DECONSTRUCTION OF FALLING STARS

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INTRODUCTION

The past six years have been a wild ride.

During that time, we have been the only Babylon 5 licensee in any market (Agents of Gaming and their Babylon 5 Wars game disappearing shortly before we took the licence on), have published over 40 books and over 200 different miniatures. As licences go, it has been a good, long run.

When we first approached Warner Brothers about a set of Babylon 5 games, the licence was considered 'dead' and, indeed, they were quite surprised that we were interested! However, we knew that there were still enough hardcore Babylon 5 fans out there with enough interest to make it worthwhile – they simply had to have more material for their favourite TV show!

All good things must come to an end of course and, over the past couple of years, interest in the series has declined. I imagine it will always be remembered with a fond heart, but science fiction moves onwards, and the fans have drifted away to other delights, such as Firefly and Battlestar Galactica, worthy replacements for Babylon 5 indeed.

So, around the middle of this year, the Babylon 5 licence will be allowed to sunset – which puts us in an interesting position.

You see, as a gaming company, we produce far more material for our games than can ever realistically be published. Some of it is just a rule here and there, others are full blown scenarios and supplements that, for one reason or another, never made it through editing and layout. Looking at the vast number of pages of Babylon 5 material we still had, we wondered if we could do anything with it. After all, the editing schedule was full and, even if it were not, there was simply not enough time to go through *everything* and ready it for publishing.

Fortunately, the loyal Babylon 5 fans on our forums had the answer. Throw it all into a single PDF for their dissection and review. There would be very little editing done, other than what had already been performed in the past (for which we apologise), and an extremely low art content. However, it would be produced for a very reasonable price, and the sheer amount of material would be able to keep the average Babylon 5 gamer going for *years*. In any case, it seemed a fitting tribute to the end of the line, and it is a good feeling that this material will, at last, find use in the hands of those who most want it.

The fans even came up with a most apt and suitable title – Deconstruction of Falling Stars.

So, what can you expect to find here?

Well, we have some bits and pieces that would have formed the basis of new material for the Babylon 5 Compendium, a collection of articles from Signs & Portents. As well as reprinting those articles, we wanted some original content too, so look out for articles and essays on hyperspace travel, creatures of the galaxy, some plot ideas, and much more.

There are four complete scenarios, two of which were originally intended to be 32 page books, one which was to become a 128 page book – the sequel to our popular Fiery Trial, the first scenario published for the game.

We have the Dilgar Imperium sourcebook, which was originally intended to stand alongside other heavyweights such as the Minbari Federation and Narn Regime Factbooks.

Finally, we tie everything up with three weighty pieces of fiction. There is Baptism of Fire, which covers Captain Ivanova's actions during Season 5, penned by none other than Claudia Christian herself. Ranger Dawning introduces a new member of the Anla'Shok, and is written by our own Richard Ford. Finally, there is Visions of Peace, scribbled down by some talentless herbert whose name currently escapes me.

Anyway, we wanted you, the fans of the Babylon 5 roleplaying game, to have full access to all the various bits and pieces we had scattered around. This is our thank you to everyone who supported the game through the years, and proved the naysayers wrong when they said 'that licence will never work.'

As the Man once said, faith manages.

EVERYDAY LIFE IN 2258

Babylon 5, like every dramatic series, takes place in an intricate world. Like most science-fiction series this world is a "far future" vision of what our lives might be like over two hundred and fifty years from now. Unfortunately the constraints of storytelling force the primary scope of action away from the mundane trivia that makes up everyday life. This trivia makes up the backbone of a large number of scenarios and stories, so we as gamers rather than fans need to explore it with an eye towards creating dramatic situations.

BABYLON 5

Babylon 5 holds a unique place in the galaxy. Its role as a diplomatic station and port of call for humans and aliens makes it a polyglot experience unlike any other. Cultures mix, individuals from cultures that have not come off their homeworld in a thousand years mingle with each other at bars, and ancient darkness stalks the shadows. Somehow in all of this the daily grind of life continues with all of its normal pageantry.

Communications

We know that BabCom handles the primary communications duties for the entire station. We also know from the existing body of evidence that parcel post and package post allow physical objects to move both to and from the station. The cost of real time communication outside of the station (set at 100 cr per minute) seems exorbitant enough to preclude it for all but the most important issues or the wealthiest people.

For on station communications people have three choices: track down the person they wish to speak with, place a Babcom call from one of the public or private terminals, or pay someone to deliver the message for them. The first costs only time and travel expenses. The second costs nothing, but Babcom cannot track a person though the station. Courier services have a thriving business Downbellow, and among the business that operate in the Red and Green sectors.

The Babcom system functions as a voice and electronic mail system as well as permitting real time communication. This allows individuals to compose and send text messages, data files, or visual/voice messages to anyone with system access. These messages are stored for a period of no longer than one year, then deleted. The system can carry out simple message delivery instructions allowing it to delay sending until the criteria occur. The most common delivery instructions include: delivery at a specific time or delivery if the user has not accessed his account for a specific length of time. Talented computer users may make a Computer Use skill check (DC 20) to place other instructions in a message. For example, the user might want to deliver a message only if another user attempts to contact someone off station via BabCom or StellerCom.

Although not directly displayed during the series, BabCom can also forward real time communications to terminal other than the user's private access port to if requested to do so. Workers and others who know they will be near a particular terminal for a significant period of time can take advantage of this feature. Forwarding messages to a public terminal costs 10 cr per day, a nominal fee designed to prevent abuse of this feature.

For a significant fee (10,000 cr per month plus 200 cr per month per person) the communications staff of Babylon 5 will establish a private communications network similar to the Earthforce communications links. These links allow the user to access Babcom anywhere on the station, and provide real time voice communications for anyone who wishes it. Those who cannot afford the cost of such a network may attempt to use short-range radios instead. Unfortunately the heavy metal superstructure of the station cuts the useful range of such devices in half. Radios transmitters also provide the internal scanners with an easy target when security is looking for you.

Off station communications presents a more complex problem. During the events shown characters receive parcel post, video messages from off world, and real time communications. The brutal cost of the later inspires Ivanova to abuse her privileges as an officer to speak with her dying father.

From this we can deduce that the most common form of off station communication is the text or video messages similar to 20th century email. BabCom can transmit these messages asynchronously to similar facilities on other worlds. This means they are not immediately delivered; rather they arrive 1d4 hours after their initial transmission. Sending an off-station message carries a nominal 1 cr fee.

The Earth Alliance Postal service represents only one of several services working to move mail and packages though the systems. A thriving courier service exists, promising faster deliveries at somewhat higher rates. These services range for individual couriers who carry packages for companies to massive companies that operate a shipping system alongside the EAP. At 80 cr. to 600 cr. per pound it (minimum charge 80 cr.) even the cheapest physical post service does not carry an extremely high volume. Letters and packages only come from off station for the most serious of business transactions or when a physical deliver is required to insure security.

Service	Price
Forward incoming messages to a public Babcom Terminal	10 cr./day
Message (video or text) delivery (off station)	1 cr.
Real time video message (off station)	100 cr./ minute
Crystal or Letter Delivery (EAP – 14 days, Earth space only)	95 cr. per jump
Package Deliver (EAP – 14 days, Earth space only)	95 cr./lb per jump
Express Package Delivery (EAP – 7 days, Earth space only)	495 cr./lb per jump
Crystal or Letter Delivery (unsecured courier – 14 to 21 days, known space)	80 cr. per jump
Package Delivery (unsecured courier – 14 to 21 days, known space)	80 cr./lb per jump
Express Package Delivery (unsecured courier – 14 to 21 days, known space)	400 cr./lb per jump
Crystal or Letter Delivery (secured courier – 7 to 10 days, bonded against letter loss, known space)	110 cr. per jump
Package Delivery (secured courier – 7 to 10 days, bonded against letter loss, known space)	110 cr./lb per jump
Express Package Delivery (secured courier – 7 to 10 days, bonded against letter loss, known space)	600 cr./lb per jump

Daily Grind

What do those who do not fly a fighter or stand proudly on the command deck do during the day? For that matter, what do the leaders who so boldly fight the war spend their time doing when not directing the movements of a barely coherent force lead as much by force of personality as anything else?

Of the quarter of a million humans and aliens who work on Babylon 5 roughly 1500 of them work on the docks. The dockworkers (as seen in "By Any Means Necessary") are a ready crew who mostly enjoy their jobs. They work long hours and back-to-back shifts trying to keep up with the constant flow of cargo. This work varies form the mundane machine operation to dangerous zero-g/hard space work involving alien technology. Despite the poor hours and working conditions it can be difficult to get a job on the dock. There are few open positions and a very long waiting list. This situation changes after the events of "By Any Means Necessary"; the sudden influx of new positions means that the queue rapidly vanishes.

The other "stable" work on Babylon 5 that is difficult to get into is station maintenance. Although the staff borders on 6500 positions, these positions require very specific skills as well as having long queues of applicants. These positions, like those of Earth Force military personnel, are positions paid for out of the Earth Alliance general budget for the station. These positions range from relatively untrained positions like janitors to highly trained maintenance personnel who work on complex integrated systems. These jobs generally take the worker all over the station, working at odd hours to keep everything running. They also carry unusually high security clearances, further limiting the people who can successfully apply for work.

The majority of the quarter million residents work in one of five sectors: commerce, customer services, knowledge services, research and retail. Jobs can almost always be found somewhere in these areas, although the work may not be entirely to the seekers liking.

Commerce involves the acquisition and exchange of goods. In the case of Babylon 5, the amount of physical traffic that it sees pales in comparison to the total volume of goods and services traded via contract. Most of the major import/export operations in the galaxy have offices on the station. Here they arrange for goods to move all over the galaxy. Less than 1% of that merchendise actually passes though the station; most of it is routed directly from its point of origin to its contracted destination. Jobs in this industry include clerks (responsible for recording goods

Setting up a Courier Service

The prices above make the job of a corporate or independent courier look remarkably lucrative. In fact, it is. However, there are a few things that the prospective courier should realize before he launches his career:

1) Work as an independent courier is sketchy at best. Every day the courier will need to make a Gather Information skill check (DC 20) to determine if he can find someone looking for a parcel delivery. Given the rates charged, 90% of these deliveries will be letters, data crystals, or other small objects. For every 5 points by which the character's skill check result exceeds the DC he finds an additional job.

2) Most successful couriers post a 200,000 credit "bond" with one of the major governments. If the courier ever fails to deliver a package, regardless of circumstances, he forfeits his bond. Corporate courier services post bond for their agents, but have legal arrangements to force the individual to repay if a default occurs. Independent couriers must come up with the bond credits themselves.

3) If the courier can post a 400,000 credit bond he receives a +2 circumstance bonus on his Gather Information skill checks to find

and services), finders (responsible for locating needed goods), shippers (responsible for contracting transports), inspectors (responsible for examining goods to determine their value), sale representatives (responsible for selling goods), and "brokers" (responsible for getting people who want to sell goods and people who want to buy those goods together).

Customer services include all of the non-infrastructure services needed to keep a civilized society moving. Examples range from cleaning services for private quarters, though the hospitality staff at a hotel, and into the range of food services provided by various restaurants. These jobs have not noticeably changed for centuries. The people being served border on rude, there is far too much work to do for the time allowed, and the pay is lousy. On the plus side there is almost always work to be found, as turn over is fairly high. Notable professions in this field include: cooks, cleaners, event planners, performers, hospitality staff, wait staff, and couriers.

So-called "knowledge services" involve the creation, gathering, and distribution of information. This includes computer programming, information research, event tracking, translation services, and anything else that requires the individual to handle raw data. Babylon 5 is a natural place for such operations, being highly connected to databases and news feeds from all over the galaxy. Furthermore the vast intersection of information technologies represented by these feeds gave rise to a burgeoning business in data interface programming; someone has to make all of these things work together.

Scientific research on Babylon 5 takes two distinct forms. The first is basic research, usually in the zero-g labs located in Grey sector. Large corporations from Earth Alliance and League space rent these facilities for long periods of time to conduct research pertaining to alien materials. The second, and more intriguing, type of research comes from the recovery and trade of alien technology. Scientists and engineers from many races congregate on the station hoping to sell what they know to any interested party. This second type of research forms a playground for the agents and criminals of the station; no one knows exactly how much information is actually traded, but at least half of it is illicit or considered secret by the originating government.

Retail services generally refer to the sale of various useable or ornamental goods. Given the exorbitant prices charged by various shipping companies, any kind of good sold must be small and relatively light weight. Large durable goods are simply not for sale. Owning and maintaining a shop on Babylon 5 can be an adventure in and of itself, as the character's try to secure a steady supply of their chosen

Station Staff Jobs

Name	Responsibility	Related Skills	Availability
Dock Worker		Technical (mechanical)	Limited (DC 20)
Dock Worker (Senior)	Requires EVA Work	Computer Use, Diplomacy, Knowledge (astrophysics), Pilot, Technical (mechanical), Technical (space travel)	Rare (DC 25)
Station Maintenance		Computer Use, Technical (electronics), Technical (mechanical)	Limited (DC 20)
Station Superstructure	Requires EVA work	Technical (engineering)	Limited (DC 20)

Commerce Jobs

Name	Responsibility	Related Skills	Availability
Clerk		Computer Use	Common (DC 5)
Finder		Appraise, Computer Use, Gather Information, Knowledge (alien life)	Open (DC 10)
Shipper	May occasionally pilot a ship	Diplomacy, Knowledge (law), Knowledge (star systems)	Stable (DC 15)
Inspector		Appraise, Computer Use, Knowledge (law) Search	Stable (DC 15)
Sales Representative		Bluff, Diplomacy, Gather Information	Open (DC 10)
Broker		Diplomacy, Gather Information, Knowledge (alien life), Knowledge (star systems), Speak Language (bonus per language spoken)	Open (DC 10)

Customer Service Jobs

Name	Responsibility	Related Skills	Availability
Cleaner			Open (DC 10)
Cook			Open (DC 10)
Courier			Open (DC 10)
Event Planner		Computer Use, Bluff, Diplomacy, Gather Information, Knowledge (sector, bonus by sector)	Open (DC 10)
Performer		Perform	Open (DC 10)
Wait Staff		Bluff, Diplomacy	Open (DC 10)
Hospitality Staff		Diplomacy	Open (DC 10)

Knowledge Service Jobs

Name	Responsibility	Related Skills	Availability
Computer Programmer		Computer Use, Technical (electronics)	Stable (DC 15)
Event Tracker		Computer Use, Gather Information	Stable (DC 15)
Information Researcher		Bluff, Computer Use, Diplomacy, Gather Information, Knowledge (history), Technical (electronics)	Stable (DC 15)
System's Analyst		Computer Use, Knowledge (history), Technical (electronics)	Limited (DC 20)
Translator	A translator may find himself dealing with a wide variety of very hostile situations.	Bluff, Diplomacy, Speak Language (bonus per language spoken)	Open (DC 10)

Research

Name	Responsibility	Related Skills	Availability
Exchange Scientist	Exchange scientists often deal with hostile aliens and recently discovered artifacts	Appraise, Bluff, Diplomacy, Knowledge (any), Technical (any)	Stable (DC 15)
Research Scientist		Knowledge (any, bonus for each skill), Medical, Technical (any, bonus for each skill)	Limited (DC 20)

product and deal all of the turmoil about to descend on the galaxy.

Available Jobs on Babylon 5 by Sector

The following short list describes some of the work character's might find on Babylon 5. The responsibility column indicates any unusual tasks the worker will be required to perform. If a worker has a "related skill" at 5 or better he receives a +2 synergy bonus to his profession skill rank. Availablity indicates the DC of the Diplomacy roll required to secure employment; the character must meet or beat this DC in order to roll for income if freelancing, or beat the DC by 5 to secure permanent employment.

Although customer service jobs are highly available they tend to pay poorly; the character only earns 50x their check result in credits rather than 100. Performers may use their Perform skill rather than Profession, although doing so means that he can never land a stable job regardless of his Diplomacy roll.

Retail Stores

Running a retail store requires at least the following every week:

- Bluff – DC 15 to manage the store and maintain a steady stream of customers
- Diplomacy – DC 15 to maintain the space and general services
- Knowledge (law) – DC 10 to avoid basic pitfalls

A storeowner gains 150 credits multiplied by his check result per week. For each of the above skill checks that reduce this amount by 50 credits.

Setting up a store to allow the character to take 10 on his Profession (shopkeeper) skill checks requires 2d4 weeks and at least 10,000 credits. Running a stall or selling off of a blanket is less difficult, but the character must also make a fourth skill check (Bluff DC 20) to avoid falling afoul with either criminal elements or security.

