

5 BABYLON

HIDDEN AGENDAS



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Hidden Agendas

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Captain Susan Ivanova watched as the familiar image of Babylon 5 filled the viewscreen of the Titans, one of the first Warlock class destroyers to come off the assembly line. The command deck screen filled most of one wall, with every imaginable readout and scanner system.

Her first officer, Commander William Berensen, looked up from his console. His voice was sharp, clear, efficient. "Establishing contact, Captain."

"Put it on screen, Commander."

A moment later, Sheridan President Sheridan, she reminded herself, appeared on screen. He had grayed a bit, the result of his experiences during the recent Earth Civil War, but the smile was classic John.

"Susan, this is a hell of a surprise," he said. "I didn't think we'd see you again for some time."

"I'm like a bad penny, I show up whenever no one's looking for me."

He laughed. "Believe me, I know. Even so, we usually get some advance warning whenever a warship decides to stop over."

"I'm keeping a low profile." She smiled thinly, hoping he would get the message from her tone of voice and stop asking questions that could be difficult for her right now. *No, John, I didn't file a flight plan with Earth Central, they don't know I'm here, and I'd really rather not have to say that in front of the crew.*

His expression changed subtly, enough for her to decide he'd figured it out. "All right, well, you're more than welcome to come aboard. I'll have Captain Lochley clear your shuttle for docking "

"Actually, Mr. President, I was hoping you could come aboard here." She looked up to see his expression going from bemused to puzzled. "I... just thought that, since you've never been aboard a Warlock

class destroyer before, you might welcome the opportunity to check her out."

"Of course," he said, taking a moment to process the request. He would know that she wouldn't waste his time with a ship tour unless there was something more important going on. That was the benefit of having gone through war and pain and suffering with friends: after a while, you know each other under the skin as well as you know yourself.

"All right," he said at last, I accept your invitation. Stand by, I'm coming aboard."

The signal blipped off, and Susan realized her muscles were so tense that they hurt. *At least he got the message, she thought. He'll be here soon, and then I'll know one way or the other if I have a big problem on my hands.*

Susan waited in the pressurized central landing bay as Sheridan's shuttle moved through the space locks, finally coming to rest in the main secure bay. There was a hiss of equalizing air, then the shuttle door popped open, and Sheridan appeared in the opening. He nodded to her as he stepped down the steps and stopped just before reaching the deck. He looked down, almost as if he couldn't figure out why he had stopped, why he felt reluctant to step onto the flight deck.

"You okay?" Susan asked.

"Yeah... fine," he said, "just had... an odd feeling, that's all."

"What kind of feeling?"

"Like someone walked over my grave."

He shook it off, took the final step down to the flight deck, and looked around. Starfuries - atmospheric and traditional filled the launch bays. "It's quite an operation you've got here," he said, rubbing his arms.

"Cold?" she asked.

"A little." He smiled. "Must be a window open somewhere."

"Maybe so." She nodded toward the airlock that led back into the command section. "This way."

They walked across the metal flooring into the red tinted hallway that led to the command deck at one end, and the crew quarters at the other. They walked in a silence that was becoming increasingly uneasy. She glanced back from time to time, and found him looking around them, as though nervous.

When they reached her quarters, she stood aside to let him enter, then closed the door, coding it shut. He turned to her as soon as the door was shut. "What the hell is going on, Susan?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that from the moment I came on board I've been fighting the impulse to run back to the shuttle and take off."

"So you don't feel you're among friends."

"I feel ... " He struggled for words. "Look, Susan, you know I trust you, but... no, I don't feel I'm among friends. I know it's illogical, I don't have any reasonable basis for it, but something inside me is saying to get the hell out of here as fast as I can."

"Interesting," she said.

"You sound like you expected this."

"I was hoping for a different reaction, but as is pretty standard with my life, it seems I never quite get what I hope for."

She crossed to a com station at the other side of the room, the access screen dormant, dark. "Computer, stand by to archive guest data: Sheridan, John J. President, Interstellar Alliance."

The screen flared to life with the Titans crest beneath an Earthforce logo. "Standing by."

She looked at Sheridan. "One last thing and we're done. Put your hand on the screen so the computer will recognize you."

"Susan, what the hell is this "

"I can't tell you until I know I'm right. Please, John, I know this doesn't make any sense, but I need you to trust me on this."

