyperspace and follow them through the jump point, sticking close to the *Titans*. The ship would lead the assault. Depending on how far the Var Krelecz fleet was spread out in space, two of the three wings of the standard Aurora-class Starfuries would take on the enemy fighters. The remaining seven ships would stay in reserve until called upon. Staying close to the *Titans*, they

would also help the gunners destroy any breaching pods before they locked on to the hull.

The Thunderbolt fighter-bombers would divide up and attack the outer edges of the Var Krelecz fleet. *Titans* would go straight down the middle.

Ivanova took her seat on the bridge and listened as all sections of the ship reported in prior to the combat lockdown.

“The alien ship has activated the Jump Gate to the Mitoc System,” Berensen announced.

On the screen Ivanova watched a small oval of yellow light blaze in the red sky of hyperspace.

“Launch Starfuries,” Ivanova commanded. “Bring the jump engines on line.”

She had considered destroying the Jump Gate once it was activated but knew there would be hell to pay, as its destruction would affect the whole network.

On the smaller screens she watched as the Starfuries raced out of the *Titans*, accelerating hard as they manoeuvred out around the ship

before dropping back to take up position behind the large missile launchers.

“Alpha Squadron in position,” she heard Oliver say over the intercom.

“Beta Squadron in position,” Rowland said.

“Weapons systems?” Ivanova asked.

“Particle beams on line,” Graydon announced. “All missiles ready to launch.”

Ivanova had chosen not to follow the Var Krelec through the Jump Gate. The alien force could be waiting for her on the other side. Alternatively, they could have blown the gate as the *Titans* was coming through.

“Anyone want to be there when that happens?” she had asked in the briefing, looking at their faces. “Didn’t think so.”

Tactically she needed to have some distance between them and the expected fleet. The missile launchers on either side of the ship had been loaded with high yield multi-megaton warheads and she needed the longer range.

“Activate Jump Engines,” Ivanova ordered.

“Jump Engines activated, aye,” Berensen said.

“Let’s see what’s waiting for us out there,” Ivanova said as the yellow and white energy filled the monitor ahead of her.

“How many can there be?” Graydon asked as the *Titans* accelerated through the jump point.

# THIRTY

It was a massive armada of spaceships. There were not just the fighters and small cruisers, but larger warships as well. Nothing came close to the *Titans* in terms of sheer size, but the numbers were incredible. They filled the screen almost blotting out the stars.

“Not so all alone now,” Berensen said as the Var Krelec vessel they had been following approached the front of the fleet and turned back toward the *Titans*.

“I’m reading weapons signatures,” Graydon said. Ivanova could hear a faint tremor in her voice.

“All weapons ready to fire on my signal,” Ivanova said, not showing the least bit of fear. She felt angry instead, being led along by the nose to this. If the Var Krelec thought she was in the least bit intimidated by their numbers they were dead wrong. She had faced Shadows and Vorlons and the Shadow Omega vessels. Although she had not fared too well in that last engagement, she was not going to let that stop her.

“All weapons, fire on my mar--”

“They’re hailing us,” Breck interrupted.

“This is H’Lan of the Var Krelec,” the voice said over the intercom.

Ivanova looked at Graydon. The faltering voice had gone.

“Well, he sounds much more confident than before,” Ivanova said.

“You have crossed into Var Krelec sovereign territory, prepare to relinquish your vessel.”

“H’Lan, this is Captain Susan Ivanova. We thought you’d invited us,” she said. “Our mistake.”

There was silence over the intercom.

“Your little assassin didn’t quite pull it off, I’m afraid.”

“They’re weapons hot,” Graydon warned.

For a moment Ivanova imagined she saw something dark and fibrous, lit by distant starlight that shone on the rippling hull. *You don’t scare me anymore*, she thought.

“Captain?” Graydon asked.

“To hell with them. No surrender, no retreat!” She turned to Graydon. “Fire!”

The missiles poured out of the large launchers on either side of the hull. The arrogance of the Var Krelec would be their downfall. Their ships were too close together. As the front line of vessels manoeuvred to try and avoid the first incoming salvo the missiles slid past, impacting into the heart of their fleet. The sudden white hot glare of the twin particle cannons firing lit up the monitor. The beams lanced through space and tore through the front line of ships. The Var Krelec fleet broke formation. With all the movement and glare from the unleashed firepower, Ivanova could not be certain but she thought that H’Lan’s ship was one of the first to be torn in half by the particle beams.

Even operating at less than the full energy output of two million terawatts, the particle beams scythed through the ships. The fleet seemed to explode from the inside out. As the particle beams carved the fleet neatly through the middle, the pulse cannons directed their fire right and left.