Education and Training

Although it seems odd to say, not everyone on Babylon 5 is of legal age. There are children, teenagers, and even young adults who have to learn and grow on the station. In addition to all of the normal confusion of becoming adults these children also have to deal with the aliens from a hundred worlds.

Earth Force also did not plan on supporting the families who moved to the station. The first few months of operation proved especially chaotic as children ran rampant over everything in sight. Shortly thereafter enterprising scholars from around the galaxy began to set up "schools" teaching everything from basic skills to advanced science. By 2258 the educational "system" of Babylon 5 is a patchwork of private services, most supported to one degree or another by diplomatic missions. Some expensive (100 cr. a week per student) per week schools have racially segregated classrooms; the other (up to 50 cr. a week per student) have integrated classrooms where alien children learn side by side.

Basic educational services provide children ages 3 to 18 with the equivalent of a complete high school education.

Having only existed for a year no one has any idea just how effective this system will prove over time, but for now it keeps children of all races out of everyone's hair. Classes are also available from accredited institutions in the Earth Alliance via distance learning, although the StellarCom transmission prices make this an option for only the wealthiest diplomats.

Stored BabCom programs or private schools provide advanced and vocational training in a wide variety of skills. Earth Force personnel have access to a wide array of on-line courses as part of their continuing training requirements. Civilians can purchase these packages directly from companies, or participate in more traditional classes put on by various educational organizations.

Service	Price
Public Teacher	30 cr./week
Private Tutor	70 cr./week
Segregated Tutor	100 cr./week
BabCom Learning Program	50 cr
Distance Learning Program	100 cr./week
Real Time Distance Learning Program	18,000 cr./week

Entertainment

Although we do not talk about it, the quest for entertainment takes up a significant portion of most people's lives. This has not changed in 2258. People still seek out a wide variety of activities to satiate their appetite for entertainment. Some of these activities border on the illegal. Others seem so mundane that even mentioning them feels foolish.

The BabCom system serves as the primary repository of entertainment coming from off-station. Shows from a dozen worlds, mainstream entertainment, audio, and video tours of significant places…all of these and more can be called up just by asking for them. Only ISN has a real time feed; all other feeds work on a time delay of 1 hour to 1 day, depending on the system of origin. News shows remain popular, as does anything talking about what "life is really like" all over the galaxy.

BabCom also hosts a wide variety of on-line games, from virtual sports to sprawling virtual worlds where the players can engage in a host of unreal activities. These services tend to be readily available and cheap, as they have little in the way of physical overhead. The most sophisticated of these simulations use virtual immersion technology to provide relatively realistic experiences.

On-station electronic entertainment ranges from vid-theaters to virtual private worlds catering to diverse interests. There are also a variety of video arcades located throughout the station where gamers meet and compete in simulations and puzzle games.

Outside of the world of electronics, a thriving industry catering to various hobbies forms a social network that stretches from one end of the station to the other. People gather in quiet corners to learn the ancient art of bonsai (and it's alien equivalents), study languages together, throw pots, and engage in similar activities. Some of these gatherings are racially segregated; most are open to anyone who shares a common interest. Rumours persist that the enigmatic Ambassador Kosh occasionally drifts by these gatherings, but no security camera has ever captured his image on such a walkabout.

Sports are another always-popular activity that continues to gain in popularity on the station. Unlike hobbies, sports are usually racially segregated. Humans, Centauri, Narn, and the other races all use the amateur sporting events as opportunities to gather together as a people. Competition for the limited sports areas is fierce, but in the last year no one has been seriously injured in the discussions.

Theatre and performing arts from the bawdy to the sublime also has a place on the station. The dancing girls of the Dark Star are justly famous, but represent only the smallest slice of the available entertainments. Orators stand in the corridors chatting about the events of the day. Buskers work the crowds looking for a fast credit. Dancers and comedians stage performances in the various public rooms. All of these legitimate forms of performing arts can be found in abundance, usually practiced by people who simply do not have sufficient resources to find a regular job.

The seedier side of entertainment grows hand in hand with its more legitimate cousins. Brothels and bars, not all of them named, thrive Downbellow. Expensive escort services provide companions for the discerning individual. Many of these services will supply cross-species companions, although the price for such services usually precludes any but the wealthiest diplomats.

Services	Price
Dark Star Dancer (1 dance)	30 cr./dance
Private Entertainer	100 cr./hour
Escort	200 cr./hour
Escort (cross-racial)	1000 cr./hour
Hobby Class	10 cr./class
Live Theatre Ticket	80 cr./performance
Vid Theatre Ticket	10 cr./show
Virtual Theatre Ticket	50 cr./hour
Virtual World Pass	50 cr./month

Environment

Life on Babylon 5 (or any other space station for that matter) is cramped. Although the architects tried to get around this by building relatively wide and tall corridors no one who walked under an open sky could ever call it roomy. Without the Hydroponics Garden many of the residents would suffer from intense "cabin fever" and cases of psychotic episodes would skyrocket.

The other thing that characters rarely talk about, but we know logically must exist, are the unique sounds and scents of the station. No matter how effective the environmental systems any closed system rapidly develops its own unique flavour in the air. Similarly, 2.5 million metric tons of spinning metal interlaced with machines and electronics will develop a unique song. These elements will vary based on the sector and the efforts made to dampen them.

Blue sector generally smells like antiseptic and odour neutralizers. Earth Force tries to minimize potentially offensive scents to avoid causing any diplomatic problems. The sound of many people efficiently going about their duties fill the main coordiors, while the chatter of people waiting for friends or loved ones echoes throughout just behind the customs area. The machinery of the station itself is notably absent, a huge amount of effort having been spent to sound proof these areas.

Brown sector smells of the harsh chemicals used to process waste. The residents add their own unique scents to the mix, as they cook and try to find some place to rest their unwashed bodies. The sound of the great recycling machines forms a constant drone under every conversation. People speak quietly in Brown sector, hoping that the background noise will drown out their words before a predator spots them.

Green sector presents the visitor with a host of strange scents. Each ambassadorial chamber is carefully climate controlled to smell and sound as much like the individual's homeworld as possible. Common meeting chambers are nearly odour free. In the corridors though we find a bizarre mix of scents as various private chambers open and close, disgorging their unique environment into the world. The entire sector also buzzes with the sound of voices arguing in a dozen different languages at once.

Grey sector smells of machines and metal, where it has atmosphere. The drone of electronics and the hiss of working mechanics create a sound environment like something out of a horror movie. The random sounds make it hard to isolate the location of a particular creature by sound (-2 circumstance penalty to Listen checks).

Red sector's residential and business areas provide a heady mix of familiar and strange sensations to any visitor. Cafeterias, meal houses, and restaurants follow the time-honoured tradition of opening their doors to allow the smell of the food to draw customers. This gives each corridor its own aroma; some residents even claim to be able to tell exactly where they are by sense of smell alone. Red sector is filled with a blend of exotic sounds from music to the laughter of children.

Food Services

Arguably the most difficult thing for anyone to procure on Babylon 5 is fresh food. Specifically, raw materials for the preparation of fresh food must either come from the hydroponics garden or off station. The prohibitive cost of individual cooking drives people out into the corridors in order to find sustenance.

In those corridors one finds a wide assortment of options. Small stalls serve racial delicacies made from things best left unmentioned. Restaurants recombine soy and other easily formable proteins into shapes mostly resembling regional cuisines. Fine dining is available for those with sufficient resources in the form of restaurants like the Fresh Air Restaurant.

Most residents who live on station for more than a few weeks eventually join one of the many cafeterias that line the halls. These cafeterias charge a flat rate per week of service. In return, the visitor gains access to the cafeteria during its hours of operation. He can eat up to fourteen meals a week, and can usually take something small for lunch with him.

Service	Price
Stall Meal	10 cr./meal
Cheap Restaurant	20 cr./meal
Expensive Restaurant	40 cr./meal
Exclusive Restaurant	100 cr./meal
Cafeteria	200 cr./week
Personally Cooked Meal	100 to 1000 cr.

PLOTS AND PLOT IDEAS

When we peek into the Babylon 5 universe as Games Masters and players we see a number of strange things. We see a world as complex as some other epic science fantasy, but with a hard science fiction edge. We see deadly combat in both space and personal scales. We meet characters defined not by their equipment but rather by whom they know. Certainly the main characters engage in what can only be described as high fantasy adventure at points; who can forget Sheridan blasting down the Shadows in Z'ha'dum? Yet that same character later falls to a simple trick played on him by an old friend.

So we have here a world very, very different than our run of the mill fantasy games. In fact, it is different even from the so called "narrative games" that crop up. Characters die from a single gunshot. Epic struggles come to a head in a massive space battle ended by personal rejection. The reward for an adventure may not be a *+3 PPG of wounding*, but a good word from a highly place diplomat in the right ear.

What can we do!

STRUCTURE

In order to address this quandary let us take a page from the book of the Maker himself, or several; after all borrowing wisdom never hurt anyone.

Sessions: Connected Scenes, Episodes or Story Arcs?

First off, we need to decide whether a session represents a set of connected scenes, a block of time equal to a series episode or even several episodes crammed together. Why is this important? The structure of our Babylon 5 source material revolves around the episodic television narrative model. Fortunately for us, this model adapts very well to the tabletop role-playing experience.

Almost every episode has a starting point, usually showing some moment of stillness for the characters that will be participate in the coming chaos. It then lays out the challenges that face our heroes, typically proposing two separate stories: the A and B plots. These plots move though the classic structure: beginning, rising tension caused by failure or confusion to the climax and then resolution. By the end of most episodes the Maker resolves the plots, moves the action along on the main story arcs and sets us up for the next round of chaos.

The A and B plots are mostly distinguished by their scope. The A plot deals with large, world changing issues. Think back to just about every episode. Remember the "big plot" that involves most of the characters? That the A plot. Conversely, the B plot usually just involves one to three characters that interact together on some minor but personally important point. Remember when Londo refused to help G'kar by selling him the plant he needed for his ritual? That was a B plot, putting two characters at odds over a relatively minor matter.

When the A plot relates to the overall story arc we call it a "story episode" or an "arch episode". In both cases we mean that the conflict and resolution of the A plot revealed sometime to us about the progress of the overall story. These episodes give us a lot of satisfaction as fans. They reward us for our investment of time. They set up or resolve world shaking events, usually with incredibly epic consequences.

At the same time many episodes have a strong B plot that either sets up or resolves long standing emotional issues. It is though the B plots that we encounter our characters in their intimate moments. We see their petty jealousies, their hopes and their fears. We meet them as people and therefore care about what happens to them when they finally enter the meat grinder that is an A plot.

Generally we can fit an "episode" with an A and a B plot into a three hour session with a little practice. Anything shorter than three hours does not give the players time to puzzle their way through the elements while still having fun. Longer sessions need more activity; several B plots can easily fill in the time. Imagine a session where the characters all worked towards some kind of major activity (say, rescuing a space station) where you also had planned 4 B arcs with 3 scenes each…

Character Conflict

Our second question deals with one of the very touchy issues of Babylon 5 (and gaming in general). How do we handle it when characters are, by nature or loyalty, on opposing sides? Players can become rather attached to their characters and destructive emotions abound when two or more characters find themselves at odds? What if that conflict forces them to betray or even murder another character?

Fortunately, the idea of using A and B plots provides us with a way to manage these conflicts. Characters should only rarely be in opposition on the goals of the A plot. For example, with the exceptions of Londo Mollari and Morden, none of the regular characters agreed to help the Shadows. They were the bad guys. Even characters clearly in opposition on many issues (like Sinclair and G'Kar) shared a common unspoken understanding on the issue. This agreement forms the coherent glue of party play.

The B plots provide us with an outlet for character competition. In fact, character conflict represents a never-ending source of custom B plots for our sessions. Does one character like to get the other's goat? Do two of the character's governments intensely disagree on a particular subject? Is one of the character's remarkably prejudiced against another? By setting up situations where these conflicts play out, we simultaneously defuse potential negative consequences and give our players a greater connection to the ongoing story.

Consequences

In the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book we briefly address the remarkable concept of consequence. That is to say, the character's actions actively come back to haunt them. If they anger a diplomat or kill him (in the grand tradition of psychopathic adventuring) then that diplomat's government will eventually take action. Mouthing off to security guards causes them to pay attention to every little infraction. Conversely, if the characters help and support others then they provide assistance in return. In theory this could provide us with an almost limitless mine of story ideas built around our character's actions.

The A and B plot structure for a session provides us with a simple way to manage the propagation of consequences though the story. As characters interact on the B plots they build resources and make enemies. Both of these may transform into either A or B plots in later sessions. Resources become new opportunities; enemies become dangerous obstacles.

A simple way to note these consequences is to make a list of various factions and primary actors on the story. At the end of the session, note a plus or minus and the character name by factions the character interacted with. The next time we break out the notes to plan the next session, this list becomes our handy guide too who wants to impede the character's progress.

PLOT IDEAS

So, now we have a structure into which to put our plot ideas. Where do we put them though? What seeds go where and how do we use them to generate ongoing game sessions?

For our purposes today we will address three types of plot ideas: story arc seeds, A plot seeds and B plot seeds. Story arc seeds give us broad, sweeping conflicts that will shape dozens of gaming sessions. A plot seeds give us conflicts that dominate between one and three gaming sessions, depending on how we structure things. B plot seeds deal with individual rivalries, conflicts and personal vendettas that involve one or more of the characters but do not have to involve everyone at the table.

Ideas for Story Arcs

Story arcs are, by their very nature, big. In fact, they can seem so mind bogglingly big that they quickly get out of control. Space armadas clash in epic combat. Worlds come under threat or are destroyed in the blink of an eye. Great empires rise, only to be kicked over by the mysterious forces of light that they accidentally attack. Getting a handle on these story arcs, let alone plotting them in time, can drive even a sane man crazy.

Fortunately all of these stories come back to basic emotions that we all feel: fear, hope, sorrow and the desire for freedom. The following ten story arc ideas show how we can take these basic themes and make some truly epic stories out of them.

Beginnings and Endings: Babylon 5 is, to one degree or another, about how the characters cope with the constant disasters plaguing them. At every turn friends die, hopes fade and enemies grow stronger. To simulate this, we can run a game where the story arc constructed around the characters' enemies' steady rise. If we set it in the main time line this arc may involve the characters coming into conflict in their early sessions with one of the minor members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, perhaps over trading rights with a number of small colonies on the borders of known space. Over time, this opposing power becomes stronger and stronger until they openly declare themselves for the Shadows. The players must deal with the increasing threat of loss, seizing advantages when and as they appear. They will lose as many conflicts as they win but each victory is sweeter for being so rare.

Elements of Shadows: The Shadows are not all bad. In fact, their original philosophy of finding truth in the shadows between light and darkness represents a widely accepted way of seeking universal truth. It is only when they turned from seeking truth to seeking chaos that they became dangerous. What if the characters were to, in their early days, encounter and become part of a group dedicated to the original ideals of the Shadows? This group could be a cross-racial organisation much like the Rangers, working for a splinter group of Shadows to prove that the old ways are best. This would bring the characters head to head with both the Shadows and the Vorlons, not to mention every side in the war. From the characters' point of view everyone is wrong, therefore everyone needs to be enlightened by facing their opposite.

Faith Manages: Babylon 5 has a strong element of mysticism running though it. Beings of good intent can move mountains. Delenn and Lenneir embody this spirit, but others have it as well. Even Garibaldi would not be able to accomplish what he does without first developing some faith in his own strength. This story arc helps to emphasise the faith aspect of the setting. In it, the characters take the role of various characters with strong faith (ministers, religious caste Minbari, Narn scholars, etc.). They work together on the edges of "accepted society", facing down the growing darkness not with guns, but with words and hope. Over time the presence and destructive philosophy of the Shadows comes like a blight, strengthening the character's opposition. Will they be able to save the people around them or even their own lives without resorting to the tactics of despair?

Mars Rebellion: We all know what happens to the Mars Rebellion during the story arc. But what happened during the decades of resistance before that? The struggle for liberty represents one of the most fundamental and morally ambiguous fights in the

modern world. Characters involved with this story arc take on the role of early resistance fighters or resistance fighters during the complex years right after the Earth/Minbari war. While trying to resist the oppression of the earth corporations they have to walk a fine line between fighting for freedom and terrorism. The story arc advances whenever the characters become involved with activities that either strengthen the resistance or weaken one of the various corporations. This fight could easily take them off of Mars itself, into the wild world of hyperspace travel and espionage.