He hesitated, then with his expression set, he walked across the room and held his hand in front of the screen. She could see the reluctance to touch it in his eyes, but he fought it down.

He touched the screen.

The screen flared with colors that gave way to a swirl of darkness and unrecognizable symbols before shutting down altogether.

She glanced at Sheridan, who looked like a man waking up from a nap. He focused on her, and struggled for a moment before he could say the one word that she was hoping he would not say, the word that would confirm the fears she had been trying to dismiss ever since the day she'd taken command of the Titans.

"Shadowtech," he said.

Nothing more was said in Ivanova's quarters. With only a nod between them, they returned to the shuttle bay and took off for Babylon 5, where Sheridan quickly convened a meeting with Captain Elizabeth Lochley, Michael Garibaldi, the newly appointed head of covert intelligence for the Alliance, and Dr. Stephen Franklin.

It was the first time Ivanova and Lochley had met since the latter had been appointed Commanding Officer on Babylon 5, and where Ivanova had expected some awkwardness as they waited for the others to arrive, she was pleasantly surprised to find Lochley a friendly and welcoming presence. Her command style was clearly

different to Ivanova's, which was built around the notion of "when in doubt, kill something." But since taking command of the Titans, she had learned that sometimes a quiet voice can be far more effective, and dangerous, than a loud one.

After the rest had arrived, Sheridan recounted his experience on the Titans, after which the room was quiet for what Susan considered a very long time, especially with this crowd.

Garibaldi, typically, was the first one to speak. "We just can't leave you alone for five minutes without you getting into trouble, can we?"

"Blow it out your butt, Michael," Ivanova said, and smiled. It was good to be back.

"You're sure it's shadowtech?" Franklin asked.

"I think so... I mean, it sure as hell felt like it."

"That's why I wanted him to come aboard," Ivanova said. "After having a Vorlon inside him for so long, I figured if anyone could sense latent shadowtech, it would be him."

"It started pretty much the first day I took command of the Titans," she continued. "We had a telepath on board, teep security for an Earthforce senator on a VIP tour of the facilities and he couldn't bring himself to stay for more than ten minutes. He kept saying he felt something was wrong, somewhere in the ship. When he said he could hear something screaming in his thoughts, I figured, okay, we've definitely got trouble."

Lochley had remained quiet during the discussion, listening carefully to the exchange before finally leaning forward in her chair. "I wasn't involved in the Shadow War, so you'll have to excuse my ignorance here. What's shadowtech?"

"Organic technology," Franklin said, "far in advance of anything we've got, courtesy of the Shadows. Telepaths in particular are extremely sensitive to it."

Sheridan stood and began pacing. "We know Earthforce was working on adapting shadowtech for their own purposes, because they wanted a technological edge in dealing with the other races. We even came across a secret base off Jupiter trying to take apart a Shadow vessel and figure out how it worked. Unfortunately they woke it up while they were poking around, and it sliced the place into a million pieces before we finally blew it out of the sky."

"But they clearly got something out of it," Ivanova said, "because they threw some massive shadowtech hybrids at us during the civil war, when..." She stopped and looked at the rest, unable to finish the sentence, when Marcus was killed.

"We thought that was all they had," Ivanova continued, pushing past it. "So you can imagine my reaction when I discovered I was practically sitting on the stuff."

She didn't tell them about the dreams she had had ever since taking command of the Titans, violent and disturbing nightmares, which she attributed to the small, latent telepathic ability she had always concealed from the rest of the world as it reacted violently to the ship around her.

There was no need, not with Sheridan's confirmation of her hunch.

"I find it odd that something so far in advance of our own technology can be adapted that quickly," Lochley said.

"Shadowtech can interface with any other kind of tech it encounters. We had an incident here a year or so back when a telepath that had been altered to function as the central processing system of a shadow vessel woke up in medlab. It invaded the station computer system and would've taken control of the whole thing if we hadn't stopped it in time. My guess is that it was designed so that it can adjust to any kind of technology, however advanced or simple, and grow there, the way a weed infests a garden and takes it over unless you're on guard enough to pluck it out fast."

"So it seems to me that we have several problems here," Lochley said. "One, if this was done by EarthForce, it's a damned good bet

that they know this stuff is there, so nothing's going to be served by telling them except to let them know that we know... which would almost certainly result in Captain Ivanova here being transferred to another command.