“Switch the screen over to tactical,” Ivanova said as the monitors showed debris spiralling out into space.

The tactical display appeared, showing the *Titans* as a large green circle toward the bottom of the screen with smaller green circles, reduced almost to dots, representing the Starfury squadrons, moving around behind it. Further up the screen were three sizes of red circles defining the different classes of ships in the Var Krelec fleet. Spread out, they formed a large crescent that advanced on the *Titans* in a pincer movement.

“Starfuries, take out the ships trying to flank us,”

Ivanova said as she felt the ship buffet from the returning fire.

“Beta squadron, you are free to engage the enemy,” Berensen



announced over the intercom. “Alpha squadron wings provide cover.”

The larger Thunderbolt Starfuries broke off from the cover of the Titans, split into two wings they rocketed toward the Var Krelecz cruisers. Flying in close formation, their quartet of pulse cannons were already firing as they moved in on the designated targets. Plasma bolts arced across the blackness of space as the bomber locked on to the cruisers. Missiles away, they arced up and around, ready for a second pass as the one-man Aurora Starfuries watching over them engaged the Var Krelecz fighters trying to force them within range of the guns on the larger ships.

A Var Krelecz fighter on his tail, Lieutenant Oliver angled his ship to avoid the streaks of plasma fire. With the enemy fighter gaining on him he hit the manoeuvring thrusters, spinning the Starfury around before firing a second, longer burst that sent his ship arcing up over the approaching alien vessel. His cockpit facing down at the alien fighter as it passed underneath him, once it filled his targeting computer, he fired a burst from the plasma cannons that blew the Var Krelecz ship to pieces.

Ivanova watched red dots blink off the tactical display as the smaller coloured dots merged on the fringes of the alien fleet, swarming around each other like angry insects. They steered clear of the central mass of ships that were flashing off the screen as the second barrage of missiles tore through the Var Krelecz fleet. Even with all the destruction inflicted upon them the numbers were still overwhelming.

“Var Krelecz ships are closing,” Berensen announced. Ivanova watched as the red circles gradually moved down the screen, closing in on the *Titans*.

“At this distance, the armoury is switching to low-yield missiles,” he told Ivanova.

It was obviously the Var Krelecz’s sole remaining tactic. Further away from the *Titans*, the particle beams and multimegaton missiles were blowing apart by. Up close, where the larger weapons onboard were less effective, they had a better chance of inflicting more damage on the warship.

“Back us up,” Ivanova ordered. “Don’t let them get within an effective range.”

As the *Titans* put some distance between it and the armada, the Var Krelec ships pushed closer towards them, coming from the sides to keep out of the forward firing solution. A vibration shuddered through the deck and Ivanova gripped the arms of the chair.

“We’ve lost a heavy pulse cannon turret,” Berensen said. Behind her Ivanova could hear Graydon order damage control teams to deal with the situation.

One of the external camera views flashed up on a secondary monitor showing a burning crater at the front of the *Titans*, pock-marking the hull where the turret had been.

“Jump points opening!” Berensen announced. “Narn signatures!”

The *N’Tek* accelerated through the jump point and swooped over the *Titans*. The heavy particle cannons were firing as soon as it appeared from hyperspace, targeting the first Var Krelec cruiser that came into its targeting display. Behind it were a trio of smaller Th’Nor Class Cruisers. They looked ancient. The primary capital ships of the Narn regime, the assault cruisers had been mothballed in favour of the sturdier G’Quan heavy cruisers. With their capital ships decimated by the Centauri, the Narn had had to cannibalise what remained and returned to the more simpler, modular design in an effort to rebuild their fleet.

The three ships held formation, their plasma cannons firing into the Var Krelec armada as they were overtaken by a wave of Frazi heavy fighters that raced into the fray, blithely ignoring the firepower unleashed by the *Titans*. Looking at the screen Ivanova wondered if the Narn pilots had mistaken the need for revenge with a death wish. The Frazi fighters all but rammed the Var Krelec ships, skimming over their hulls and blasting away with the forward particle cannons as the enemy guns desperately tried to get a lock on them. The manoeuvre did not work for all the Narn ships. The Var Krelec fighters rallied and blew them out of the stars. A damaged Frazi fighter spiralled down and crashed into a Var Krelec cruiser setting off a chain reaction that tore the ship apart. Another veered away from a strafing run over its target and flew into one of the *Titans’* missiles before it could hit the target.