On the Firing Line: Although there is not much mention of it in the setting, there is no reason for raiders to be the only independent military forces. Mercenary companies have a long history of service all over the Earth; one can easily imagine them going out into space. Once they open their membership to the other races they get access to stolen technology from across known space. Characters who serve with such a company could come from any race, be assigned nearly any sort of paramilitary mission and perhaps in time come to play a part in the great conflicts of the galaxy. Mercenaries also have fewer legal problems than raiders; they can easily serve legitimate governments. They can also switch sides in the middle of a conflict if the situation becomes dire enough; what if the players started by serving Shadow interests and in time came to serve the Alliance of Light?

The Quiet Life: One of the things that we miss out on from the series is all of the work that goes into pulling off a huge alliance like Sheridan manages. There are ships to service, messages to carry, diplomats to soothe, ships to salvage, scout reports to sort though; in short, a vast opportunity for adventure. In this story arc the characters take on the role of intelligence analysts and agents working for one of the various sides or for an independent "think tank". They gather information, discover patterns and use that information to the benefit of their group. If they run an independent agency the characters will quickly find themselves forced to choose sides; or they may try to work all sides looking for a good profit. This story arc relies a great deal of puzzles and mind games, so it plays very differently than a more action oriented campaign.

When Men Dream of Conquest: Everyone in Babylon 5 dreams about something. In their hearts and minds they dream of a world and then they act to create it. Mr. Clark is no different; he wants a world where he and his cronies control the power of an interstellar empire. What if the players were members of the machine that he puts in motion to seize that control? The story arc starts with the characters working for one of the many internal security groups in the Earth Alliance. Over time they are ordered to engage in more and more repressive activity. Eventually they have the option of participating in the absolute suppression of freedom in the Earth Alliance or joining the rebellion as active members. This story arc allows the characters to get involved with some of the most dramatic activities in the series, including the storming of the ISN building broadcast though out earth space.

The advantage and disadvantage of an existing setting

Like other established settings, the universe of Babylon 5 brings both a tremendous advantage and a tremendous disadvantage to the table. On the positive side the setting creator already went to a great deal of trouble to establish an epic story arc. On the negative side, the already told stories within the series serve to drive this story arc to its resolution. Fitting a new story into the arc poses a rather remarkable challenge.

Fortunately truly good game settings have enough space in them to contain many story arcs. Babylon 5 is one of those, although it takes a bit of work to wrap our brains around the intricacies of the setting.

Wheel of Time: Crusade highlighted a point made early in the series; the world of Babylon 5 is filled with the debris of long fallen civilisations. Not all of that debris takes the form of ruins either. Many old races never ascended to the status of First Ones, but instead just cling on to life in forgotten corners of the world. In this story arc characters play representatives of one of these old races, quietly moving though the rapidly falling apart regions of known space trying to reintegrate into society. Their story arc starts with them leaving their home system and beginning to encounter the outside world. Over time they may become more and more involved with the events happening around them. Alternately they may try to defend their people by keeping them hidden from both sides of the conflict. Of course, the shadows and the Vorlons seem to know all…

Where Lies find Honour: One of the key points themes of the series is redemption; characters that fall always have the opportunity to pick back up and try again. Only when someone stops trying do they truly become evil. In this story arc the characters start out as criminals, lurkers, deserters and all of the other people who prey on one another. As the arc advances they receive opportunities to draw themselves out of the muck. Not all of them need to be earth shaking; helping someone out of a jam could mean as much as hunting desperately for a shadow assassin sent to deal with Sheridan before he becomes a problem.

Ideas for A Plots

A Plot ideas usually look more manageable from the outset than story arc ideas. They are shorter, have clearly defined plots and we can make noticeable progress on them in a single session.

A perfect example of this comes from Season One of Babylon 5. It is filled with episodes that directly address or advance the story arc in some way. But that arc is so large that we barely notice the progress. At the same time, each individual episode moved towards a conclusion of the events initiated during the first portion. Sometimes we agreed with the conclusion. Other times, it looked deeply strange to us…and those were generally the arc episodes.

The following story ideas try to provide a similar kind of structure to an individual session. The plot idea may or may not be related to the story arc plot, but its resolution often furthers (to one degree or another) some element of the story arc plot.

Darklight (Artefact search, 2nd/3rd season): Rumours abound of a race called the shadows, First Ones that will help anyone to fight a war or settle a score. Despite their seemingly helpfulness many people find them to be dangerous allies. Even more disturbing is the rumour that they and their agents are functionally invisible. They can go anywhere, see anything and nothing can stop them. However, a rumour also exists of an old organic technology artefact that radiates "darklight", a variable light pattern that cancels their invisibility. Agents from all sides are scrambling to get the gizmo; the Alliance of Light wants it to at least protect their key councils, the shadows want it out of circulation and the Vorlons want it to keep the battle "clean" since invisibility is an accepted tool. The characters may find themselves working for any of the three sides or for any number of other interested parties. They may have to retrieve it from its initial location, protect it while it is on the station, escort it to its final destination or break it free from its escort to take it to another party.

For Honour and Blood (Dangerous Fight, 3rd season): The characters find themselves caught in a battle between two forces of raiders. One, composed mostly of Centauri, wants to wipe the other out. The other, composed mostly of humans and Narn want to get about whatever business they were one. The characters may be members of either raider group, security working on a nearby station/ship, helpless bystanders or even instigators who were hired to bring the two groups into conflict for some other sinister purpose.

Forgotten Prices (Intrigue, 1st to 5th Season): One of the character's most powerful non-hostile adversaries contacts them. He will "settle the score" between them if they will agree to help him in a delicate matter. He needs someone removed from the field of play (either killed or simply made unavailable for a length of time). This person is actually an old friend of his from the past, who has called in a very inconvenient marker. He cannot say no, but the favour is time dependent; if he can keep his friend out of circulation for long enough then it becomes moot. The characters can help out, discover what is going on or even turn the adversary's friend over to his enemies.

In the Name of the Rose (Hunt, 1st to Mid-2nd season): The Thenta Makur never admits to failure. Unfortunately this does not mean that they do not fail. Assassination is a chancy business and fraught with peril. In this story, a desperate Narn approaches the characters. He has considerable funds and is perfectly happy to give it all to them if they take him far out onto the rim. The Narn has quite a following as well: the Thenta Makur want him dead, his target has plans that will eventually lead to his merciful death and a handful of Centauri who would really like to find out more about a number of assassinations he performed over the years. This plot works best for characters that are members of a relatively independent group or diplomats from one of the minor races (see the Wheel of Time above).

Into the Breach (Stand up fight, 1st to 4th season): The opportunity for stand up fights does not occur very often in the world of Babylon 5. Shady dealings, ancient ambiguous evils and complex plots abound, but rarely an honest fight. Into the Breach gives the characters the opportunity to just be soldiers. The characters' employer receives word that a small allied base in neutral territory stands on the brink of attack. They are sent to help with the situation, eventually going head to head with a mercenary group hired to make the place uninhabitable. If this is a non-arc story then the mercenaries work for themselves. If it relates to an arc then the main arc villains hired them to get the job done.

Questions from People Who Should Know Better (Puzzle game, 5th season): The Interstellar Alliance is a fragile entity, filled with doubt and mistrust. One of the primary members of the Alliance hires the characters after their "stellar performance during the war" to do some covert work for him. He wants to assess the intentions of the other members without arousing their suspicion. Everything is actually on the up and up, although the intricate dealings of empire building make it look as if everyone has some kind of sinister agenda. The "payoff" in this story comes not from overwhelming a foe, but from clearing up the complex tangle of plots and counter plots to discover that everyone actually deals in good faith.

Remembering to Dance (Diplomacy/Intrigue, 1st to 4th season): Young noble Centauri are disappearing at an alarming rate. One of the Centuari houses calls in some favours with the characters or their employer to initiate an investigation. Although well hidden, it eventually becomes clear that the young nobles have run away to "avoid the chaos of home". Taking advantage of the chaos brewing in the galaxy they settle a small world of their own. There they live a quiet life of peace and debauchery. How the characters handle these well meaning but misguided youngsters will have serious ramifications in their later dealings with the Centauri.

Speakers and Dreamers (Diplomacy, 1st to 5th season): A religious caste Minbari calls together a meeting of religious leaders from the various peoples to talk about the great issues of the day. This "sharing of spirit" takes place in an increasingly tension-filled Babylon 5. The characters may be sent to observe, gather information, disrupt the proceedings, assassinate any Narn who might come out of hiding to attend, etc. The speakers themselves range from the highly provocative to dreamers who lack the vision to truly change the world.

To Stand Alone (Intrigue, 5th Season): A mysterious race has come out of the stars, asking the Alliance where their masters, the shadows, went. They are not angry or hurt or bitter. They just want to know what is going on. The mechanisms keeping them in slumber malfunctioned, causing them to basically miss the war. Once they learn what happened they turn and head to the Rim. The characters could be part of the team that discovers them for the first time, a negotiation team working to recruit them for one of the major powers or an assault team sent to destroy them.

What Value Order? (Puzzle game, 2nd season to 4th season): The characters come into contact with a member of the Earth rebellion. Not the happy go lucky colonists or the staff on Babylon 5, but the people fighting the quiet struggle back home. This person needs helpers with a fast ship and nerves of steel to run a package Earthside. He does not have much in the way of money, but the good will of a lot of powerful people supports his cause. Of course, the good will of an equally large number of powerful people would go to the individual who turned him and all of his compatriots in…

Works of Charity (Moral Conflict, 2nd or 3rd season): A charity organisation approaches the characters or their employer with a request for assistance. They wish to smuggle assistance to the people of Narn, regardless of the consequences. They have some money, but more importantly they have the good will of Mr. Garibaldi. Such smuggling pits the characters head to head against the Centauri Republic. If the characters fail then they perfectly set up the events of *Comes the Inquisitor*.

Ideas for B Plots

B Plots work a little differently than either A plots or full story arcs. Instead of trying to involve everyone in the group, they focus intensely a conflict between one or two characters. At least one of these characters is under player control; the other may be controlled by another player or a Games Master character.

These plots require a bit of rethinking on our part. Unlike A plots they do not require great fireworks. What the need instead is a deep connection to the characters in question? For example, look at the scene where Londo poisons Lord Refa This scene amounted to two men sitting in a bar, having a drink together. But the emotional context of the situation: Londo's pain, his anger, Refa's astonishment that his situation had changed so suddenly, all worked together to create a defining moment for both characters.

The best place to look for B plots is in the players actions. However, the following ideas should help you to recognise a few useful patterns.

A Point of Faith: One of the character's more cynical friends declares his intention to seek out "the grail of light". He has heard that the Minbari will support a seeker after lost myths without reservation and this strikes him as an excellent opportunity to live the easy life.

Approaching Gods: Two of the character's friends got drunk one night and set up a bet. The first person to actually get Ambassador Kosh to say something directly to them wins. The loser has to buy the other a night of drinks at the Dark Star.

Breaking The Seal: Though means fair or foul one of the character's underworld contacts acquired a sealed diplomatic pouch. He wishes to trade it with one of the other major powers, but is afraid that in doing so he will incur the wrath of the original government. He comes to his friend to see if he can get some assistance in the matter.

Contending Honour: This plot activates when a character makes a stand on an issue based on his code of honour. Two to three sessions later one of the character's close contacts takes an opposite stand in public. What will the character do?

Dances with Minbari: One of the character's more lecherous friends wishes to become intimately involved with one of the "fainting lily" religious class Minbari. She has chosen to ignore him. Since he considers himself "irresistible" this has wounded his pride. Over the next few days his behaviour deteriorates to the point of outright stalking. The question is: what does the player do about it?

Fear and Loathing on Babylon 5: One of the character's close friends admits that he has a stim addiction. He works in a relatively sensitive position, where drug addiction would cause the loss of lives. What does the character do?

Point and Counter Point: Two of the character's allies come almost to blows over some topic of discussion. They refuse to listen to the other side's point of view and the character needs them both for his current A plot. How does the character resolve the tension?

Rite of Passage: The character runs into a young member of his own race out to prove his adulthood. This young person has a past remarkably similar to the character's and may even share many of the same personality traits. How does the character help him?

Searching for Oblivion: A friend walks up to the character, hands him an illegal PPG and cap and walks away. If tracked down, he tells the character that he was thinking about killing himself, but decided not to go though with it for now. He will come back for the PPG if he changes his mind. How does the character deal with this revelation and what has caused his ally to enter into suicidal depression?

GETTING AROUND THE MAN

Characters in adventure games behave in ways that they would never dream of doing in real life. They clumsily break laws, threaten people who might sue them or get them imprisoned for assault and liberate private property without regard for its previous owners. Although they may be able to get away with this kind of behaviour in the outer fringes of civilisation, on Babylon 5 the forces of order keep a careful watch. Anyone who steps out of line will eventually have to answer to the Man himself.

Who is the Man? What does he want, and how does he go about getting it? Is it possible to avoid him? Can he be dealt with? At some point these questions will arise in just about any game; the answers to them may well determine the fate of the galaxy.

WHO IS THE MAN?

The forces of order in the world of Babylon have faces and names. They have agendas, intentions and points of view about their responsibilities. Most also must bow to superior forces in the civil and military administration whether they wish to or not. All of these factors come into play when determining exactly what kind of opposition the characters will face when they wish to break the law.

Babylon 5

On Babylon 5, Mr. Garibaldi personifies "the man". He runs the security forces with a steady hand. But he himself is not a stickler for rules; he abuses his access privileges, makes deals with people to ignore their transgressions and has more underworld connections that most criminal bosses. He does what he has to do to fulfil his mission and to help those who he feels need helping along the way. Mr. Garibaldi also works hard to train his people to use the same fluid techniques he does, creating a highly adaptable military security force that can switch from peacekeeping to defensive roles very quickly. It is important to remember that his staff is not comprised of civilians, but rather military security personnel working on a potentially dangerous mission.

Off of Babylon 5 the characteristics of security become more diffuse. Instead of having a specific individual to deal with, characters face a complex web of races and laws. Just determining exactly what the characters will face when they meet the man can be a difficult task. Fortunately, the colonies generally break down into easily understood categories.

Earth Alliance and Earth Force Colonies

Earth colonies fall into three categories: long established civilian, new civilian and military. These three categories include the majority of legitimate colonies; squatters will live by whatever rules they can get away with.

The long established civilian colonies have a civil police force that works to maintain the rule of law. They answer to an elected branch of government and generally enforce the laws of their specific colony. These security forces greatly resemble the more stable police forces of 20th century earth. They have a fairly "closed" mentality, but do the best they can to uphold the law. Colonies with a strong ethnic tradition tend to keep the laws of their homeland; corporate colonies maintain EA law when it is not inconvenient to profits to do so.

Security forces on new colonies, mining colonies and other places where humans engage in rough behaviour take a more liberal interpretation of Earth Alliance law. So long as no one is killed or incited to riot they tend to look the other way. Theft will be punished if proven, but these beleaguered forces do not have enough time to investigate it themselves. Justice tends to be enforced by the local majority, with lynching being the ultimate sanction from the community. Cultural norms hold the force of law, backed by the rough and ready justice of men who know what is right and don't much are for due process.

In contrast, Earth Force installations display a crisp efficacy about their security procedures. Military law applies to all installation. Even those with civilian populations must abide by these regulations. Security forces in military installations tend to focus strongly on matters that would endanger the mission or personnel. If a civilian population exists alongside the military one, they provide basic policing but leave matters of justice to the civilian legal system. This can lead to rather odd situations where the characters find themselves detained in military facilities and then tried before a civilian judge.

Centauri Security Forces

Security in the Centauri Republic involves two separate but not equal forces. The Centauri Houses protect their own interests. In theory the Emperor's forces protect the common people, but in reality his reach is limited to Centauri Prime and more practically his own household. Although individual grievances can be raised to him, and his command will be obeyed, practically the daily matters of justice devolve on the Houses.

A security force watching over its own house completely ignores "illegal" activities that originate from house members or on the orders of the house nobles. Services that cater to noble tastes (like prostitution, drugs and blood sports) can flourish under this benevolent dictatorship. However, if one of these businesses crosses a noble it can find itself out of business, and its principle actors hung, in very short order. Common vassals of the house are afforded as much protection as their status allows; highly placed workers can find themselves living like nobles, while those who do not provide anything useful quickly fall prey to the dark elements of society.

Long established Centauri colonies tend to have a single "dominant" house and a host of other lesser houses. These houses typically started out as allies, but the vagrancies of Centauri politics can quickly turn friends into bitter enemies. Generally each house maintains its own security arrangements, and co-operates only though the intermediary of the Imperial Court. This can lead to small-scale wars fought between the security forces of various houses, with the winner being declared the de facto winner in a legal sense.