"Two, if this shadowtech is an integral part of the ship's main computer system, we can't just go in there and yank it out."

"Agreed," Ivanova said. "Without saying too much, I've had engineering go over every inch of the ship looking for anything out of the ordinary. Wherever the Shadow interface is, we can't find it."

"And even if you could find it," Lochley said, "if we try and remove it and we fail, which I think is almost a certainty, the system would almost certainly red flag the intrusion into its database. Then the next time it linked back to the EarthForce main relay system for instructions and updated clearances, that information would find its way back to the Powers That Be, and "

"And I'm out one command again," Ivanova said.

"So we're right back where we started," Garibaldi said. "Now that we know this stuff is here, what do we do about it? More to the point, what can the Alliance do about it?"

This time it was Sheridan who had remained quiet, listening to the discussion before chiming in with his own thoughts. "We're in a delicate position right now with Earthgov," he said at last. "They've joined the Alliance, but we all know that there was just a hint of pressure there."

"Yeah, I'd call about a thousand fully armed White Stars flying over the capital a hint of pressure," Garibaldi said.

"Exactly my point. They see the benefits of cooperating, but they're still suspicious. If we go in guns blazing and tell them to rewire their new, top of the line warships to our specs, they'll use this to say we're trying to weaken their defenses for our own purposes, that we're interfering with their internal affairs."

"In short, we'll be crucified," Franklin said.

"So what are you saying?" Lochley asked. "That we should do nothing?"

Ivanova shook her head. "I vote against that idea right off."

"I'm not saying that at all. I'm only saying that we have to proceed cautiously. In the best of all worlds, over the next few years, as the Alliance grows, and as those who were involved in President Clark's shadowtech program are eased out, better people will take their places and we can influence them to remove what should never have been put in those ships in the first place."

Garibaldi snickered. "Yeah, and then we can all hold hands and sing Kumbaya and everybody in the Earth senate will give us a warm hug and a teddy bear before bedtime."

"You want to go to war over this, Michael?" Sheridan asked, his face sober. "We just came through the hardest fight of our lives. You want to start another one?"

"Not really. I just don't think we can rely on optimism. It's sure as hell never done me any good."

"I agree. Look, the number one danger of having shadowtech in these ships is that they can be compromised. Their systems can be taken over by someone using a stronger shadowtech system, which leaves whoever's commanding them vulnerable. For the moment, at least, the best thing we can do is to make sure that Susan doesn't have to deal with that problem. If the other Warlocks should fall, we need to ensure that she can remain in command of her own ship, and act as she feels appropriate."

"Best idea I've heard all day," Ivanova said. "But how do we do it?"

The room was quiet. Everyone else in the room suddenly seemed to find their shoes to be of tremendous interest.

Finally, Sheridan looked up. She caught his gaze, and recognized the expression behind his eyes, what she would've once called the

light behind his eyes except for the fact that when Sheridan had a Vorlon inside him previously his eyes did light up and she didn't much like remembering that part of it.

But she knew this look half tactical brilliance and half mad genius and she smiled, knowing he had something in mind.

"Where's Lyta?" he asked.

Lyta Alexander stood on the metal bridge that spanned the Zocalo, oblivious to the crowds eating and shopping below, her attention elsewhere. She watched as several more of the newly arrived telepaths met up with their leader, a man whose name she had learned only this morning, though she had felt his presence ever since his arrival six days earlier: Byron.

She had heard the name before; there was little involving telepaths that didn't end up on the teep grapevine after a while, and Byron was an almost mythic figure in the telepath underground. There were rumors that he had once been a Psi Cop, charged with the task of running down rogue teeps. According to another story, he was the illegitimate son of one of the most feared of all Psi Cops, Al Bester, but Lyta couldn't even start to wrap her brain around that particular rumor. The idea of Bester mating with anything higher on the food chain than an armadillo was almost more than she could handle on a full stomach.

Whoever Byron was, wherever he had come from prior to his discovery of non-violence as a tactic for teep independence, there was no denying that he was charismatic, even attractive in a moody, dark, ascetic eighteenth century poet sort of way. The runaway telepaths who had begun to filter into Babylon 5 flocked to his side like faithful children, hanging on his every word like a -

She shook her head, pushing away the attractiveness of the word that she had come to hate when it came to the Psi Corps, and long

for in her real life: family. But that's what it looked like to her down there, what had been promised to her by the Corps but never delivered.