Watching the tactical display, Ivanova tried to decide whether the appearance of the Narn was a help or a hindrance. Just as many green lights were blinking out as red ones. Already one of the Th’Nor

cruisers was going down in flames. A large hole had been gouged out of the rear of the vessel close to the fusion reactor. Manoeuvring on thrusters alone, the ship was still firing a steady stream of fusion missiles into the Var Krelec fleet, stopping one side of the armada from outflanking the *Titans*.

“Incoming breaching pods,” Graydon called out.

“How many?” Ivanova asked.

“I’ve got seven contacts, two on the port side, five to starboard.”

“Advise the gunners to take the pods out if they enter their line of fire,” Ivanova ordered. “Bring up the Starfury wing.”

“Aye sir,” Graydon replied as she keyed the intercom. “This is the bridge to all batteries. We have breaching pods moving on an intercept course. Take them out if they enter your firing line.”

Turrets on the hull of the *Titans* swivelled around as their sensors locked on to the heat signatures from the breaching pod thrusters. Continuous bursts of fire from the plasma cannons lanced through the blackness of space. The first two pods closest to the *Titans* were torn apart before they could manoeuvre, exploding in tiny balls of fire. The remaining breaching pods punched their attitude thrusters, spiralling around as they shot forward to evade the deadly fire from one projective AA placement only to be targeted by another.

The seven Aurora Starfuries that had been kept in reserve to protect the *Titans* in such an eventuality moved away from the rear of the ship and targeted the remaining pods coming in from the starboard side.

“Second wave incoming,” Graydon announced before they could even pause for breath.

“How many this time?” Ivanova asked.

“Too many. Twenty at least. They’re coming in from all angles.”

“That’s pretty ambitious of them,” Ivanova said. “Where are they projected to latch on?”

“Deck’s E and G on the port side. They’re heading for the armoury and Damage Control. Starboard is angling for the Engineering compartment and the hanger bays. And here to the bridge.”

“Commander Dorland, this is the Captain,” Ivanova announced over her link. “We have breaching pods zeroing in on the ship. Projected targets are Deck E armoury, Damage Control on G and Engineering.”

She looked at the officers around her. *That’s too precise*, she thought. It was as if the aliens knew exactly where to strike.

Lieutenant Lindsey Garland led his marine detachment thundered down the corridors to the side of the landing bays.

“Compartment F-43,” he heard in his headset. Rifles raised, they took the positions, hunkered down against the bulkheads. With the lockdown in place they had an eighty metre killing zone. The narrowness of the corridors would allow them to concentrate their fire on the hatch the alien shock troopers had to come through.

They heard the dull echo as the breaching pod, having got through the spread of cannon fire, landed hard against the hull of the ship. Garland gestured for his first team to follow him forward. As they edged into the corridor, ready to face the enemy, the bulkhead door slid shut behind them.

Garland turned as he heard the men locked out pounding on the door. Before he could respond there was a loud explosion as the hatch to the compartment was blown out. His ears rang and he ducked down as a fireball briefly raged across the ceiling.

“This is Garland, open the bulkhead leading to F-43,” he shouted into his link as the first of the Var Krelecz shock troopers appeared.

Even with only five men at his side, the marines were trained well enough to shoot down the first of the shock troopers dressed in their dark crimson body armour. PPG bursts cracked against the tall, narrow helmets. As the bodies collapsed onto the deck, more kept coming.

Trooper Marzac was the first to fall, blown back against the bulkhead door. With the Var Krelecz using their fallen comrades as cover, Garland felt more exposed than ever before. He continued firing at the mass of red until his aim was interrupted by Howe tumbling back against him, his visor split open by fire from the Var Krelecz’s rifles.

A burst of fire hit Garland’s hand. Screaming as the bones in his hand were blown out through the skin of his palm and imbedded in his glove, he leant back against the wall, taking deep breaths as the sounds of gunfire suddenly abated. Miller and Klauson were also dead,

one lying over the other. Garland scrambled for a weapon as one of the shock troopers walked towards him. The Var Krelec stood over Garland, the dark eyeslits in the helmet staring down at him, as it reached behind its back and produced two crimson metal discs. The alien pressed one against the bulkhead door, the other against the wall to the next compartment.

Garland looked up at the discs. A gold light spun around in a narrow grove on the disc as a high-pitched whine grew. From compartment F-43 he heard what sounded like a loud cough. Suddenly the dead Var Krelec shock troopers lifted off the ground as they were pulled back into the compartment. The bodies of the marines around him were dragged toward them and then Garland felt himself being wrenched after them. It all became clear to him. The Var Krelec had detached the breaching pod from its landing site. Before he was flung into the compartment and out into space, Garland heard the whine from the discs reach an ear-splitting intensity.