House security forces take a very dim view of outside encroachments. Behaviour they happily ignore from their own people they come down hard on in others. A house member may be able to walk around drugged out of his mind and drunk as a lord; an outsider who does the same thing will find himself in prison or heavily fined for 'disturbing the peace'. Similarly they deal harshly with anyone proved to be an agent of a rival house, creating whatever charges they need to allow for brutal punishments.

League Security Forces

Characterising League security forces is a chancy shot at best. Each race has its own points of view, needs and desires. However there is one constant that does come into play. No matter what a particular races point of view on the law, its scope of action will be very limited on the galactic stage. League forces control at best a handful of worlds. They also usually cannot just run after criminals; anyone who escapes the government's sphere of influence can make a clean getaway.

However, crimes committed on those worlds will eventually catch up with the criminal. At its core the League exists as a set of diplomatic agreements between worlds. Once a criminal escapes that diplomatic machine sets into motion, attempting to secure co-operation, or at least no interference, from the various races involved. Thus a criminal fleeing from Drazi to Antarean space may be safe for a few years, but eventually Drazi security will show up after the diplomats finish their discussions. For particularly short-sighted individuals this can come as quite a surprise; criminals never seem to expect that injured parties will talk to other people who might actually have reasons to help them.

When dealing with alien citizens outside of their home space the laws that apply depend entirely on the location involved. In diplomatic and military locations (like Babylon 5), the aliens are subject to their own laws when interacting with each other and to the host people's laws when interacting with others. On civilian colonies the local laws apply equally to all individuals although diplomats have more leeway than the common folk.

Minbari Security Forces

Minbari security displays the same rigor and quiet determination that marks every other aspect of their culture. Highly trained members of the warrior caste keep a close eye on anything that might represent a danger to their more peaceful charges. They quickly investigate any unusual activity, persecute those who have done harm, and enforce penalties of service on those who shirk their duties. Consequences quickly follow action, mitigated by the practicality of the workers and the compassion of the religious. Anyone attempting illicit activities, or wishing to harm the Minbari on their home territory, would be well advised to choose another target.

When out among the "lesser" races Minbari apply basic common sense to matters of their personal security. They avoid places where they might be in danger. They move quickly and quietly. Most hold themselves with such assurance that lesser criminals avoid them for easier marks.

When a Minbari suffers at the hands of a non-Minbari the warrior castes retribution comes swiftly. They are not afraid of throwing threats around, or of outright violating the laws of other people in order to bring the matter to resolution. Most Minbari commanders will give the local authorities what they consider a "reasonable" length of time to deal with the matter before acting. Depending on the commander's patience this period may be as short as 24 hours or as long as 72. Having a nearly invincible Sharlin sitting around with open weapon ports and demanding hourly progress reports is an unnerving situation for even the most effective security force.

Narn Security Forces

The entity called "Narn Security" takes a rather dramatic turn during the course of the five years of the story arc. What starts out as an arrogant and war-like people rather swiftly becomes first a conquered state, then a group of scattered refugees who

The Narn Regime takes security very seriously. Armoured Narn soldiers patrol the streets. Every Narn is armed with some kind of melee weapon (usually a knife) and often with a pistol as well. They take justice very seriously, and their security forces happily enforce their rules on other races. For them the display of internal cohesion is one more way that they prove their superiority over the Centauri.

After the fall of Narn there is a period of chaos during which the Narn security forces completely lose control. They transform themselves into an organised resistance, but discard their civic protection duties. The flame of hate consumes what little order they might be able to provide. This effect is most pronounced in the Narn colonies, where the Centauri do not send occupation forces until well after the homeworld's fall.

After this period of chaos G'Kar steps into the breach, using the free Narn to assist the over-stretched military security forces of Babylon 5. Although it passes almost unnoticed by many races, this moment represents the birth of a new kind of Narn. These Narn are honest, forthright, and courteous. They stand firmly by their convictions but do so without pride. They fight and die beside the other races, leading the way towards victory not by words but by quiet action. They embrace the philosophy in the Book of G'Kar: if the Narn must pass then let us do so with dignity and purpose.

WHAT DOES THE MAN WANT?

Regardless of their personality or approach, the security forces of the galaxy all generally seek to accomplish the following things: protect a given area and/or population, enforce social norms, and insure that property laws receive sufficient respect. They also work to prevent alien or undesirable influences from intruding, although undesirable may vary from culture to culture.

How a particular security organisation ranks these activities depends on their physical circumstances as well as their mandate. Generally their priority lists may be organised in the following fashion:

Issue Priority by Physical Location

Priority	Space Station/ Domed Colony	Established Colony/ Homeworld	New Colony or Trade Route	Frontier Security
1	Structural Protection	Personal Rights	Trade Rights	Security Preparedness
2	Personal Rights	Property Law	Personal Rights	Trade Rights
3	Security Preparedness	Civil Order	Civil Order	Structural Protection
4	Civil Order	Trade Rights	Property Law	Property Law
5	Property Law	Structural Protection	Structural Protection	Personal Rights
6	Trade Rights	Security Preparedness	Property Laws	Civil Order

Physical Location Key

The above table sorts possible locations into four categories. These categories provide us with a simple key to the primary responsibilities and concerns a security force may have.

Established Colony/Homeworld: The security/police forces on a well-established colony or homeworld are primarily concerned with civic order. Regardless of their methods, they try to keep things safe and reasonably quiet for the vast majority of the people. If they encounter heavily armed resistance they will have access to elite forces and even military units. These security forces are usually well organised for dealing with crimes involving violence, property or electronic theft. They do not deal well with trade disputes, espionage or mass destruction.

Frontier Security: Frontier security forces are usually corporate security agents, relatively isolated civic servants or military staff with some rather unpleasant enemies back home. They try to keep a lid on unruly, violent people by maintaining a very strong personal reputation for discipline. However, their primary concern lies in being prepared to deal with any number of hostile forces that might appear at any time. They deal with other matters when and as they have time.

New Colony/Trade Route: New colonies and trade routes share many things in common. Most importantly, they exist primarily for the corporations and interests that created them. Each one has a specific function that overrides any other concerns that security might have. These places are notorious for "passing on" crimes to other people, because they cannot be bothered to investigate such things themselves. They may even wilfully allow the overriding interest to breach structural integrity, putting the lives of everyone involved in danger.

Space Station/Domed Colony: Space stations and domed colonies have the most stringent structural protection requirements of any of the four types. A mistake can literally lead to the death of everyone within the colony. As such, these security forces work night and day to prevent anything from harming their homes. When station integrity is threatened they drop everything to prevent it from happening. Most station/domed colony security adhere to military discipline and regulations, even if they are not actually a military unit.

Issue Descriptions

Security deals with six distinct kinds of security issues. These are:

Civil Order: Civil order refers to peace, quiet and the ability to move around without encountering unpleasant sights. In places where civic order is important people do not defecate on the streets or wander around starting fights in public. People maintain a relatively polite approach to one another, do not engage in illegal activities in public, and try not to cause a fuss. Large gatherings can assemble and disperse peacefully. Places with low regard for civil order are rowdy, boisterous and relatively difficult to navigate without causing offence.

Personal Rights: Personal rights refer to the body of law dealing with personal privilege, injury, privacy and the right to life. Where they are highly important the security forces act quickly to deal with anything that infringes on them. In other places the individual must expect to protect himself, taking the law into his own hands.

Property Law: Property law refers to the body of legislation and common practice dealing with the protection and ownership of property. The more important this is to a given location, the more likely it is that security will interfere when private property becomes threatened or damaged. Forces that put a low priority on property law tend to laugh off reports of petty theft, although they may be motivated to deal with something sufficiently spectacular.

Security Preparedness: Security preparedness refers to the local security staff's ability to deal with a military or paramilitary threat. It involves the creation of considerable logistical capability, along with advanced combat and tactics training for the force. The higher the priority of this issue, the more combat ready a force becomes. Station security forces tend to have the highest level of combat readiness, often being prepared to stand off invasions if necessary.

Structural Protection: Structural protection deals with the public infrastructure surrounding the security force. Places that have a high priority on structural protection control everything that might possibly be dangerous to the infrastructure. Guns, bombs, anything explosive, plants, insects…. the list seems almost endless. Any actions that threaten the security of the structure are dealt with harshly. Conversely, many established worlds place the safety of the public infrastructure as a secondary consideration to the rights of individuals and property owners.

Trade Rights: Trade rights deal with the collection of appropriate tariffs, protection under the law for visitors, and the ability to move cargo without inspection. The more important trade rights are, the more likely it is that the security staff will not bend them in the name of other priorities. This insures the smooth flow of commerce, although it often annoys people who have other needs.

Using the Priority Matrix

So, what do we do with this priority matrix? How does it help us to quickly work out what security or police forces will do in a given situation?

Priority 1 issues receive the most attention and the heaviest fines. Even the usually low-key security forces on frontier worlds take immediate action when faced with this sort of issue. People violating the restrictions associated with priority 1 issues can expect to be caught in short order.

Priority 2 and 3 issues are important but not enough so to cause security to drop everything they are doing. They take a strong interest though, and will likely pursue issues to a conclusion. Penalties are severe, but generally not fatal or overly destructive.

Offence Punishment by Priority

Type	Centauri	Earth Alliance	Minbari	Narn
Civil Order	Indentured Service (1 to 5 years), Public Flogging	Imprisonment (1 month to 3 years), Public service	Term of service (1 year)	Death by torture, Life service
Personal Rights	Death, Life imprisonment, slavery	Life imprisonment, Long term imprisonment (30+ years), Mind wipe	Term of service (10 years)	Forced service, Time of Pain (21 days)
Property Law	Imprisonment (10+ years), Restitution (10x property lost)	Imprisonment (1+ years), Restitution (3x property lost)	Term of service (5 years)	Forced service, Time of Pain (14 days)
Security Preparedness	Imprisonment (1-5 years)	Imprisonment (5 years)	Term of service (1 year)	Death, Time of Pain (21 days)
Structural Protection	Banishment, Imprisonment (5 year), Public torture	Banishment, Imprisonment (1 year, Fine (1000 to 10000 credits))	Behaviour modification, Term of service (6 months)	Banishment, Death, Time of Pain (14 days)
Trade Rights	Public flogging, Restitution (10x estimated value of trade)	Restitution (5x estimated value of trade)	Enforced solitude, Term of service (1 month)	Public Flogging

Priority 4 and 5 issues generally only get resolved if and when the security force has time to deal with it. In high traffic areas that may be never. Otherwise they will eventually get around to it. For sudden or reasonably well hidden crimes this means that the perpetrator will get away. However, sloppy criminals may well find justice coming after then weeks or months after the initial event as security forces purge their files of old cases.

Priority 6 issues almost never see resolution. If the event occurs in front of a security officer he will do something about it. Otherwise, the event will be filed and "someday" investigated.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN HE COMES DOWN ON YOU?

The punishment inflicted by security forces for inappropriate behaviour depends on the race and the priority of the crime. The Offence Punishment by Priority table describes various probable sentences from the major races based on the priority level of the offence.

The penalties above indicate the maximum penalty for the most aggressions violations. The individual decreeing the sentence may choose to apply lesser punishments based on mitigating circumstances, the vagrancies of specific culture's laws, or the political pressure brought to bear on behalf of the victims and perpetrators.

Note that Centauri justice is considered relatively harsh by galactic standards. Similarly, most of the League worlds would consider Minbari justice almost ridiculous. Most worlds follow the Earth Alliance as a standard, believing they struck a solid balance between justice and mercy. These same worlds feel that the Narn have fallen far off of the scale, and are leery of allowing any of their citizens to fall on the "mercy" of Narn justice.

The Narn "Time of Pain" deserves a special mention. Imprisonment is generally regarded as a slave's punishment. Free Narn would rather die than spend time in a cell. Therefore they have instituted a system of public torture using the pain giver technology. Each day of his sentence the Narn spends time standing in the public square, with pain givers active at random intervals. He is allowed to sit and rest at night. Once the sentence completes he is considered to have paid his debt to society in full.

HOW DO YOU GET AROUND HIM?

Now that we know a bit about the man and his needs, not to mention the hammer he holds over our heads, what can we do to get around him? How do we avoid the hammer and make a bit of profit? More importantly, what steps do we need to take before raising a ruckus?

Do things he does not have time to deal with

The simplest solution to the problem of the man is simply to engage in illicit activities that he does not have time to deal with. For example, Mr. Garibaldi takes a personal interest in anything that might threaten the station. He only cares about misplaced trade goods when they either enter into the aforementioned category or someone gives him a direct order to. Conversely, the fastest way to get a bored customs agent on a trade route to come down like a rabid dog is to mess with someone else's cargo.

If security does catch you violating a low priority issue, chances are they will be willing to let the characters go with a reprimand or at most a small fine. They want the activity to stop and the repercussions to go away so that they can focus on more important issues. So long as they are reasonably polite it will probably just be smoothed over.

For an example of how this plays out, consider the crime of smuggling illegal vegetables into a restricted area. On a homeworld or a new colony the security forces will probably just confiscate the merchandise if they find it. On Babylon 5 or another space station the smuggler will likely face at least banishment from the station, if not heavy fines and a possible prison sentence. Why?

The difference lies in the security of the environment. A handful of produce is not likely to harm a large, thriving ecosystem. On the other hand, as few as a dozen insect larva could easily infest a space station leading to untold catastrophic consequences for everyone on-board. A similar rule of scale applies to all smuggling issues. Anything that might threaten the environment must be dealt with immediately in space, and is at best a secondary concern on homeworlds.

Friends in the right places

Everyone knows that having a "friend in the right place" helps to get away with murder. Unfortunately, figuring out who that friend needs to be is quite a bit more complicated than it looks. Can a security chief just publicly ignore regulations? When does a diplomatic friend help, and when does his intervention just cause more problems then it solves?

Criminal contacts look like a good place to start until one starts to dig a little deeper. Although they can provide the character with some resources and jobs, they honestly do not provide much in the way of protection. The word of other criminals does not hold up well in the court of law, or in the opinions of security.

Corporate contacts have the advantage of being extremely rich. They can afford the best lawyers, the most expensive services and even the occasional illegal operation. However they have to work behind the scenes. Characters will find that corporate contacts work best in situations where they have time and justice proceeds at a reasonable pace. They are useless when justice happens too quickly for them to bring their resources to bear. Most will also refuse to publicly support someone caught in a criminal act.

Diplomatic contacts can generally intercede any time the character engages in illegal activities in alien territory. They might not be able to get the charges dismissed, but they can certainly tie them up in negotiations for months if not years. Conversely, the contact may end up having to "trade" the characters for another concession from the previously stifled government as the tides of politics shift. Most diplomatic contacts do not have significant authority within their own governments and therefore cannot help with domestic disputes.

Military contacts can help smooth over illegal activities that take place within their jurisdiction. However, they may not be able to just cause the problem to go away. Due process must be followed, and evidence presented. They can mitigate the punishment but not cause it to go away entirely.

Security contacts sound like the ideal people for dealing with pesky problems regarding criminal activity. A friend on the force in the area that the crime occurred should be able to smooth everything over. Unfortunately things do not work that way. For low priority issues the contact can probably get the matter dropped, or a summary judgement entered for some minor penalty. However he cannot cause high priority issues to vanish. Such things directly impact his job. He must therefore carefully account for them, and must usually demonstrate impartiality in judgement. This does not mean that he will not be able to help; but it does mean that any help will have to occur after the final judgement is rendered.

Getting away the Centauri way

As always, the Centauri are a notable exception to the above rules. For them, everything hinges on house membership and position. A noble can get away with nearly anything within his own house, but must obey the ordinary rules outside of it. Conversely a low ranked Centauri has little leeway to act unless a greater noble directly commands him.

Common Activities

Characters commonly find themselves engaged in a wide variety of illegal acts including: assault, breaking and entering, electronic intrusion, kidnapping, smuggling and theft. These activities would land most people in jail for the rest of their lives. Fortunately for the characters they are not most people; they have access to friends in the right places and skills that help them get out trouble. Most of these are relatively well covered in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book, but several require more information.

Assault

Assault is defined as an unlawful threat or attempt to injure another physically. Its primary defining aspect is the state of fear: it is possible to assault someone without physically attacking him or her if the target fears that an attack will take place.

In order to get away with assault the characters must do one of the following:

1. Convince the threatened individual not to go to security.
2. Prevent the individual from testifying at the hearing.
3. Operate in an environment (like a frontier outpost) where assault is considered a personal matter between two individuals.

Breaking and Entering

Breaking and entering is defined as the unauthorised forcible entry into another's premises for the purpose of committing a crime. This includes searching someone's quarters without permission, slipping onto their ship to avoid paying for passage, or entering a locked shop to steal the merchandise. It is actually possible to be guilty of breaking and entering in situations involving the retrieval of stolen goods; the act of entering the premises with the intent to steal is the violation, regardless of the circumstances.