Family.

She toyed with the idea of going down there and introducing herself, one free teep to another.

She thought it might be fun to challenge him on some of his ideas, see if he was really all he seemed to be. Not that she really had time for Messianic figures these days, of course, and she knew full well how most such figures wound up in the end. It would be better to just stay clear of the whole thing.

And yet...

She looked down at them, at the exchanges of welcoming hugs and embraces, things she had never known, having been raised inside the Corps. The Corps was mother, the Corps was father.

That was the way it was supposed to be.

She studied their absurdly happy faces, thinking, Or is that the way it was supposed to be?

Perhaps she would stop by one of Byron's talks, if not this week then next. There was no rush, after all.

She would just go, and listen.

After all, what was the worst that could happen?

She started to turn away when she found Zack Allen at her elbow. Lately he had developed an almost preternatural ability to turn up at just that very spot, time and again.

"How would you like to earn some money?" he asked, smiling.

"Depends. Is it a big job, or a small job?"

He hesitated before answering. I guess that depends on your definition of big," he said.

Lyta laughed, shook her head. "Okay, I'll bite. Is it... bigger than a suitcase?"

"Bigger."

"Bigger than an elephant?"

"Bigger."

"Bigger than a starship?"

Zack smiled again, bigger this time. "As it happens, Lyta, by a strange coincidence this job is exactly the same size as a starship."

She decided she didn't like the way that smile looked at all.

Sheridan prepared himself for a moment before entering Docking Bay 13. When Vorlon Ambassador Kosh had been stationed at Babylon 5, this was where his ship had been berthed. Upon his death, the ship itself based on highly advanced organic technology, as close as anyone would ever create to a living ship had been released. Acting on something between autopilot and true sentience, it plunged into the heart of the local star when it was clear that its master would never return.

Afterward, it had been home to the ship that carried Kosh's replacement, Ulkesh, a much darker and ominous Vorlon. Ulkesh had not cared for Humanity the way Kosh had, was even found to be working against Humanity's interests during the Shadow War. At the end it came down to a pitched battle between Ulkesh and Sheridan's forces, a battle that was tilted in Sheridan's direction only by the presence of the last of Kosh's sentience, which had taken up root in Sheridan.

Ulkesh's ship had been destroyed in that battle, broken into six roughly equal sized pieces.

Sheridan had ordered the pieces brought to Bay 13 for study. The next thing he knew, the six pieces had become five, five had become four, and it became quickly apparent that the ship was rebuilding itself, extruding tiny tendrils to reattach and repair the broken sections, slowly regenerating those parts that had been destroyed.

The ship was still engaged in self repair when the rest of the Vorlons went beyond the Rim along with the Shadows at the conclusion of the Shadow War. Subsequent scans of the ship found it to be dormant, seemingly dead. Sheridan had assumed that, with its master dead and the Vorlons gone where it could not follow, it had nowhere to go and simply... stopped.

Nonetheless, he had ordered Bay 13 isolated from all station personnel, and he himself had never entered it.

Just in case.

Because he had learned the hard way that with the Vorlons, death was not always as clear cut as one might assume. So he always gave the ship a wide berth.

That was about to change.

He entered his own private code, and the door slid away on its tracks, securing into the safety locks with a deep metallic chunk that resonated throughout the bay. The ship sat in its rail locks, silent, motionless, lifeless.

Waiting, he thought distantly. Waiting for someone to wake it up.

He walked down the ramp toward the ship, which loomed over him even larger than he had remembered. It was sleek, almost squidlike in appearance at one end, streaming off at the other end into delicate petals that opened and closed to radiate away the heat caused by hyperspace jumps. There was no visible door, though Sheridan had seen the side iris open when Kosh chose to enter.

The ship was a shade of red he had never seen before or since, with a sheen that seemed deeper than it could or should be. His gaze kept drifting away from it, as if his eyes couldn't quite focus on the hull. There was a dark mottling all along the ship's exterior that shifted like the coloration on a chameleon when the ship was in space.