Since the fighting had started the marine detachment cut off by the bulkhead door had tried to override the system and get the hatch open. Marine Guy Broom had listened to the PPG fire as it grew in strength before eventually tailing off.

“Get this bulkhead open,” Broom shouted angrily. From the other side of the bulkhead he felt an unusual vibration and a sound that rose in pitch.

“What the hell is that?” Broom asked just before the countdown expired and the hatch exploded in his face.

“Hull breach on Deck F,” Graydon called out. “Damage control teams are on the way.”

She looked at the graphics of the Titans on the wall. A red block close to the hanger bays was flashing a warning hazard.

“The breaching pod blew itself up,” she said checking the data that scrolled up her console screen. “Damage control teams are on their way to seal the compartments.”

“I want sensor readings on all the breaching pods,” Ivanova said, worried by the turn of events.

“Four pods incoming. Only our life signs,” Berensen replied

“On each?”

“In total,” Berensen announced ashen-faced.

“Starfury wing, take out all breaching pods. They’re using them as suicide bombs against us.”

The tactical display zoomed in on the *Titans* and the red dots zeroing in on the ship.

“Two coming in amidships,” Graydon said. “They’re heading for the missile pods.”

“Launch all remaining missiles,” Ivanova ordered, “and stop the armoury from reloading the silos. If they blow the missile launchers it’ll break the ship in half.”

“Missiles away,” Graydon said. “The armoury has discontinued rearming.”

The final missiles slid from their silos just before the breaching pod latched on to the starboard launcher and exploded. The shockwave rippled through the *Titans*. On the bridge Ivanova heard a deep groan as the superstructure absorbed the impact. On the tactical display five lights winked out as the short-range pulse plasma turrets took out the breaching pods. The Detonations so close to the ship, they felt the shockwaves buffeting them on either side.

“Have Beta squadron locate and take out the support carriers,” Ivanova ordered.

“Second wave of breaching pods,” Berensen said. “Life signs confirmed, they’ve got troops onboard.”

“Where are they targeting?”

Berensen looked up, wide-eyed.

“Here. They’re heading for the bridge.”

THIRTY-ONE

Alexi Kutzov angled his Starfury toward the breaching pod as it headed toward the *Titans*. Before he could fire, a Frazi fighter

suddenly flashed past his cockpit. As it banked hard, plasma bursts from a Var Krelec fighter tore through the Narn ship, blasting it apart.

Kutzov spun the Starfury, raking the enemy ship with his plasma cannons, blowing it to pieces. Debris rained against his Starfury damaging the starboard thrusters. Fighting to control his ship he increased the power to the port thrusters, fighting the building G-forces as he zeroed in on the breaching pod. The proximity alert sounded in his ears. He reached for the lever to eject the cockpit from the X-foil frame as the Starfury spiralled into the pod. The fuel cells ruptured and ignited,

spinning the Starfury around moments before the cockpit was released. Kutzov cursed softly as, instead of being shot out into space he was hurled toward the side of the *Titans*. Waiting in the accessway, the marines heard the dull thud as the cockpit impacted against the hull plating. Weapons raised they stood poised to go into battle. Visors were pulled down to shield their eyes as the aliens blasted their way onto the ship. Marine Sergeant Daniel Marber lipped his dry lips. The stock of the rifle dug into his shoulder as he silently counted down, waiting for the Var Krelec shock troopers to come blasting through the wall. Around him marines shifted from one foot to another, eager to get into the fight.

“Sarge, what’s going on?” a voice close behind him asked.

Ivanova stared intently at the tactical display. With the last of the Var Krelec suicide pods dealt with it flashed back to an overview of the whole battle. There were a lot less red dots but the *Titans* was taking hits. The hull had been compromised more times than she would have liked but the damage control teams had contained the atmosphere loss and extinguished the fires quickly and effectively so as not to allow them to cause any long term structural damage. The hours of simulated drills appeared to have paid off.

Dorland’s marines were holding their own against the shock troopers that had boarded the ship. Two of the breaching pods heading for the bridge had made it through the curtain of fire from the AA placements and latched on to the hull like deadly parasites.

Ivanova had heard the marine reinforcements run past the entrance to the bridge to back up the squad already on guard. She listened out for the dull thump, which came earlier than she expected. The nearest

hatched had been shut and sealed but Ivanova knew, if they were determined to get to the bridge, they would find a way. In the last couple of minutes the bursts of PPG

bursts and returning fire had grown louder.

“What we need here are some Gaim thermo-nuclear bombs,”

Ivanova said.

“I can check the armoury, Captain. But I’m guessing I’ll come up empty,” Berensen replied.