In order to get away with breaking and entering the characters will need to do more than just get though the door. They also need to:

1) Disable any station security (cameras and recording devices) that monitor the quarters. This usually requires a Technical (electronics) skill check with a DC determined by the Games Master.
2) Disable the area's computer controls, which will record access and any commands given. This usually requires a Computer Use skill check with a DC determined by the Games Master.
3) Avoid leaving forensic evidence, including fingerprints or trace amounts of DNA from skin flecks, hairs or other bodily material. This requires a Concentration skill check (DC 20), as the characters must pay detailed attention to everything they do.

Smuggling

Smuggling is defined as bringing in or taking out objects without paying lawful customs charges or duties. It includes not only bringing in otherwise legal goods, but also carrying various kinds of illegal merchandise into a specific area.

Although it seems easy at first, the easy with which you can smuggle something or someone into an area depends on three factors:

1) How high is the priority on structural protection? Security forces that place a high priority (1 or 2) on structural protection do not like to have anything in their environment they do not know about. The DC to evade detection is therefore increased.

2) How dangerous is the object? Weapons and illegal drugs tend to be more carefully screened than plants and data crystals.

3) How large is the object? Sneaking a milligram of Dust into an area is quite a bit easier than sneaking a person on board.

The DCs to avoid detection are based off the following chart, and further modified based on the Games Masters assessment of the situation.

Smuggling DCs

	Tiny Object	Small Object	Medium Object	Large Object
1	24	26	28	30
2 to 3	18	20	22	25
3 to 4	14	16	18	20
5 to 6	9	11	13	15

The DC is further modified by the potential danger represented by the object being smuggled:

Extremely dangerous (weapons and drugs): +10
Unauthorised entry (bringing a person though): +5
Modestly dangerous (organic matter, animals): +3
Illegal technology (organic tech, alien artefacts): +2

This modifier represents the basic scanning abilities of any capable security force. The Games Master may choose to reduce or alter these modifiers if the security team is ill equipped or otherwise unable to fulfil their duties.

The skill used to avoid security depends on the actual smuggling plan. The creation of a scan and search proof box or hold-all requires a Technical (electronics) skill check. Working out the patterns of the security forces so as to avoid detection requires a Diplomacy skill check. Sneaking around security is certainly an option, but it requires multiple contested Hide and Move Silently against individuals equipped with highly sophisticated detection equipment and (in the case of a space station) the ability to scan large areas rapidly. Just brazenly stepping though the detectors without bothering to conceal anything will get the character caught, invoking the details provided above.

DUST

The Following are alternative rules regarding the drug Dust

Dust, the addictive chemical developed by the Psi Corps and distributed by criminal laboratories on Earth to human colonies and stations throughout the galaxy, has the unique property of making its users telepathic for a short amount of time. While this power is both extremely focused and not entirely under the user's control, it is still a potent ability - fully capable of slicing through the willpower of anyone unfortunate enough to come across the user during its duration of effect.

When a user takes a dose of this drug, it stimulates their neural processes to ten times their normal speed and awakens the inborn but dormant telepathic gene. This awakening makes them powerfully telepathic for a limited time (1d4 hours) and lets them force the equivalent of a Deep Scan (see the Telepathy rules in the main rulebook) on any one person during its duration. This target gets no Will save to avoid the effect and the power's range is 50 feet. While it requires line of sight to initiate, the Deep Scan can be maintained for as long as the user remains within its range thereafter.

Once this Deep Scan has been started, the Dust user will not willingly leave the 50 foot range and will immediately become insensate and unresponsive if forced outside of it. The Deep Scan will be maintained automatically for as many rounds as it takes to drive the victim of the mental attack unconscious with subdual damage (at a rate of 1d3 points every round as per the Deep Scan telepathic power). The 'questions' asked are very general and not fully under the user's control; they tend to centre on secrets, current thoughts, and important personal memories. Once the victim goes unconscious, the Dust user wanders around in a delirious haze for the rest of the drug's duration, babbling about the things he or she has seen.

Someone on Dust generally assaults the first person they come into physical contact or close proximity with after taking the drug. If the user has an acutely strong will (Will saving throw bonus of +8 or better), he or she can try to seek out and use their new gift on a specific target. This is usually quite difficult, as the user can only move 10 feet per round on foot and does not possess the physical capacity to operate a vehicle of any kind. Telepaths taking Dust may always choose who they assault with it but they are also limited in their ability to move.

Dust users are generally docile until they use their Deep Scan ability on someone with violent or terrifying memories; this drives them into a berserk rage (+4 to Strength, -2 to Defence Value) for the remainder of the drug's duration. Oddly, the rage rarely vents itself on the source of the memories that set it off. The Dust user will attack a person at random within 50 feet of where the victim of the Deep Scan is lying. Telepaths under the influence of Dust *always* become enraged after the Deep Scan concludes and are 50% likely to take out that fury on the victim of their mental attack.

Recovering From Dust

A Dust user is bed ridden for two full days after taking a dose and riding through its effects. This can be reduced to one day if he or she receives competent long-term care. Dust addiction doubles this recovery time, making it difficult for regular users of the drug to hold any kind of job or position of responsibility. Dust addiction is mostly a judgement call on the part of the Games Master, but more than two uses within a year by any character should qualify under all but the most extreme circumstances.

Victims of a Deep Scan brought on by Dust are another matter. Having suffered deep psychological trauma as a result of their assault, most do not regain consciousness for at least three days and are not coherent for another 24 hours. Medical care and psychotherapy can reduce these times but in extreme cases of violation, catatonia and schizophrenic breaks are not unheard of.

When a victim is reduced to zero hit points by the subdual damage caused by a Dust induced Deep Scan, a Will save (DC 16) must be made. On a natural 1, the victim will suffer an extreme neurotic effect such as those previously mentioned. If the saving throw is simply failed, the mental trauma suffered will cause the victim a temporary loss of 1d4 Wisdom points. These will return at the rate of one per day. Neuroses caused by Dust can usually be dealt with through therapy as well but they may take months or years to overcome.

A telepath suffering a Deep Scan from a Dust user enters a comatose state as soon as the subdual damage brings him or her to zero hit points. This coma lasts 1d20 days and without medical attention, the telepath will die during that time. At the end of the coma, the telepath victim can make a Will save (DC 24) to awaken. If the save succeeds, the telepath wakes up with a permanent neurosis of some kind (determined by the Games Master). If the saving throw fails, the telepath has a 50% chance of mental collapse and physical death. If the victim lives through this but does not awaken, the Will saving throw and the consequence for success or failure repeats itself every ten days.

Dust and Alien Physiologies

Dust has the same effect on most aliens as it does on humans but there are a few exceptions. Slight variations in the minds and bodies of alien races can cause the drug to have unknown side effects when taken by them. The effects on a victim of the Deep Scan caused by the drug (unconsciousness, chance of insanity) are always the same, regardless of race. The Games Master is encouraged to alter the effects of Dust slightly when it is used by alien characters, though its general capabilities never change.

TRAVELLING THROUGH HYPERSPACE

The swirling red shades of hyperspace are a familiar sight to all those who travel the light years. While the first gates were built aeons ago by the First Ones, their design has been copied and recopied over the millennia until, now, there are hundreds throughout the galaxy, making galactic trade, communication and warfare possible. While larger ships do not need the gates, it is unlikely any race would develop such technology without the gates to study.

Hyperspace does not relate one-to-one with realspace; it is not possible to know your realspace location without reference to the navigational beacons. The continual pull of forces in hyperspace makes navigation without those reference points impossible; even trying to stay perfectly still requires precise control and advanced technology. Once a ship is off the beaten path, its chances of survival are very small indeed.

Most beings that are not pilots or physicists know hyperspace as, essentially, 'the place between jump gates'. Few ships dare veer from the established beacons and those which do, perform slow and cautious hops, coming out every few light years to get their bearings in realspace, while leaving beacons behind them so they can find their way back. Thus, it is not commonly known that the crimson emptiness of hyperspace is not quite so empty. Beyond the beacons and the ships, there are other things. Hyperspace is an entire universe, after all and it is filled with unknown wonders and terrible dangers.

Here are some of them.

NATURAL FEATURES

Hyperspace is not featureless. While it is a vacuum, it is a vacuum rent by strange forces. Realspace mass tugs and distorts hyperspace very slightly but, over time, the forces which build up are dramatic. There are forms of 'weather' in hyperspace - huge, slow, 'winds' which traverse light years, sudden vortexes and unexpected surges of energy. While these are very rare and while the beacons are in place so as to avoid areas known to be dangerous or unstable, it is still possible for a ship to encounter danger.

Directional Ripples: These are the 'winds' of hyperspace or, possibly, 'waves'. They are distortions in the fabric of hyperspace, which move in a single direction. A ship travelling against the direction of the ripples is slowed, as hyperspace itself resists the progress of the vessel – all travel times are increased by up to 20%. Contrariwise, a ship travelling in the same direction as the ripple gains a small boost to speed, reducing travel time by as much as 10%. These numbers represent the maximum speed loss or gain; it is rare for a ripple to be moving directly towards or away from a specific gate. Thus, if it is determined that a head or tail ripple is encountered, roll 1d6 to determine the general direction of it. A 1-3 indicates it is generally moving against the direction of travel, while a 4-6 indicates it is moving generally towards it. Then, roll 1d20 to determine the percentage of time increase or 1d10 to determine the percentage of time decrease in a ship's travel time, as appropriate.

The chance of a ripple existing between any two gates is 1% per week. Ripples will usually exist for 1d4 days before dissipating.

Bursts: Hyperspace bursts are a mystery even to advanced races as the Minbari. It is generally theorised that they are a form of naturally occurring rifts between realspace and hyperspace, akin to the artificial rifts which are created by jumpgates but which are wholly uncontrolled. They occur rarely but can be catastrophic if a ship is caught in one. There is no random chance of one occurring; if one happens, it is by Games Master fiat - if it were even so rare as 1%, hyperspace would be too dangerous to be used casually; imagine if 1% of all airline flights exploded mid-flight! The damage done depends on the severity of the burst: A small burst will do 1d4x100 points, a medium burst 2d6x100 points and a large burst will do 5d6x100 points.

Vortex: A hyperspace vortex is formed by the same forces which create directional ripples, only it takes much longer for one to form. A vortex is a swirling, powerful, distortion that can pick up even the largest ship like a leaf in a hurricane and carry it far off course. As with bursts, these are so rare that they should not be checked for randomly; they should be introduced as plot elements only. A ship caught in a vortex will take 4d10x10 points of damage per turn and has a 10% chance per turn of being moved out of range of the navigation beacons. A ship will remain within the vortex for 2d10 turns before it is flung free; trying to get the ship out of the vortex before then requires a Pilot (DC 25) check and failure by more than 10 results in an additional 2d10x10 points of

damage. The Damage Reduction of a ship is halved before applying it to damage done by a vortex; as the stresses of the vortex wrench and pull the ship, making armour useful only for the additional structural support it represents, not for its ability to nullify any blast damage.

Artificial Features

Hyperspace has been used for transit by sentient beings since the First Ones were young. As a consequence, there is a lot of junk in there, from fragments of jumpgates destroyed in war (though this is considered an abominable crime, it does happen) to lost ships to secret installations to huge constructions of unknown origin.

The 'space' of hyperspace is infinite and, without stars or other gravity wells, items can drift forever with no tendency to cluster in particular spots. This helps create the illusion of emptiness. Given the risks of leaving the beacon network, the odds of simply stumbling across anything in hyperspace which didn't originate there are pretty slim. Nonetheless, if some form of chance discovery is desired, the following system can be used.

Every ten days (cumulative) of travel off the main routes has a 1% chance of a discovery being made. Because the main routes are so well travelled, any items on them will most likely have been found and removed long ago. Only off the beaten trail are there still any discoveries to be made. If such a discovery occurs, roll d% on the following chart:

Roll	Result
01-05	Interesting junk
06-07	Escape pod
08-10	Lifeform (see creatures)
11-15	Abandoned ship, known major race
16-20	Abandoned ship, known minor race
21-22	Abandoned ship, unknown younger race.
23	First One relic
24	Active base, major race
25-30	Dangerous junk
31-100	Boring junk

Boring Junk: More or less exactly what it says. Odd bits of worked metal of no value, empty cargo pods, fragments of an old jump gate that contain no valuable minerals and so on. A total waste of time and effort retrieving it; it has no monetary, historical or military value.

Interesting Junk: This is junk of the same general type as boring junk except that, as the name implies, it's not boring. The interest may be historical – a fragment of a ship known to have been lost decades ago. It may be military – a portion of a Narn encryption system, which Centauri intelligence officials would love to get their hands on. It may be information – a fragment of a destroyed ship from an unknown race with the information needed to find them and contact them. It may be monetary – a cargo pod which is not empty but stocked with valuable seeds or metals. Or it might be plot-dependant, a clue the characters have been searching for. No matter what, the junk was worth stopping for and collecting. It is almost impossible to distinguish interesting junk from boring junk without actually bringing it on-board for examination, however. This is further complicated by the problem of...

Dangerous Junk: Generally indistinguishable from boring or interesting junk but a lot riskier to have on-board. This may be a missile warhead whose arming mechanism is triggered by the warmth of the ship's hold or a cargo pod containing dead food animals which are infected with a lethal virus, a virus which is still virulent. Perhaps it is a tracking beacon that leads hostile forces to the ship or dangerously radioactive or toxic waste. Only the sadism of the Games Master limits the possibilities, which is to say, they are without limit.

Escape Pod: Often, ships become lost in hyperspace due to damage, perhaps caused by some of the natural phenomenon documented above. Once it is obvious that the ship is crippled, the crew may seek to leave, taking the infinitely slim chance of rescue over certain death. In most cases (99%) the escape pod will contain only a long-dead corpse of a race determined as follows.

Roll	Result
01-60	Known major race (Human, Narn, Centauri, etc)
61-90	Known minor race (Drazi, Pak'Ma'Ra, etc)
91-00	Unknown race.

In 1% of the cases, however, the pod will either contain a sleeper system (most likely of human origin, although in theory it could be a *very* old Centauri or Minbari pod) or it will contain a very lucky living being, who will most likely need immediate medical attention and then some form of transit home.

Lifeform: The ship has come upon a creature native to hyperspace. See the Creatures section for more details.

Abandoned Ship, Known Major Race: A ship belonging to one of the major races has been abandoned here. This is most likely a badly damaged vessel, one where the crew fled prior to its expected destruction. The ship could be on the verge of exploding or it could be a dead hulk. Alerting the owning government to its location would probably be the best course of action, unless the ship belongs to race currently at war with the species who controls the ship which made the discovery, in which case the ship can be claimed as a prize of war.

Abandoned Ship, Known Minor Race: As above, except the ship belongs to one of the member races of the League of Non-aligned Worlds or a similar 'bit player' in galactic politics.

Abandoned Ship, Unknown Younger Race: The race that built this vessel is a mystery but their technology is not on a par with the First Ones. The ship will contain clues to the races' location and biology and, as such, is an incredible treasure, as whoever finds it will be able to make a well-informed First Contact after suitable study. Of

Navigating Off the Beacons

'No ship lost in hyperspace has ever been found.'

This is a common statement but it is a bit extreme. While getting off-beacon is never good, it is not an absolute death sentence – just near absolute. A lot of skill and even more luck might return a ship to the main routes. Here are some methods:

Realspace Position: A ship which is not severely damaged and which can form its own jump point, can leave hyperspace and find its position in realspace. It is possible that they may be within range of a known star system or jump point. Even if they're not, taking bearing can give them some idea of a direction to proceed within hyperspace. If a ship uses this tactic, a Technical (space travel) check (DC 30) will allow them to relocate a beacon. Such a check can be made once per day, with the ship leaving hyperspace orienting and then returning. Each day that passes without success, though, increases the DC by +2. In short order, the task will become impossible. It might also be that a ship in realspace equipped with appropriate communication gear can send a message to a nearby world or space station and have them send a rescue or repair ship. However, this can only be done if the ship is close enough to the navigational beacons that it is safe to navigate through hyperspace to the ship's realspace position.

Buoys: Some ships, primarily explorers, carry navigational buoys that can be dropped. These are relatively short-lived and will drift with time, becoming useless, but can be used to allow a ship to find its way back on course without much difficulty. Of course, the first buoy must be dropped close enough to the main network that the ship can get a fix on it; if a ship is lost before a buoy can be dropped, dropping one is useless. A buoy will be useful for 1d4 days before the hyperspatial drift pulls it off target.