That it had defenses was certain; he had seen them in action on Kosh's ship when he once made the mistake of getting too close. It was an error he had pledged never to make again.

That, too, was about to change.

He edged closer to the ship. So far it had not responded to his presence, had not shown any indication of activity. It seemed totally safe.

Which only worried him that much more.

He reached out a hand, and tentatively closed the distance between himself and the ship. He hoped that the ship, which had been made by Vorlons would recognize someone else who had also been intimately touched by Vorlons. He hoped that he still carried enough of that presence to resonate with the ship's scanners.

Mainly, he hoped it wouldn't grow a gun tentacle and laser him into a smoking smear on the deck.

He touched the ship. It felt unnaturally cold to his fingertips. It was the cold of space. It was the cold of death. It was the cold of something infinitely older and more dangerous than he was. He was just starting to wonder what the hell he was doing here in the first place when the skin of the ship shuddered.

Shuddered. Like the skin of a reptile awakening at the first touch of warm sunlight.

It knows I'm here, he thought. Either this is going to work or I'm going

to end up so dead that all my ancestors back five generations will get a really bad feeling about the future.

The skin of the hull warmed slightly beneath his fingers. Then he felt more than heard a change in the bay, a sense of hidden engines waking up, of scanners and sensors reaching out, listening, feeling, seeing, touching.

Touching him.

Sheridan realized he was holding his breath.

Then: the hull softened beneath his touch, seemed to be drawing inward, into the ship. He yanked back his hand as the hull continued to pull away from him, folding into itself and slowly, slowly, irising open.

In another moment, the entrance to the ship was fully open, revealing only a darkness beyond.

Unaccountably, Sheridan found himself remembering a phrase from the Bible:

And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and beheld a pale horse, and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.

Sheridan moved toward the entrance of the ship.

Come and see, it seemed to whisper.

Sheridan stepped inside.

Lochley paced back and forth in front of the massive window that

was the centrepiece of the observation dome, more casually referred to by the crew as C&C, Command and Control. It had been nearly an hour since Sheridan had entered Bay 13. I knew I should've let someone else do this, she thought resignedly. Only problem is finding someone else who was part Vorlon once, and damn it there just aren't any of those around when you really need them.

An excited Lieutenant Corwin called over to her from his station. "I've got President Sheridan for you on channel four, audio only."

"Put him through!"

She crossed to the main console, punched up the access for com four. "Mr. President? Are you all right?"

For a moment, there was only static, a kind of static she hadn't heard before. It wove in and out of the audible range, frequencies bleeding through one on top of the other in a way that made her ears itch. Then, finally, Sheridan's voice came through.

"I'm all right," he said. Though he was only a few decks below C&C, his voice sounded a million miles away.

"I'm... inside."

"What's it like?" she asked.

There was another long delay. "There are no words."

"Do you think you can control it?"

"I'm not sure." There was another pause, longer than the one before. She thought she heard the sounds around him riding up and down in a deliberate way, a rhythmic way, as though the ship were -

No, don't be ridiculous, she thought. *It's not singing to him.*

Then his voice came back to her: "I think so," he said. "I think... I think it would like to have something interesting to do."

She looked at Corwin.

Corwin looked at her.

"The... ship... would like something interesting to do?"

"Don't ask," Sheridan said. "Is everyone in position?"

"Lyta's on board the Titans with Ivanova. They're ready when you are."

"Then let's get this show on the road," Sheridan said. "Open Bay 13, prepare for launch."

"Will do," she said, and in a final burst of static before she cut off channel four, she thought she heard a sound that seemed to her might be just the kind of sound a ship might make if it were thinking, *About time*.

She shook her head. *You've been here less than a month and already you need a vacation.*

"Open Bay 13 and clear all other traffic from the area," she called to Corwin.

"He's coming out."

Ivanova watched the display on the control bridge as the Vorlon ship emerged from the central docking hub of Babylon 5 and arced slowly, gracefully, toward the Titans. She never got over her awe of the ship's ability to convey both beauty and terror at the same time.

She looked to the other members of her crew, saw the numb expressions on their faces, and smiled. Vorlons were more myth than fact to these people, and to see something like this coming toward them had to be like entering the pages of a fairy story.

I remember what I felt the first time I saw one of those, she

thought. And the funny thing is, I'm feeling exactly the same thing right now.