“Damn, because I think they could do with a couple down the hall.”

“The Narn cruiser is taking fire,” Breck said. On the monitor Ivanova watched as a sustained burst of plasma fire from the Var Krelec cruisers sliced through the leading edge of the *N’Tek*.

“Lieutenant Maddison, take us in close to give the Narn ship cover,” Ivanova ordered.

“How close?” Graydon asked her.

“Just try not to scrape the paintwork,” Ivanova replied. Ivanova felt a vibration shudder through the deckplates as the Titans advanced into what remained of the Var Krelec armada. Space around them was littered with debris from the Var Krelec cruisers and fighters. She saw the broken remains of

Starfuries wheel past the external cameras feeding to the monitors. A Thunderbolt with two of its foils sheared off spun lazily into view. The cockpit had been blown open when the pilots ejected. Leaking plasma from the pulse cannons sparked leaving a glowing trail that curled around like a cat’s tail. Behind it one of the Th’Nor cruisers idled listlessly, venting its atmosphere. The red symbols that swarmed around the green circle of the *Titans* had gradually diminished but there was still a long way to go. On the screens the emptiness of space was a barely visible backdrop to the fiery criss-crossing of plasma weapons bursts. A Var Krelec cruiser rose up into view firing directly at the *Titans* as the particle beams sliced through the bow. Ivanova grabbed the armrests of her chair as the ship was buffeted by the close-range assault.

“Direct hit amidships,” Commander William Berensen announced calmly as sparks showered down across his console. An acrid smell



drifted across the bridge. Ivanova listened as the exchange of small arms fire that echoed down the corridor and into the bridge grew louder.

Relay systems in the walls ruptured behind her and Ivanova turned to see Lieutenant Maddison throw his hands up to cover his face as the console in front of him overloaded.

“Damage to the navigational system, unable to take evasive action!” he called out as he managed to avoid the full brunt of the explosion. He tilted his head back as blood ran down the side of his temple from a gash in his scalp.

Even if they were not shielding the Narn ship, it was now impossible to make a tactical withdraw and put enough space between the *Titans* and the enemy fleet so that the port missile launch could be brought back online, Ivanova realised. All they could do was stand their ground and fight. On the screen she saw the Var Krelec cruisers were making an effort to regroup and concentrate their fire on the *Titans*.

“Full power to the forward batteries,” Ivanova ordered.

“Punch a hole through their hearts!”

“Particle beams, retargeting,” Berensen said. “Firing!”

The monitor flared white as the full force of the beams ripped through the enemy ships just at the bow of the *N'Tek* was torn open and splintered into a million pieces.

“Narn heavy cruiser disabled,” Graydon announced, grabbing on to the railing as the ship was rocked again by incoming fire.

“Jump points opening!” she called out, looking back at her console.

“Where?” Ivanova asked, unable to see anything on the monitors.

“Directly behind them,” Graydon said, her voice wavering.

“It looks like reinforcements.”

A multitude of jump points flowered open in space. So close together, they resembled a crown above the Var Krelec armada. In that moment Ivanova admitted to herself that they had been overconfident,

trusting in the vast weapons of the *Titans*. Now

there would be too many ships to hold them back and it would be the end of them.

Through the commotion of the battle she heard what sounded like rapturous singing inside her head. It was the Vorlon ship calling out, not just to her but what was out there, coming out of hyperspace.

Ivanova choked back tears of joy as she realised the ships were not Var KrelecZ but White Stars. Light gleamed across their graceful contoured hulls as they sped to engage the enemy.

“I think we’re going to be okay,” Ivanova announced as she watched the ships sweep down over the Var KrelecZ cruisers, neatly carving through their hulls with the forward-mounted discharge beams.

There must have been almost two dozen ships in total. They swept down over the alien fleet and flashed past the *Titans*, before braking hard and spinning back around for another pass. As they finished their second attack run, red lights blinked off the screen in rapid succession.

“What are they?” Graydon coughed.

“It’s the White Star fleet of the Anla’shok,” Ivanova announced. “It’s the Rangers.”

The dead were laid out on the deck of the landing bay. Most of them were marines. They had stood their ground, not letting the Var KrelecZ shock troopers reach any vital parts of the ship. Ivanova saw Dorland walking quietly amongst the rows of the dead, his head bowed. His emotions were on the surface, she could see. A gruff commander he may have been, but this time it was personal. These were his men. He had trained them, fought along side them.

He looked up and saw her walking towards him.

“Twenty-seven dead. Thirty-one injured,” he said. Ivanova nodded.

“They fought well,” Ivanova said, not knowing what else to say. Dorland nodded solemnly.