'Any sufficiently advanced technology': It seems likely that Vorlons, Shadows and others of their ilk have learned to navigate through hyperspace without recourse to beacons. There may well be artefacts left behind which serve the same purpose. As with all technology of such power, artefacts of this nature are likely to be dangerous, unpredictable and three-edged, but desperation may justify experimentation.

course, a ship built by an unknown race may well contain a variety of dangers; exploring it can be risky, due either to different environmental tolerances (perhaps they breathe corrosive gases) or due to traps left behind by the original owners, who do not *want* aliens wandering their ship.

First One Relic: This is about as dangerous – and as potentially rewarding – as a random find can get. The ship has stumbled on *something* left behind, abandoned or lost by one of the elder races of the galaxy, by the Vorlons, the Shadows, the Walkers at Sigma 957 or some unknown and ancient other race. The artefact could be anything – a weapon, a scientific experiment, a collection of music – but it will be strange, incomprehensible and, even if benign in original design, very dangerous to those who find it and do not take every possible precaution. Even the hypothetical music collection could be lethal; perhaps the music of the First Ones causes insanity or the vibrations turn human cells to mush. The introduction of such a relic can easily spawn several scenarios or, if it is sufficiently dangerous, end a campaign...and leave another pile of junk drifting through hyperspace. Indeed, if the relic is found adrift in a cloud of fragments identified as being from a recently constructed ship, this ought to be considered an important clue…

Active Base, Major Race: Psi-corps maintains mobile bases in hyperspace, ultra-secret research facilities located on vessels, which are capable of maintaining position within the turbulent realm. It can be assumed that there are other such places, extremely secret, run by EarthGov and the other major races. Centauri, Narn and Minbari all have reason to keep large ships permanently stationed in hyperspace and such ships, if stationary, are de facto bases - a true base, without motive power, is unlikely to be built in hyperspace. It would quickly drift away and be lost. Furthermore, it is sometimes necessary for a ship to re-enter realspace. Stumbling on such a base is very dangerous, even if the base is run by the same government that the discovering vessel serves. The very existence of such bases is a secret;

to discover one is akin to coming upon an alien vessel on a 21st Century Terran military base. The discoverer, if not authorised to be there, is likely to be silenced out of hand unless the controlling government is extremely ethical, the discoverer is known to be very trustworthy or there is some other compelling reason to not follow the dictum that dead men tell no tales.

Hyperspatial Locations

There are a small number of fixed locations within hyperspace, mysterious places of power known only by the most secretive of groups or advanced of races. While they may be visited infrequently by the likes of Technomages and Vorlons, these places form the basis of legend for most sentients and few truly believe in their existence. This has not, however, stopped many adventurers and explorers from making dangerous hyperspace journeys far off the beacon network in order to become the first to reveal the strangeness that is present within the galaxy.

The Well Of Forever: This magnificent structure is days away from the major hyperspace routes and its existence is generally not even suspected by any but the Technomages and those who created it, untold aeons past. It is an example of the kind of engineering feats that a truly advanced species can accomplish and, to humans and the other younger races, it might as well be magic. In form, it resembles a gargantuan nest or sphere of curling branches surrounding a central rocky core. The core and branches are riddled with tunnels and passages and a large city sprawls over the central core. A bubble of breathable air surrounds the entire structure.

The core of the Well is pure Quantium-40. Whether this is necessary to hold the structure together against the forces of hyperspace or if it serves an aesthetic or symbolic purpose is unknown.

The city is silent, for there is no one living in the Well. The hollow passages and caverns are filled with gold, platinum, jewels - anything and everything of value, all owned by the dead. The place is a tomb, burial ground, mausoleum. It is a cemetery for gods. The only Earth ship to discover it, the *Excalibur*, treated it with due respect and dignity (and the location was since purged by a Technomantic spell from the ship's databanks, so it could not return) but some other discoverer might not be so cautious. It is worth considering that the Well has sat, undisturbed, for ages, with the few visitors who know of it coming only to leave behind treasures or the honoured dead. It seems almost certain that those who built the Well had the power to defend it, if any being was foolish enough to try to plunder that which rightfully belongs to the deceased.

Canonically, the existence of the Well was unknown to the younger races, other than the Technomages, until the arrival of the *Excalibur* in 2268. Or was it? It is almost impossible to know what secrets are held in the deepest vaults of the various governments. The Technomages, after all, are not a separate race but members of various races and it is possible some leaked the existence of this place, though not its exact location, which was *not* clearly known. Ships may have been sent to search for it and failed to return. Nonetheless, if the Well is happened upon prior to 2268, there should be some reason why it is not mentioned or well known and why the crew of the *Excalibur*, other than Galen, had no idea it was there.

Psi-Corps Bases: The Psi Corps has converted a number of standard Earth Alliance starliners into semi-mobile bases, which remain in hyperspace at nearly all times to support their few Motherships. Most of these bases are extremely secret - it is possible one or two are kept as 'open secrets', so that accidental sightings of the others are easily dismissed. Some of the Corps' nastiest work occurs in these bases, including the reprogramming of Michael Garibaldi. This fleet of large, mobile and mostly unsuspected bases gives the Psi Corps tremendous power and flexibility, enabling them to muster forces and move them around without anyone, including their presumed superiors in EarthGov, noticing.

In a Psi Corps centred campaign the bases can be anything but sinister. They can be the centre of operations for the characters, a home among their own kind, without any mundanes around to pretend to be nice to and with all the luxuries one could expect – they are converted starliners, after all.

The Crescent Breeze: There are legends that spacers tell. Hyperspace breeds stories, tales of monsters, demons – and ghost ships. The theme of ships appearing as distant blips on the scanners, refusing to answer hails and then vanishing again is a common one and anyone who has spent more than few years travelling in space has heard the tales, though few have actually seen such craft.

At least one such legend is true.

During the last Great War, nearly a thousand years ago, the flagship of the Minbari fleet was the *Crescent Breeze*, a magnificent ship for its time fitted with the finest weapons that could be produced and crewed by the most elite members of the Wind Sword clan. It fought many battles against the Shadows, always returning in victory to the mysterious base which the Vorlons and Valen, the great leader and prophet, had given to them. The crew of the *Breeze* sometimes wondered about the alien writing which filled the station or the artefacts – images, statues and so on – which depicted a race similar, but not identical, to the Minbari. It was only in the waning months of the war, when the Shadows and their allies were fleeing back to their outposts on the Rim, that the Breeze fell. Ill-fortune found the ship alone when a group of fleeing Shadow warships happened upon it in hyperspace and though the *Breeze* fought well, it was outnumbered and outgunned. Damaged, it spun hopelessly out of control into the depths of hyperspace, never to be seen again. Members of the Wind Swords still honour it and claim it is still out there,

drifting and some even claim to have caught sight of it in the distance. To 'See the *Crescent Breeze*' is a euphemism among some in the Warrior Caste for having a vision that can lead either to greatness or to destruction.

The *Crescent Breeze* is still adrift in hyperspace, but there is something about it which no Minbari suspect.

The *Breeze* is, in an odd fashion, aware.

While Minbari are less prone to 'damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead' style of technological experimentation than humans are, they are nonetheless still of capable of taking risks and pushing boundaries. One such experiment was on the *Breeze*, a singularly advanced AI system that was designed to interface with the ship's telepaths (stationing of telepaths on warships was common practice, given the Shadows known vulnerabilities to them). During the final moments of the last battle the *Breeze* fought, the telepaths' dying agonies caused their thoughts, memories and feelings to flood into the ship's AI. The ship survived, though the crew did not and, over decades, managed to repair itself. It now exists as a sentient ship, a blend of advanced (for the era) AI technology and psionic force. It has one goal and purpose – to slay Shadows. For a thousand years, it has hunted them through hyperspace, finding nothing. Now, as they return, the *Breeze* is finding new prey.

Sargasso: Hyperspace is a realm of exceptions, even to itself. As noted above, there are no places that serve to collect hyperspatial debris, no central points where it collects. However, this is not entirely true. There is one such point, though being mobile itself, it is not an easy destination to find. A conflux of gravitational inclines has, over the aeons, formed a sort of semi-permanent, slow-moving vortex that drifts through hyperspace. Lost ships that end up 'falling' into the bottom of it stay there even as it moves, creating a vast junkyard of crippled and dead vessels – and their surviving crews.

Dozens of ships from all known (and many unknown) races have ended up in this hyperspatial sargasso, many with sufficiently intact systems to sustain life support. Cannibalising more badly damaged ships (in some cases before their crews were entirely deceased) allowed the inhabitants to scratch out a barely sustainable existence. Every few years, another ship is drawn in. Those which are mostly intact become part of the growing junk city; those which are badly damaged are torn to shreds for parts. Power supplies to keep life support running and organic resources for hydroponics are the most vitally needed components. The inhabitants of the Sargasso cling to life with a mad desperation. Some are the living crew of ships lost recently; others are the descendants of the crews of ships lost as much as a millennia ago. The powerful forces that keeps the Sargasso stable also prevents ships from leaving; even if a ship had fully intact engines, it would have an almost impossible time climbing out.

The various races of the Sargasso have reached a state of truce; most of the new arrivals quickly recognise that fighting will lead only to their deaths and, for those who were born here, this life is simply normalcy.

The population of the Sargasso varies overtime, but generally hovers at about 500 individuals from a variety of races, most of whom live in a cluster of generally intact ships. Technical skills are highly prized, as the life support mechanisms that sustain all existence are kept functional only by continual maintenance. They represent masterworks of 'bailing wire and chewing gum' engineering, with air compressors dating from the earliest Centauri explorations wired to filtering mechanisms from a two hundred year old Minbari cruiser and both feeding from oxygen tanks originally from a Pak'Ma'Ra cargo vessel. Any large, open area, such as cargo or landing bays, are turned over to farming. Recycling of everything is paramount. Most of the ships which are not part of the central living core have been stripped bare and what hasn't been stripped has been exhaustively catalogued, in case it may be needed. The location of every spool of superconducting wire and every stockpile of high-impact plastic rods is noted and logged.

A ship stumbling into the Sargasso has a fundamental problem – getting out. It will also have to deal with the inhabitants, who tend to view newer arrivals as unwanted consumers of needed resources. The younger inhabitants, especially those whose own vessels were trapped, are likely to be welcoming; those born in the Sargasso are more likely to be hostile. If the new arrivals seem either very few in number (and thus represent less of a drain) or if they are numerous and powerful (and thus seem capable of putting up a fight), they are more likely to be accepted into the patchwork society. If they fall in between, however, they may be killed and their ship seized for whatever it can offer.

Leaving the Sargasso is non-trivial. If it were easy, the Sargasso would not exist. No younger race engines can propel a ship against the steep gravitational incline. Highly experimental engines (such as those on the White Star or similar very advanced craft) may have a chance.

RANKS AND AWARDS IN BABYLON 5

EARTH ALLIANCE RANKS

The Earth Alliance uses a set of ranks similar to that used in many 21st Century militaries, with many of the same names and rank levels many readers will be familiar with. The two branches of service, the Fleet and Ground Forces, have different names drawn from history, but possess the same number of ranks in each category. Thus, an officer in the Navy can easily tell how his rank compares to someone in the Army.

The Earth Alliance has two levels of military service—enlisted and officer—plus a third level of warrant officer found in both services. In both the Army and Navy, the officer corps provides leadership and management while the enlisted forces handle the physical aspects of making war—i.e., doing the actual fighting. Or, to be more direct, officers give orders and enlisted men carry them out. The lowest-ranking officer outranks the highest-ranking enlisted individual, although in practice, junior officers rarely override the decisions or recommendations of senior enlisted men under their command. A raw ensign does not show up on board ship his first week and start changing the way his CPO, with twenty years of experience repairing engines, handles his duties! The ensign would be laughed out the airlock and he knows it—or should, if he paid any attention at all to his training.

Officers are generally highly skilled, well educated and far less in number, but this is not to say that enlisted men are poor or untrained. The Earth Alliance has an all-volunteer force and ensures that those who do agree to sign up are treated fairly and trained as well as possible to do their jobs. Furthermore, an enlisted individual who shows true leadership abilities and noticeable command skills can be promoted into the officer ranks if he agrees to do so. This would be unheard of in some of the other races' militaries.

The grade of warrant officer is designed for highly trained specialists (rather than using high non-commissioned officer ranks, as was done in some old Earth forces). Warrant officers rank higher than NCOs but below commissioned officers and are valued for their expertise and experience. They can be found as special staff experts to advise commanders, pilots of VTOL gunships, specialists in interrogating alien prisoners or many other obscure tasks. Thanks to the skills warrant officers provide, they are often allowed waivers for physical or other issues that might otherwise bar them from military service. As an example, it is normal for warrant officers to remain in service long after other ranks would be retired, this being preferable to losing their expertise. Occasionally, civilian experience can be a deciding factor in granting a warrant, with a typical example being a physician's assistant called into military service or a 'fixer' brought into service to provide local expertise in civil-military affairs.

At the top level of the officer corps, there is a special rank held by only the top member of those particular armed forces, either the Admiral of the Fleet or the General of the Ground Forces (or General of the Army). These are the ones to whom everyone must salute, but even they salute the Earth Alliance President, who is the commander-in-chief of all EA military forces in either peacetime or war.

Medals and Honours

The Earth Alliance gives out a wide variety of different types of awards. These are worn in the form of coloured ribbons on the standard uniform and pin-on medals on the dress uniform. Some lesser decorations are simply displayed as small pins or ribbons on the dress uniform as well. All awards are rated beginning from highest to lowest in perceived importance, so that they must be displayed in the proper order on the uniform. In the listings below, all awards are shown in order. Since a complete list of the wide variety of Earth Alliance military decorations would likely fill this book, only some of the most interesting are listed hereafter.

Each service has its own version of these awards, so that even those who cross-train into the opposite branch of service can easily display the branch in which they received the honour. Note that combat uniforms, such as fatigues, generally do not include decorations (or rank insignia for that matter) so that enemies have a more difficult time locating those to shoot first. This is a tradition that has become more and more ingrained on the military structure as longer and longer ranged sniping weapons became available to the EA's foes.

One interesting feature of the Earth Alliance is that awards and decorations are given out solely on their own merit, without regard to rank or service. If a soldier and a high-ranking officer both fight side by side to destroy a rampaging enemy tank, thereby saving the rest of their unit from certain annihilation at the risk of their own lives, both would be considered equally for the Order of Bravery,

Earth Rank Structure: Ranks are shown on the following chart, which lists ranks from lowest to highest in the enlisted and officer corps. In addition, there is a third level associated with warrant officers (see main text).

Enlisted Ranks

Fleet	Ground Forces
Crewman	Private
Crewman First Class	Private First Class
Petty Officer Third Class	Corporal
Petty Officer 2nd Class	Sergeant
Petty Officer 1st Class	Staff Sergeant
Chief Petty Officer	Sergeant 1st Class
Senior Chief Petty Officer	Master Sergeant
Master Chief Petty Officer	Sergeant Major
Command Chief Petty Officer	Command Sergeant Major

Officer Ranks

Fleet	Ground Forces
Ensign	2nd Lieutenant
Fleet Lieutenant	1st Lieutenant
Lieutenant Commander	(Ground Forces) Captain
Commander	Major
Fleet Captain	Colonel
Rear Admiral	Brigadier General
Vice Admiral	Major General
Fleet Admiral	Lt. General
Admiral	General
Admiral of the EA Fleet	General of the EA Ground Forces

Warrant Officers

Warrant Officer 2nd Class
Warrant Officer 1st Class
Chief Warrant Officer
Senior Chief Warrant Officer

Distinguished Service Cross or even the Medal of Honour if the risk was great enough.

Medal of Honour: The highest military award of all, this is given for tremendous bravery under fire, almost always involving a tremendous risk of one's own life. To earn this decoration, an individual must basically sacrifice or attempt to sacrifice, his own life for that of his fellow soldiers, his ship or the Earth Alliance. Although it is most frequently given posthumously, the Medal of Honour can be awarded to someone who survives such a situation against all odds. In such a case, the decoration can only be delivered by the President himself and confers a special 'rank' on the recipient higher than any other member of the service except other Medal of Honour winners. Although he holds no command authority, the tradition is that all other members of the armed forces salute him, even if his rank is that of a mere private. Their accomplishment in winning this medal is considered so impressive that even the General of the Army would salute such an individual.

Order of the Line: only those who fought in the Battle of the Line wear This special award, created only recently. The medallion, worn around the neck only at formal occasions, recognises those who stood their ground in the face of certain death as the Minbari advanced towards Earth. Many who fought at the Line also received the Medal of Honour, of course, but the Order trumps all lesser awards in significance.