"Open flight bay, secure all airlocks," she said, "prepare to receive." She had told the crew this was a classified mission, that they were to hold onto this ship for safe keeping until such time as Earthforce asked for it back. That with any luck Earthforce would never know it was here was, of course, quite beside the point.

"Bay doors open, Captain," Commander Berensen said, never taking his eyes off the display.

"Here it comes."

Why do I always get the crappy end of these jobs? Lyta wondered. She stood at a computer access panel in flight bay seven, wearing a heavy atmosphere suit to protect against the hard vacuum that could penetrate the bay in case anything went wrong.

Though if anything goes really wrong the whole place could explode, or I could get sucked out into space, or the walls could come down around me like a deck of cards, so yeah, this suit is gonna be just a big help to me in my hour of need.

She looked up sharply as a red warning light began to flash above her, then glanced right as the huge bay doors began to slide away, revealing the Vorlon ship hovering on invisible magnetic grapples in the space between.

It moved slowly into the bay, positioning itself above the deck, where access panels had been cut into the metal flooring, within which naked cables and controls were visible, the tangle of computer relays hot wired directly into the Titans' main system. The final effect was that of a ship sized interface.

Slowly, the ship began to lower toward the interface.

Here goes nothing, she thought, and gripped the equipment around her as tightly as she could, counting down the inches until...

Contact.

Ivanova looked up sharply as the lights flickered above her, then darkened.

She felt the ship shudder.

Berensen checked his display. "Captain? We're getting some anomalous readings from the-"

Before he could finish his sentence the engines of the Titans exploded into life, slamming him and everyone else back into their seats, heedless of the artificial gravity that was supposed to compensate for such things.

The room shook violently as the ship twisted first one way, then another. Anything not bolted down was thrown across the room; crew members crashed into walls or tumbled over displays.

Ivanova had once seen vids of an ancient sport called a rodeo, had seen a horse bucking violently, trying desperately to throw its rider, and wondered what it must have felt like.

She no longer had to wonder.

"What's going on?" Berensen yelled above the roar of the bucking ship.

"Oh... nothing," she said. "Just hold on."

In the flight bay, Lyta drove her thoughts deep into the ship's organic center, fighting for control even as the Vorlon ship sent out delicate tendrils that wrapped themselves into the Titans' conduits and control Systems.

Once the Vorlon ship lands, you can bet the organic shadowtech will recognize it for what it is and fight like hell, Sheridan had told her. When that happens, someone's going to have to go in there and fight at an organic level, thought against thought, until the Vorlon ship does to it what the shadowtech does to everything else: takes over.

All you have to do is make sure the Titans doesn't tear itself apart before the job's finished.

She could feel a blind, searing rage emanating from somewhere deep inside the ship, where the sentient, organic shadowtech had been carefully woven into the ship's normal computer system... could visualize its thoughts in the darkness behind her eyes, could see its desperation as a bright red flare lashing out in every direction. She held onto the equipment, fighting not to be thrown across the bay.

The triple space lock doors opened. Air shot out of the bay and into space, blasting past her in a roar that was second only to the roar of the shadowtech screaming in her mind. The plasteel walls around her twisted, groaned with metal fatigue.

It's going to tear itself apart... its going to destroy itself before it lets the Vorlon ship take over.

She fought back, lashing out with her own thoughts, trying to fight the organic system's access to engines and navigational controls just as she would try to shut down a Human brain's access to fingers and legs and speech centres.

She felt something pop high up in her nose, felt something warm flowing down over her upper lip.

A moment later she tasted blood.

Great, just great, she thought, and pushed harder.

Berensen held onto the console in front of him, refusing to be thrown. "Engine systems are overheating, moving toward overload!"

"How long?" Susan called over the roar.

"Two minutes!"

Lyta felt herself starting to black out. She fought to hold onto her thoughts, to hold onto the ship's organic centre, not knowing how much longer she could do so -

Then suddenly the red fury behind her eyes was lanced by a cool green determination that grew, surrounded it, engulfed it. They wrapped around one another, a tangle of colours and intentions, striking, retreating, fainting, parrying, then suddenly a final green lunge struck deep at the red, paralyzing it.

Then the red was gone, and only the green remained.

And instead of a roar of fury, the green sang in her thoughts.