Ivanova looked over the bodies and across the bay to where Berensen was standing, looking at the row of nine helmets that represented the Starfury pilots lost in the battle. She had already spoken briefly with

Oliver who had looked dazed. Four other pilots had ejected and been picked up. Two of them, including Rowland had broken bones and were being treated in the MedLab.

There were eleven general crewmembers that had been killed. Amongst them was Harriet Crawley who had joined the marines guarding the bridge.

“She was a good officer,” Dorland said. “Keen as mustard. Sergeant Bisley said she just stuck a helmet on her head, grabbed a rifle off the deck and started firing as the Var Krelecz troopers orchestrated a counter attack. She didn’t have any armour, didn’t think about herself. She knew it was all about the man fighting next to you.”

He cleared his throat and leant forward, brushing the hair from her forehead.

“She was a good soldier,” Dorland nodded as he moved on. Ivanova looked over at the body next to her and was surprised to see it was Wynant. She squatted down beside him. The overhead lights shone directly down on him and she thought about the sunlight he missed so much. Gently she turned his head away to examine the side of his face and neck was burnt and there was a blackened depression on the edge of his temple.

“What’s General Lefcourt’s aide doing here?” Graydon asked, looking over Ivanova’s shoulder.

“What are you talking about?” Ivanova said. “This is Lieutenant Kyle Wynant. He met me in Geneva.”

She stood up, trying to figure out why Graydon looked so puzzled.

“You sent him to escort me to the *Titans* from EarthDome.”

“I was supposed to meet you in Geneva,” Graydon said, wondering why Ivanova now looked confused. “We were busy working around the clock to get the ship ready on time and there was difficulty arranging a transport. I got a message from EarthForce saying they would send an aide to accompany you. It seemed irregular, but I... followed orders.”

Ivanova looked around for Berensen. He wasn’t there. She raised her right hand to activated her link, cursed when she remembered she had to switch hands.

“Ivanova to Lieutenant Breck.”

“What’s going on?” Graydon asked, but Ivanova ignored her.

“Breck here, Captain.”

“Is the icebreaker up and ready?”

“It’s all installed,” Breck said.

“Stand by. I don’t want the message, but the location. Once you’ve pinpointed the source kill all outgoing transmissions.”

“Confirmed.”

Ivanova pushed past Graydon and headed out of the launch bay. She ran down the corridors heading deep into the *Titans*, waiting for the call.

*Come on*, she thought. Her cheeks felt hot. Her eyes welled up with anger. This was supposed to be a clean start, but they were not going to let her forget.

“E Deck,” Breck eventually told her. “E-87.”

Ivanova ran, pushing her way past crewmen. She wanted Dorland with her, a full squad of armed marines. Instead Ivanova knew she had to do this for herself.

She checked the numbers on the hatches, trying to orient herself. She was close to the armoury that much was sure. There were scorch marks from PPG blasts on the walls, a red Var Krelec helmet on the floor and the bodies of two shock troopers rolled against the side of the corridor, their weapons left discarded on the deck.

Hatches were open and she looked in at the rows of empty bunks to accommodate the hundreds of marines the *Titans* would carry if they were going to war. This was why it felt unfamiliar. She had not needed to come down to this part of the ship. No one needed to be down here. It was the ideal place to hide a stowaway.

A hatch opened ahead of her. She could see the light spill out into the corridor, suddenly blocked by a silhouette. Ivanova ran forward, fist raised she lashed out, caught the figure square on the chin. The person fell backwards and Ivanova tumbled in after him.

## THIRTY-TWO

The room smelt of stale sweat, of someone locked up for too long. There was a small cot and a tiny cubicle with minimal washing facilities. Wrappers from basic rations littered the floor. Wynant had come on board and this is where he had been, sealed up inside, waiting for inter-ship communications to be relayed to him that he had dutifully passed on through Gold Channels.

She tried to make the connection between the shy young man who had talked about standing in sunshine and the pride of his parents. That had been an act. It reminded her of Talia Winters on Babylon 5, the resident commercial telepath whose whole life was revealed to be a lie when she was exposed as a sleeper agent.

“Wynant was your man,” Ivanova said.

Her hands were around the throat of the person sprawled on the floor, knees pressed firmly into his stomach.

“He was a rush job. We didn’t think he was going to work out. The original agent who signed up was killed in a shuttle accident a week before you took command. ‘Wynant’ was just some schlub pulled out of the Academy and programmed as best we could in the time we had left.”

“And for his troubles he was locked up here, sending your reports while you stood on the bridge, free from suspicion.”