Distinguished Service Cross: Only slightly less impressive than the Medal of Honour is this award, which is given for exceptional service above and beyond the call of duty. A recipient of the Cross receives it through acts of superior heroism that are often life threatening, but not quite worthy of the EA's highest honour. Not surprisingly, there are far more survivors wearing the Cross than there are wearing the Medal. The Distinguished Service Cross is noteworthy, but does not carry the same saluting tradition as its higher cousin.

Distinguished Service Medal: This is the 'low-risk' version of the Cross (above) and generally involves some significant accomplishment, often in the long-term, that was of great tangible benefit to the Earth Alliance. A crewman who invents a new way of fine-tuning an engine might be considered for this award, if it saved the Alliance a noticeable amount of maintenance time or prevented some sort of catastrophic failure down the road.

Order of Bravery (Silver Star): This is the most common of the higher-ranking heroism medals. Also known as the Silver Star because of its design and shape, the Order of Bravery is given for great courage, valour or gallantry while in combat. Taking the helm despite injuries, carrying a bleeding comrade through a fire zone to safety, remaining in a threatened forward position to call in an artillery strike and similar acts are all worthy of this medal.

Medal of Courage (Bronze Star): This award is given for heroism in much the same way as the Silver Star, but is awarded for acts not involved in direct conflict with enemy forces. The threat might exist, but the lack of actual fighting is the only distinction between the two medals.

Wounded in Action Badge (Purple Heart): This award is given to those injured or killed while involved in active military service against a hostile enemy. There are two versions of this medal, the first of which is given in relation to direct combat, while the other is for injuries sustained indirectly. In either case, wounds could occur through virtually any method—being shot, struck by artillery shrapnel, poisoned by airborne toxins, hurt in a crash caused by enemy action and anything else either directly or indirectly related to combat would suffice. The 'enemy' need not be a nation with whom the EA is at war—Purple Hearts have been awarded for combat against raiders, terrorists, insurrectionists, rioters and anyone else the EA military man might be expected to fight as part of his duties.

Prisoner of War Medal: Like the name suggests, this award is given to those taken prisoner and held captive by enemy forces. In this context, an 'enemy' is a military foe, not terrorists and the like.

Minbari Campaign Medal: This is the highest ranking of many 'campaign' medals awarded for veterans of specific wars. Other campaign medals include the Dilgar Campaign, Ch'Lonas Campaign, Koulani Campaign, Narn Campaign and any of several Raider Campaigns. In general, an individual must have served at least three months of any such war or for a significant length of the conflict in the case of those that didn't last that long. An individual wearing such a medal is considered a veteran of that conflict for all purposes, which might involve benefits that extend beyond the end of one's career.

Others: A variety of other awards are given out for service at specific locations, certain lengths of time, long-standing excellence, specific instances of noteworthy accomplishment and so on. Some awards are given to everyone in a specific service or unit, especially if that particular unit has completed a particularly difficult assignment. Many specific units also give out their own awards, which are always treated as lesser than any of the others listed above.

Minbari Ranks

The Minbari rank structure is discussed in full in the *Minbari Federation Fact Book*, available separately.

Medals and Honours

The Minbari don't have medals and honours and frankly find them vulgar. In their place, they have warrior names. A warrior name is formally bestowed by the superiors for actions above and beyond the call of duty. Often, these names are already unofficially in place before this, bestowed by fellow soldiers spontaneously. Sheridan's title of Starkiller is an example, although not an especially proud one (for the Minbari, at least). It is worth noting that although these are referred to as 'warrior names,' they are not given exclusively by the warrior caste, although most are. Members of the religious and worker caste may also receive such an honorific.

Minbari warrior names can be broadly divided into three categories. The first is a commemoration of a certain action, such as charging an enemy tank or rescuing Minbari POWs. Such names will succinctly describe the action, with examples like 'Destroyer of Centauri Mass-Drivers' or 'Deliverer of the Captured.'

The second category will describe some trait that the Minbari individual exhibits and may reflect the desired attributes of either their caste or the caste of those who bestow it upon him. Examples are Nailar (steadfast), Ch'ran'que (unstoppable), Hetlok (reliable, often used in the worker caste) and Geech (inspired, often used in the religious caste).

The final form will attribute some creature or object that the Minbari most resembles such as Isil'Zha veni (a cat-like creature known for its stealth and cunning) or Denn'bok (the classic Minbari fighting pike). These may be combined with a place name for where the Minbari comes from or where they showed the traits that earned the name.

Unlike most warrior names, which are specific to the individual, some can be held by more than one Minbari at a time. Such names are the closest thing to a 'medal' the Minbari possess. Two examples of these titles are listed hereafter.

Shadow-Killer: The most coveted of the warrior names is Shadow-Killer, a very rare and usually posthumous name. The tradition stems from the previous Shadow War, but does not necessarily involve killing Shadows. One can earn this title only by defeating an especially powerful opponent against all odds.

Defender of the Minbari People: This is the most prestigious warrior name that can be bestowed on a Minbari and is given only for acts of supreme heroism and sacrifice. Like Shadow-Killer, this name can be held by anyone and is more of an award than a title.

Centauri Ranks

The Centauri military can be pretty clearly divided into three steps along the advancement ladder. Common-born Centauri or those in disgraced houses enter as the equivalent of enlisted men. In theory, promotion here is by merit, although family pull, connections or unfortunate accidents can clear the way for advancement in rank. For a list of ranks presently in existence in the Republic, see the sidebar.

The first and most important step is to go from Junitus to Secii. While there is no actual advancement in position, Junitus get the worst details, the poorest weapons and are generally treated like dirt. Even the lowest on the totem pole need someone to lord it over in Centauri society!

The core of the Centauri military is the Chiefs and Sergeants. While the rest of the Centauri is rife with favouritism, the Chiefs and Sergeants are surprisingly clean of this. They have to be, for they often serve far above their presumed position, handling duties of an EarthForce Captain or Major. In a sense, they are a reaction to the sure knowledge that a Centauri officer is often an incompetent buffoon whose father happens to be in favour. Thus, the bottom half of officer ranks are often more for show than go, although the competent officers will quickly take on more responsibility and power.

It is worth noting that there are almost no 'Mustangs' in the Centauri military. It's almost unheard of for a Junitus to get promoted past Cenkane. The only exceptions come when an enlisted man's family (re)gains favour in the court or when it may be discovered that his paperwork was incorrectly processed. This is one reason why there is no title difference between the two services in these ranks—since no worthy noble would be in it, why waste the effort?

Obviously, there can be a lot of tension between these ranks and their officers. On the other hand, Chiefs and Sergeants who handle an incompetent officer and keep things going well while not embarrassing him will often find the rewards from that officer's house to be lucrative and substantial. It's not unknown for a Senior Chief to stay with an officer and baby-sit him up to the highest ranks, gaining riches in the process. Woe to the senior officer who dismisses the Cenkane working the desk outside of the Tonansu's office, for he might be the actual power of the position! By the same token, convincing a rival to dismiss his guardian chief might get rid of him and even his house more effectively than killing that rival.

For the officers, it's a snake pit. There is one—just one—promotion that matters and that is from Jollasu to Latia. These promotions consist of a marathon two-day exam of physical and mental capabilities in front of boards of

Centauri Ranks: The following lists summarise ranks employed in both the navy and ground forces of the Republic.

The Centauri Royal Fleet
Thetatal (Grand Fleet Admiral)
Rejane (Grand Admiral)
Rejansu (Provisional Grand Admiral)
Rejeus (Admiral)
Rejalaru (Provisional Admiral)
Mollanisu (Captain)
Mollani (Provisional Captain)
Turhasu (Commander)
Turha (Lieutenant)
Lujant (Ensign)
Peffa (Midshipman)

Cenkane (Grand Centurion)
Cenkasu (High Centurion)
Cenkii (1st Centurion)
Cenkalaru (2nd Centurion)
Cenkaputa (Provisional Centurion)

Primii (1st Sub-Centurion)
Secii (2nd Sub-Centurion)
Junitus (Recruit)

The Centauri Royal Guard
Omesus (Guardsman Elite)
Tonane (High Guardsman of the Centauri Army)
Tonansu (Provisional High Guardsman)
Toneus (Guardsman General)
Tonalaru (Provisional Guardsman General)
Agrussisu (Colonel)
Agrussani (Major)
Agrussiputa (Captain)
Latisu (Equivalent to First Lieutenant)
Latia (Lieutenant)
Jolljant (2nd Lieutenant)

Cenkane (Grand Centurion)
Cenkasu (High Centurion)
Cenkii (Provisional High Centurion)
Cenkalaru (1st Centurion)
Cenkaputa (2nd Centurion)

Primii (1st Sub-Centurion)
Secii (2nd Sub-Centurion)
Junitus (Recruit)

higher officers and Senior Chiefs and Sergeants. Although favouritism is present (nobody flunks the emperor's son), this test is largely on merit and has a failure rate of 65-70%. It's a gruelling challenge, but the officer can be happy to note that it will largely be the last time that merit will be important to him, outside of his political skill.

Once past this step, an officer enters a queue for this and every subsequent promotion. If he is the 1,001st Latia at the time of his promotion, all 1000 in front of him must be promoted to the next level before he can advance. In this, there are no exceptions. Promotion is based solely on seniority. However, there is a way around this. If a candidate shows such skill or has such political pull that his superiors want to promote him, they can blanket promote everyone above him to the next rank as well. When this happens, all of the other personnel will be evaluated. Those who are deemed worthy will simply be promoted, while those not deemed worthy will also be promoted but their title will have a second word added: Aqullum (e.g., Agrussiputa Aqullum). It carries no stated penalties, but everyone knows what it means. To make things more interesting, the one officer candidate who prompted this whole thing also gets a new word, Cavo, at the end of his title. Thus, a superior with the title of Mollanisu Cavo is either a brilliant officer or has enormous political connections. Either way, he's a Centauri to watch!

The highest rank in each service is purely hereditary. Sometimes the occupant is capable, like Fleet Admiral Dromo and sometimes not, like Guardsman Elite Tavastani. In the latter case, he will usually be shuttled aside by his flag officers that will handle most matters, feverishly working to keep him from exerting his authority. One thing of note: Fleet Admirals and Guardsman Elite have no power over the ranks up to Cenkane. They may dismiss, execute and blanket promote anyone above this rank, but in a rare moment of sanity it was decided that his influence needed to be minimised on the backbone of the service.

Medals and Honours

It's worth noting that all medals have two versions, one for officers and one for the rest. The officer's awards are often some of the gaudiest ornaments one could fear to see—restraint is not a Centauri concept. Neither is tackiness!

Order of the Emperor: The highest award that can be bestowed. Personally given by the emperor himself, this award automatically raises the recipient's house to favoured status and, for those commoners without a house, it establishes one. Given only for great service for the Centauri Republic.

Medal of Valour: One step below the Order of the Emperor.

Order of the Orieni: Awarded for gallantry in the face of their old enemies, the Orieni Imperium.

Centauri Sunburst: Equivalent to the Gold Star, this medal comes in 1st through 3rd classes.

Medal of Charan: Equivalent to the Silver Star, this commemorates a famous officer's gallant last stand against the Xon.

Good Conduct Medal (also known as the 'Can Comb His Own Hair' Medal). Given out like Halloween candy as a reward for damn near anything.

Order of the Narn Slayer: Given for successful actions against their old foe, the Narn Regime.

Order of the Minbari Slayer: A fairly rare and prestigious medal, this is given when the candidate bests the Minbari in 'misunderstandings' that occur from time to time. If you see this pinned on the chest of a Mollanisu Cavo, you've encountered an especially skilled officer.

There are numerous other lesser awards given for anything from time in service all the way up to command of a particularly successful ship or unit during times of war. Most of the Houses also possess awards of their own, given to particularly effective leaders in their service. These are worn alongside all other medals so that just about any Centauri officer in full dress uniform has to struggle to keep from tipping over due to the weight of all the metal hanging from his chest.

NARN RANKS

In stark contrast to Centauri military structure, the Narn military is a meritocracy. Applicants are assessed via standardised physical and mental testing and sent either to the Tol'Koro (enlisted) branch or the G'Darik (officer) corps. Advancement is based solely on merit and is quite rigorous—far more Narns fail their tests for promotion than pass. This leads to extremely capable personnel from a lower rank, but leaves the upper ranks somewhat thinly spread out. This has forced the Narns to rely heavily on their lower ranks, where one can usually assume that a certain rank is performing duties at a rank or two above its equivalent in another race's military. This, combined with the heavy reliance on standard operating procedures (SOPs), allows them to strike very quickly by selecting a well-rehearsed plan from the book. On the other hand, this tendency does leave them vulnerable when an enemy does something new and unexpected.

Medals and Honours

Narn awards are almost all named after important individuals from the race's past. Not all of these are great warriors, but all honours listed hereafter are based on a hero's actions during times of great conflict. Since the Narns have had many heroes in their past, there are a huge number of awards—far more than can be listed in this limited space. The Narns see the creation of a medal as though it were as a monument to the one for whom it is named, which explains why there are so many of them, even though a good number are indistinguishable from each other.

Narn Ranks: The following shows the ranks in use by both the ground forces and the Narn Navy.

Ground Army Forces:

Dar'Sol Taka	Supreme Commander of the Army (Supreme Warleader)
Dar'Sol	General (Warleader)
Dar'Jareth	Colonel (War Captain)
Dar'Goroth	Captain (War Hunter)
Dar'Kan	Lieutenant (War Commander)
Dar'Tat	Ensign
Tol'Nok	First Sgt
Tol'Jak	Sergeant
Tol'Dak	Corporal
Tol'Suk	Private
Tol'Rek	Recruit

Navy and Air/Space Defence Forces:

Dar'Sol'Tas Taka	Supreme Commander of the Fleet (Supreme Warleader)
Dar'Sol'Tas	Admiral (Warleader)
Dar'Jareth'Tas	Captain (War Captain)
Dar'Goroth'Tas	Lieutenant (War Hunter)
Dar'Kan'Tas	Lieutenant Junior Grade (War Commander)
Dar'Tat'Tas	Ensign
Tol'Nok'Tas	Master Chief
Tol'Jak'Tas	Chief
Tol'Dak'Tas	Corporal
Tol'Suk'Tas	Private
Tol'Rek'Tas	Recruit

The Order of G'Last: This medal is almost 180 years old and celebrates the sacrifice of G'Last in the last of the Unification Wars. Charged with holding an insignificant mountain pass, he instead became face to face with the 30,000 strong detachment of the War Leader T'Lanal, attempting to flank the army of the Warleader G'Staal while he was fighting his victorious campaign that finally led to the unification of the Narn people. G'Last held the mountain pass for almost 6 hours against probing attacks until, finally, the army broke through. In a last act of defiance he detonated his supply dump, strewing the pass with such rubble that the enemy force was still working through it when G'Staal's army turned and destroyed them. Through his actions, he may have single-handedly ensured the future of the Narn people. This medal is the highest award that can be bestowed upon a Narn for battlefield duty. It is generally posthumous, although War Leader Tu'Kar possesses one from his actions at the Battle of Yeshnim during the revolution against the Centauri.

The Order of the Heroes of the Resistance: This medal commemorates those who struck serious blows against the Centauri during the fight for independence. Not quite at the level of the Order of G'Last, this award nonetheless is cherished and highly respected, for it shows that the wearer has vanquished their most hated enemy. Over time, this medal evolved into two distinct forms. The medal struck in Gold celebrates actions that took place until the Narns declared independence, while the medal struck in steel celebrates actions against the Centauri since then. One other thing of note: Readers will notice that the hexagonal medal, showing the symbol of the Narn Regime atop an upside-down Centauri symbol, often appears to be darkened red in the background. This is not an illusion—the background is coloured anywhere from the faintest red to a bright and vivid scarlet. Based on a colour scale of 1-100, the deeper the colour, the more Centauri the Narn is personally responsible for killing. When the Narn has killed 100 Centauri, the new badge has the Centauri symbol also covered in vivid scarlet. A Narn wearing one of these 'maxed out' badges seldom has to buy his or her own drinks or meals in a public Narn establishment. To many Narns, one of these medals is even more coveted than the Order of G'Last.

Peacebringer of G'Quan: This special award is given to those whose actions result in the *avoidance* of conflict and is thus somewhat rare. Any Narn who, through diplomacy or other means, prevents an unnecessary and undesired battle or war is eligible for the Peacebringer.

Dagger of G'Mal: This dagger-shaped medal is awarded to those spies or agents who, through stealth or guile, bring down an important enemy target during wartime. While few races acknowledge assassination in this manner, one must remember that the Narns fought a guerrilla action for decades against the Centauri occupation of their home world. This medal

was created to honour G'Mal, a skilled expert in stealth and marksmanship who reputedly brought down over a dozen high-ranking officials of the Republic during the Occupation until he was finally caught and executed by vengeful Centauri.