She opened her eyes as the ship steadied, evened and calmed. The air doors slowly closed, and she could hear the hiss of equalizing air filtering into the bay.

Lyta released her death grip on the equipment that surrounded her, and realized that her arms and legs were shaking. She desperately wanted to sit somewhere, but since the nearest chairs were two decks up, she collapsed where she was, not caring that she was sitting in leaking lubricant that pooled around her environment suit.

Impossibly, improbably she was alive, and that was all that mattered.

In another moment, the side of the Vorlon ship irised open, and Sheridan stood revealed in the opening. He looked over to her, and waved, smiling. Triumphant.

She waved back. Barely.

Then passed out on the floor of the flight deck.

"Any other problems with the interface?" Sheridan asked.

Ivanova shook her head as she walked beside him down the main crew corridor of the Titans.

"Nothing serious. A few minor glitches here and there, the interior temperature's running a bit warmer than it should be, and a couple of the com channels are scrambled, but we should have that in hand soon."

"Good," Sheridan said.

"We've checked out Lyta, and she seems to be all right, just severely

stressed," she continued.

"We've put her on the shuttle and given her something to help her rest and recover. I'd thank her myself but we're way behind schedule, and if we don't get back on course Earth Central is going to want to know where we are and where we've been, and I'd rather avoid that conversation if I can."

"Understood." They stopped in front of the main door to the flight deck, and he turned toward her. "It was good to see you again, Susan. I know you've got your own mission to worry about now, but you're always welcome to stop by whenever you're in the area."

"I know," she said. "It's just... I'm not sure I'm comfortable enough yet with what happened... what Marcus did ... to spend any time here. At least, not yet. I just ... need a little time, that's all."

"Of course," he said, his voice quiet. "Well, good luck with your ship, Susan. And remember, she has to go in for an oil change every forty thousand parsecs. And keep everyone the hell out of flight bay seven."

"I will," she said. "Thanks again, John. And don't worry, we'll run into each other again soon."

He smiled, and much to her surprise, gave her a hug. "I know we will," he said, then turned and entered the main bay.

On her way back to the command deck, Ivanova paused to contradict Sheridan's instructions long enough to peek into flight bay seven. The Vorlon ship was the only thing there, sitting quietly in the middle of the bay, thinking whatever Vorlon thoughts still hummed silently along its control systems.

Illogically, it seemed to her that it almost looked content.

He was right, I have to stay out of this place, she thought, and walked out again, closing the door with a command string that no one below her in rank could open. Then with a final glance back, she continued to the bridge of her ship.

Sheridan watched from the shuttle as the Titans pulled away from Babylon 5 and angled toward the jump gate. It was Ivanova's ship now, no one else's, no hidden agendas, no chance of compromising control. He knew it could come in handy someday, if whatever leftover shadowtech programs had been implanted in the Warlock class of warships was ever activated.

If that day came, he knew that there would be at least one ship free of that influence, that would not go along with the rest, that would be independent.

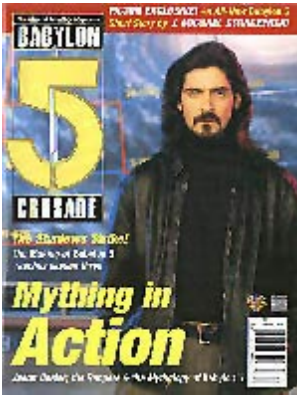
And it seemed utterly appropriate to him that it would be Ivanova's ship... because that was about as good a description of Ivanova herself as he could muster.

"Take us in," he told the pilot, casting a backward glance to Lyta, asleep in the back of the shuttle. "Take us home."

Cover created by YellowMoya

Warlock class Destroyer image found on b5tech.com. (dead link) Retrieved 31 December 2007 . According to the references Tim Earl (Tim Earls), an employee of the company «Babylonian Productions», designer destroyer

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DESCRIPTION:

First issue to feature an all-new Babylon 5 short story, "Hidden Agendas" by J. Michael Straczynski, a tale set on B5 during the original five-year arc. Also features an interview with Jason Carter and a Ship of tears station log.

JMS AT RASTB5M SAID:

JAN.18.2000

[T]hese will be brand new stories, written just for the B5 magazine (the first of which will be determined by fan vote from four possible story areas).