“He understood the meaning of duty.”

“Duty?” Ivanova said, incredulously. “What duty?”

She pulled his head up, smacked it back hard against the deck.

“Receiving instructions that endangered my ship and the lives of everyone on board. Why?”

“Because the Generals who wanted to see you rewarded won out. You got the ship. So we had to turn your reward against you. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

There was not enough room to swing a proper punch but Ivanova managed to crack him across the chin before pushing herself away and standing back.

"This was all just to get back at me?" Ivanova growled. Berensen pulled himself up to his knees. He coughed blood. A ruby rivulet of blood ran down his chin. He wiped it away with the back of his hand and briefly looked up at Ivanova with unmasked hatred.

"Can you think of a better reason?" he said.

"You wanted me to fail."

Regaining his composure, Berensen stared blankly up at her.

"Who wanted me to fail?" Ivanova asked.

"Him. Her. They."

"Who are they?" she growled.

"You expect me to give you their names?" Berensen said. "Or just their ranks and serial numbers? They're higher up the chain of command than you'll ever get."

He grinned when he saw Ivanova's stunned expression.

"And that's just in EarthForce. Then there's EarthGov and the Psi Corps. And the Cops," Berensen explained. "They haven't forgotten you. They'll never forget. They want you so bad they can taste it."

He basked in the silence. Then his right eyelid flickered involuntarily and the muscles under the eye twitched. His eyes narrowed as he looked Ivanova square in the face, studying her expression. A thin smile gradually spread across his face.

"So that's how you really discovered the Shadowtech? Well, it looks like we've all got our dirty little secrets," Berensen said. "You can knock all you want but I'm not letting you in. I've been through the programme and you don't have the training to get inside, bitch. And wait until they hear about this back home. Your next command will be from a jar of formalin."

The frown faded from Ivanova's face as the realisation sunk in.

"I guess, I'll have to try a different approach," she told Berensen. Standing over him she clenched her fist and slugged him again, snapping his head back.

She pulled a PPG from the holster at the base of her spine, pointed the

pistol at Berensen.

“This will get inside,” she explained.

Berensen looked her in the eyes. His calm expression didn't change as he raised himself up on his haunches, lifting his head enough so that his chin nuzzled the PPG before he dropped forward and pressed his forehead hard against the short barrel of the pistol.

“Knock, knock!” he shouted.

It wasn't what Ivanova expected. Berensen looked up from under his brow and saw that. Instantly he used her surprise to his advantage, jerking his head back as his arm swung hard around. Ivanova's finger jerked on the trigger as her arm was knocked against her chest. The energy burst went wide. He clawed at the weapon. As it slipped from her grip, Ivanova grabbed it like a stone in the palm of her hand and smashed the flat of the weapon against Berensen's temple. The force of the impact split the skin below the hairline and blood ran into his eye. He stumbled backwards, head rolling from side to side.

“And the Var Krelec?”

“They were the Shadows little helpers from long ago and far away who came back to do their masters' bidding. Except they were a little late and found the Shadows gone and new masters.”

“Which was why they attacked Babylon 5?” Ivanova asked.

“That was just the bait, to begin with. Although we hoped they would destroy the station, but their force obviously wasn't sufficiently strong enough.”

“So striking at the Gaim first was a ruse so it wouldn't look like Babylon 5 was the main target.”

“The Gaim? *We* could stomp on those little bugs and be home in time for breakfast. Just another puppet race for the Minbari to tug the strings of.”

Berensen spat blood on the floor.

“They wanted Sheridan discredited on Earth. He tried to take down everything we had done and gets a promotion for his troubles? We had Minbari warships in Earth orbit! If he wants to stay out amongst

the aliens he can. You can all stay out there. We don't want you back. We don't want you in our uniform. You're not part of us anymore."

"That's the first thing you've said that I agree with,"

Ivanova said.

She leant against the wall, lowering the weapon. Berensen suddenly lunged at her. He knocked the PPG from her hand and grabbed a fistful of hair. Yanking it toward him, he shifted his weight and slammed her head hard against the wall.

"I'll be sure to put in my report that the Captain died a foolish death," Berensen spat. "Who knew there was one Var Krelec trooper still roaming the ship? How unlucky is that?"

As he tugged at her again, a plasma burst split the silence. Berensen screamed as the concentrated discharge shattered the bones in his hand.

He stumbled away from Ivanova as they both turned, shocked to see Graydon standing in the doorway, the Var Krelec weapon pointed at Berensen.

"Captain," Graydon said to the surprised Ivanova, "you really shouldn't run off like that when the ship isn't secure."

"Lieutenant Commander," Ivanova said.

Berensen screamed with rage. He threw himself at the door. A second shot echoed loudly in the room and he fell face down on the deck, his broken, outstretched hand landing on the tip of Graydon's boot.

"Commander," Graydon corrected her.

Ivanova leant against the wall, breathing deeply as Graydon prodded Berensen's body with her foot.

"How long have you known?" Ivanova finally asked.

"I suspected him for a while now," Graydon replied. "Few people aboard had authorisation or access to make unlogged Gold Channel transmissions. By process of elimination, I simply narrowed it down, without such unorthodox methods."

"And you didn't say anything?" she said incredulously. Graydon shrugged.



“Like you said, it takes a while to trust someone.”

“I’m glad you’re a fast learner,” Ivanova told her. “How much did you hear?”

“Most of it,” Graydon replied. She turned and looked at Ivanova. “Except the parts that didn’t concern me.”

Ivanova nodded.

“There was a time when I thought it was you,” Ivanova admitted.

“I didn’t doubt it,” Graydon replied.

“But then I discounted you because you don’t hide your feelings.”

“He’ll have told them everything. About the trip to Babylon 5, everything,” Graydon said.

“I don’t expect EarthForce would want it made public. Even if they know I know, they’ll also expect that the President of the Interstellar Alliance knows. And he’s sitting on my side of the table.”

Graydon dropped the weapon on the floor beside Brensen. She looked at the two bodies of the Var Krelecz shock troopers outside in the corridor.

“Well, I’ve got to report Mister Berensen’s unfortunate demise. Meanwhile, there’s someone waiting to see you.”

The Ranger stood waiting the bridge. He had light blond hair swept back over his forehead and a neat goatee. The long brown robes swayed as he turned, hearing Ivanova approach. Light from the screens was reflected in the polished Isil’Zha set in his pin.

“Ranger Edwin Ambrose,” he said bowing.

“Captain Susan Ivanova,” she replied, returning the greeting. “Thank you for your help here.”

“Entil’zha informed us of your quest. We requested to offer assistance if it was required.”

“It was very much required,” Ivanova said.

“We will always be at your service,” Ambrose told her.

“And I will always be in your debt,” Ivanova replied. “For Marcus.”

Ambrose put his fist to his heart.

“Marcus Cole lives on inside of you,” he explained. “We live for the One, we die for the One.”

Ambrose bowed before her.

The bridge crew watched in silence as the Ranger finally straightened and nodded to Ivanova.

“I will take my leave of you now,” he said.

Ivanova sat down in the Captain’s chair. She watched on the viewscreen as the formation of White Stars turned as one. A Jump Gate blossomed ahead of them and the ships darted into hyperspace.

She rested her chin on her hand, looked around at the damaged consoles, the dissipating smoke drifting languidly through the bridge. The crew had turned away from the screen and were back at work, sizing up the damage.

“Thank you everyone,” Ivanova said.

Heads turned towards her. There were one or two smiles.

“I guess that concludes the practical part of the training exercise,” Graydon ventured.

Ivanova smiled.

“The first stage at the very least. How would you evaluate their performance?”

“More than adequate,” Graydon declared.

Ivanova looked around at the faces, blackened and bloodied but not bowed.

“Very much more than adequate,” she declared.

“Listen to the wisdom of an old man,” her father had once implored

her when, as a child, she truculently refused to accept his line of reasoning. All these years later she couldn't remember what had prompted this, but the words still rang in his head.

As the first of the First Ones, Lorien certainly fitted the category of an old man. As they had sat together aboard the White Star, waiting for the ancient reinforcements that would aid the alien armada in the final showdown between the Vorlons and Shadows, the alien had imparted his own special wisdom.

“Only those whose lives are brief can imagine that love is eternal,” he had told her. “You should embrace that remarkable illusion. It may be the greatest gift your race has ever received.”

Ivanova knew she should have shown Marcus that love. He had stood at her side and fought alongside her. What had stopped her, quite simply, was the pain of past relationships that had ended badly. She did not want to repeat the mistakes. She mulled over Lorien's words. For the first time Ivanova realised that, in his wisdom, what Lorien had suggested was that she had to love herself first before she could love anyone else. She wondered how much to tell Sheridan. The Alliance was still new and fragile. She wondered whether to wait until it was stronger. There was time to consider what would go in the report. There was a lot of time for everything.

Ivanova looked around at her crew. One thing that saddened her after leaving Babylon 5 once the Shadowtech had been purged from her ship was that she had not got to see G'Kar while she was onboard.

She would have liked to have told him that in the end, being amongst the humans was not so bad after all.

The End