Ta'Ral's Shield: This medal is awarded to those Narns who survive particularly grievous injuries in combat. Ta'Ral was a warrior of the ancient past who, according to legend, was repeatedly wounded throughout his career until his body was so scarred that his flesh was almost unrecognisable. His enemies came to regard him as indestructible, so to eliminate him, one faction reportedly buried him alive. His body was never found, so many Narns believe he survived even that, although he was never seen again thereafter. Unlike the Purple Heart in the Earth Alliance military, the Shield of Ta'Ral is not given to just any injured soldier, but only to those who earn their wounds through significant bravery and live to fight again.

Medal of Na'Var/G'Lan/Tu'Mal/etc.: Named after great warriors of the ancient past, these medals are given for courage and bravery in the face of danger. There are so many different ones (well in excess of one hundred) that even the Narns have trouble keeping them all straight. In general, when an individual conducts himself in such a way as to earn an award for valour, his actions are compared to those of the heroes honoured by the various named awards. The Narn will generally receive the medal with which his own actions most closely compare. For example, Na'Var was best known for setting up a surprise counterattack in a heavily forested area, so someone who pulled off a similar stunt would most likely receive the Medal of Na'Var. Sometimes, one who can trace his bloodline to a particular individual might receive that Narn's award instead, but this is uncommon.

Drazi Ranks

In the Drazi military, ranks are held a bit differently than in most other races' militaries. For instance, a Zavrev may command from 1 to 30 Drazi—how many and how important a force depends on the Drazi's skill in challenges of personal combat. Challenges can come about at any time (outside of a war zone) and thus the 'bucket of crabs' analogy is apt for the Drazi. It's worth noting that every Drazi starts as a Gret, as there is no specific officer's track. All promotions are earned through valour and challenges.

There are two ways to advance to the next rank. Several times a year, military-wide contests are held where all potential Drazi fight each other for the next rank. For example, if 20,000 Drazi are vying for 200 open slots, they will fight until the 200 Drazi with the most wins are identified and those are the ones who get promoted. Such combat is, as a general rule, non-lethal, although deaths do occur and are almost always written off as accidents.

The second way to achieve promotion is by direct challenge. A Drazi may challenge any higher-ranking officer to personal combat. This may not be done in a war zone as a general rule—challenging during time of war is illegal *unless* it can be proven that the challenged Drazi was not performing his duties (usually by not attacking at every

Drazi Ranks: The following table lists the ranks in use by the Drazi Army and Navy. Note: The naming of Drazi ranks is based on the original designations, back before space fleets existed. When the Drazi went into space, they simply added Cas (Space) to the front of their established ranks.

Ground Army Forces:

Drodak	(Supreme Commander of the Armies)
Zhakrac	General
Tha'Doknar	Colonel
Kolalla	Major
Trosh'Kolalla	Captain
Chravo	Master Sergeant
Trosh'Chravo	Senior Sergeant
Dran'Chravo	Sergeant
Zavrev	Corporal
Pran	Private
Gret	Recruit

Space Navy Forces:

Cas Drodak	(Supreme Commander of the Fleets)
Cas Zhakrac	Admiral
Cas Tha'Doknar	Commodore
Cas Kolalla	Captain
Cas Trosh'Kolalla	2nd Captain
Cas Chravo	Master Chief
Cas Trosh'Chravo	Senior Chief
Cas Dran'Chravo	Chief
Cas Zavrev	Corporal
Cas Pran	Private
Cas Gret	Recruit

opportunity). If the challenger wins, he gets promoted to the challenged Drazi's rank while the challenged drops to whatever rank the challenger had. Theoretically, a Gret can advance directly to Kolalla this way, although this rarely happens and, when tried, almost always results in a dead Gret. Those involved in a challenge may not challenge a higher rank for one Drazi year, although they can themselves be challenged after one half of a Drazi year (allowing time to heal and get somewhat settled).

The Drazi are not suicidal, however. The nature of the challenges changes once the rank is higher than Kolalla. Here, the battles are elaborately designed war games suitable to the challenged Drazi's rank and placement in that rank. A computer randomly programs scenarios where each side is equal, usually not in numbers but based on factors of terrain held, composition of forces and so on. These war games are fought until one side is totally defeated, which determines the victor. Once a rank is held at this level, neither party can challenge again for the next rank for three Drazi years and cannot be challenged for 1 year. There is a twist, however—whoever wins gets the challenged Drazi's rank, but the loser drops *three* ranks. This has a tendency to make these attempts less attractive to lower ranking Drazi unless they are certain they can win. If the Drazi challenging cannot drop three ranks (effectively below Dran'Chravo), he is executed. Note that this all pertains to a direct challenge only—during the yearly promotion trials, only those attempting to advance one rank are eligible and they compete in these same war games against the other potentials.

One will note a pretty thin rank tree above Sergeant/Chief. This is for two reasons. One, the Drazi are aggressive to a fault, so often the only effective commands amount to 'kill that, over there.' Tactics are not their strong suit. Tha'Doknar and above are pretty rare, simply because there are so few Drazi that can make the leap from ripping an arm off to directing a contested landing. These Drazi are elite, for they can not only think, but they can threaten, cajole or trick their fellow Drazi into doing complex actions. While these precious few realise that they are too few and too busy, there simply aren't enough Drazi capable of serving at these duties. It is not unknown for these high-ranking Drazi to keep an eye out for like-minded individuals and subtly assist them in their climb to higher ranks, protecting them from their less thoughtful brethren. Nothing overt or obvious—just putting them into situations where they may prosper. Cas Kolalla Hodrash (now Cas Zhakrac) of the Thrazda Pon is one such example of this.

Medals and Honours

The Drazi give out a lot of awards. So many, in fact, that a typical officer's dress uniform is literally festooned with pins, medals, ribbons, stripes and other finery. They reward aggressiveness and fighting in virtually every way imaginable and the Drazi are a very aggressive and warlike people. There is little competition for awards, since they are given so readily.

An individual's commanding officer has the authority to grant some of the lesser decorations, while those of commensurate rank must provide higher ones. Only the Drazi leadership itself gives the highest honours. Since it falls upon an individual to give awards to his subordinates, those who tend to hand out more rewards receive an benefit of greater loyalty, but care must be taken not provide so many honours that they lose their importance. Conversely, an officer who rarely provides awards can find himself disliked or even despised, unless those medals he does issue are of the highest value.

Some of the more important medals are listed below. All Drazi generally respect these awards, while those outside one's immediate organisation often discount the lesser ones. Since the latter types are so common and prevalent, they will not be listed here, except to note that they can take literally any form and are frequently created on the spot for individual actions.

Saviour of the Freehold: This legendary award is given out only to those whose actions single-handedly save the Drazi from a devastating defeat or other disaster. Since the Drazi do not give out posthumous awards as a general rule, choosing instead to simply remember a fallen warrior in song and story, this medal is very hard to come by. This award is one of the few that is sometimes handed out to those not actually a part of the formal military, such as a diplomat who ends an otherwise disastrous war or a spy who uncovers intelligence that single-handedly turns the tide of battle.

Talons of the Avenger: This medal is given to those Drazi who take revenge for a previous defeat, insult or slight in a particularly noteworthy manner. During the Dilgar War, in which the Dilgar performed a seemingly endless series of atrocities upon Drazi colonies, this medal was given out in droves. In recent times, however, it has proven very elusive. Declaring and earning revenge must be declared in advance using an elaborate ritual and if the attack does not work, the failure becomes a black mark on the Drazi's career. Even if a later follow-up mission succeeds, the Talons are not awarded, although the shame of the previous defeat is thereby lifted.

Victory Medal: This medal takes the form of a golden sphere with tassels dangling underneath. One tassel is provided for every combat victory against an enemy. For soldiers, a tassel generally represents a combat kill, while in the navy, it represents a destroyed fighter (for pilots) or a destroyed enemy ship. In the latter case, tassels are provided to each member of the Drazi ship's crew. Thicker and longer tassels represent larger and more critical enemy ships. An entirely separate medal, created for the specific event in question, represents victory against a very large fleet.

BRAKIRI RANKS

Brakiri society is dominated by corporations and this structure applies to their military as well as civilian endeavours. While most of the corporations employ regimented ranks and specific promotions like a typical military force, this is not always the case. Each company uses its own structure depending on many factors, in particular its history and the amount of power its ground or naval forces actually wields.

In the present-day Syndicracy, there are four corporations that presently account for over 95% of the Brakiri military. These are the Ak-Habil Conglomerate, primarily focused on ship-building; Ly-Nakir Industries, chief competitor for Ak-Habil and a primary producer of fighters and carriers; Pri-Wakat Military Concepts & Solutions, accounting for most of the ground forces and transport ships; and Im-Rehsa Technologies, a smaller corporation with a massive interest research and development. In general, most common starships (including the majestic Avioki Cruiser) are produced by Ak-Habil, the large majority of carriers and fighters are made by Ly-Nakir, virtually all ground troops and transports are the responsibility of Pri-Wakat and new advancements in technology are the focus of Im-Rehsa. A list of their rank structures, such as they are, is presented hereafter.

Ak-Habil Conglomerate

The Ak-Habil corporation has a single tree of ranks—everyone starts as a Recruit and works his way up. Thus, there is no distinction between enlisted and officer—it's simply a series of escalating duties and responsibilities. Commodores and above sit on various senior boards and influence company policy outside of strictly military matters. Admirals and the Supreme Commander sit on the Board of Directors for the company. This allows the influence to create truly excellent designs such as the Avioki cruiser, although it also occasionally leads to costly dead ends, such as the Corumai dreadnought that probably should've been killed in the design phase.

Ak-Habil Corporate Ranks:
Brodas Ty Rashka (Supreme Commander)
Brodas (Admiral)
Ny'Brodas (Rear Admiral)
Gashet (Commodore)
Kalim Pyn (Senior Captain)
Kalim (Captain)
Helot (Lieutenant)
Ny'Helot (Lieutenant Junior Grade)
Fahktu (Ensign)
Felk Ty Santar (Master Chief)
Felk Ty Lynn (Senior Chief)
Felk (Chief)
Ty Rashot Gal (Master Chief Petty Officer)
Rashot Gal (Chief Petty Officer)
Rashot (1st Class Petty Officer)
Betas (2nd Class Petty Officer)
Tolkem (Enlisted Apprentice)
Kassadet (Enlisted)
Velot (Recruit)

Ly-Nakir Corporate Ranks:
Brodas Ty Rashka (Supreme Commander)
Brodas (Admiral)
Ny'Brodas (Rear Admiral)
Gashet (Commodore)
Kalim (Captain)
Helot (Lieutenant)
Fahktu (Ensign)

Felk Ty Santar (Master Chief)
Felk Ty Lynn (Senior Chief)
Felk (Chief)
Ty Rashot Gal (Master Chief Petty Officer)
Rashot Gal (Chief Petty Officer)
Rashot (Petty Officer)
Kassadet (Enlisted)
Velot (Recruit)

Ly-Nakir Industries

The Ly-Nakir have the most conventional structure, where there are two tracks: officer and enlisted. One interesting facet is that, outside of the Supreme Commander, the military arm is completely separate from the rest of the corporation and has no influence with the corporation. This gives them the unfortunate tendency to get less effective ships, since to some bean counters 'excessive armour and weaponry' simply isn't cost-effective. The Falkosi interceptor and Brokados carrier are good examples of highly capable ships with less armour and weapons than they probably should have.

Pri-Wakat Concepts & Solutions

The Pri-Wakat serve as the Brakiri army forces and have three discrete tracks: officer, enlisted and non-Brakiri mercenary (usually Drazi or Narn). This mercenary corps is reminiscent of the French Foreign Legion of old Terra, where any race can be hired, no questions asked and live under the non-extradition protection of the Brakiri nation for as long as they serve. After 25 years, such individuals may retire as full Brakiri citizens (and pay Brakiri taxes). Thus, any character can serve in this organisation and while doing so will meet an eclectic group of fellow soldiers, ranging all the way from the normally pacifistic Abbai to the insectoid Gaim. These mercenary legions are the

Pri-Wakat Corporate Ranks:
Velos Ty Rashka (General of the Army)
Velos (General)
Ny'Velos (Brigadier General)
Frall (Colonel)
Claitot (Major)
Telos (Captain)
Halet (Lieutenant)
Ny'Halet (2nd Lieutenant)

Jolev Ty Santar (Sergeant Major)
Jolev Ty Lynn (Master Sergeant)
Jolev (Sergeant)
Ny'Jolev (Corporal)
Distat (Specialist)
Ny'Distat (Private 1st Class)
Devoki (Private 2nd Class)
Mai (Recruit)

Mi'Telos (Captain/Commander of the Mercenary Legions)
Mi'Halet (Lieutenant/Captain of the Mercenary Legion)
Mi'Sacrev Ty Lynn (Master Sergeant of the Mercenary Legions)
Mi'Sacrev (Sergeant of the Mercenary Legions)
Mi'Besk (Corporal of the Mercenary Legions)
Mi'Pesha (Private of the Mercenary Legions)
Mi'Grad (Recruit of the Mercenary Legions)

shock troops and casualty-sumps of the army, getting paid very well (never mind the profit sharing) to frequently die. The mercenary legion answers to a Ny'Velos, often termed Mi'Ny'Velos even though that is not an official title.

Im-Resha Technologies

There are no real 'ranks' in the Im-Resha corporation. Personnel are hired for specific positions and set terms of service, as listed in the sidebar. Once hired, an individual typically remains in that specific job until retirement or dismissal. However, those individuals who show good service in these positions are eligible to be hired for a higher position and outstanding service or specific need can lead to contract renegotiations that may place the Brakiri into a higher rank category.

Medals and Honours

Brakiri awards are referred to as 'certificates' and almost always involve some sort of monetary bonus, increase in pay or other compensation. Since most military personnel are hired for specific positions, remaining there for most of their career, the rate of pay varies widely between individuals. A highly skilled engineer with twenty years in service and a dozen certificates hanging in his quarters very likely earns a higher salary than a brand-new officer—even the ship's captain.

Instead of vying for promotions, Brakiri military officers and soldiers compete for certificates. Most certificates are fixed award handed out at specific times, usually annually, to only the individuals who best meet the requirements. In this way, individual expertise, skill and motivation are better rewarded than in most militaries. However, this method also produces a significant amount of unhealthy competition and often leads to underhanded acts, heavy politicking and bad feelings between rivals. While these seldom result in combat or violence, they do create a strained relationship and difficult work environment.

Brakiri certificates are not worn on the uniform, but instead are provided within frames suitable for hanging on an office or quarters wall. By tradition, the wall in question must be blank and unadorned except for these certificates. When a Brakiri guest visits another's quarters or office for the first time, it is expected that all remain silent while the certificates are viewed, after which the conversation or meeting can begin. Not taking the time to view someone's hard-earned awards is considered a grave insult.

Certificate of Invaluability: Granted annually to the single individual within a unit who is considered the most valuable, this award carries an automatic raise, a huge bonus and more job security than any other certificate. When someone wins this prestigious honour, they are virtually guaranteed to keep their current position for as long as they like and should they wish to pursue a promotion, it will almost always be granted. Losing the benefits of a Certificate of Invaluability (also called the 'Immovable Employee' award) requires a significant error or lapse in

Im-Rehsa Corporate Ranks:
Brodas Ty Santar (Supreme Commander/ Corporate Senior Battle Director)
Brodas Ty Lynn (Admiral/Battle Director)
Brodas Pyn (Captain/Senior Director)
Brodas (Lieutenant/Director)
Teshlat Pyn (Lieutenant Junior Grade/ Senior Official)
Teshlat (Chief/Official)
Ny'Teshlat (Enlisted/Junior Official)

judgement. The winner of such a certificate must take care not to let it get to his head, however, as overusing the perks of the certificate can lead to enmity, especially with others who were up for the award and failed to receive it.

Superior Achievement Certificate: This award is given to the Brakiri who provides the single most important contribution to his unit during the previous year. Unlike the Certificate of Invaluability, which rewards someone who consistently excels, the Superior Achievement Certificate recognises only a specific occurrence. If the certificate is awarded for an invention, it carries with it a patent that may provide royalties in perpetuity, thus making this award potentially the most valuable of all. Some Brakiri have retired to great wealth thanks to just one of these certificates.

Certificate of Ultimate Excellence: Similar to the Earth Alliance's Medal of Honour, this is the highest commendation that can be achieved. To achieve it, the individual must go far and above the call of duty or corporation, performing some heroic act that marks him virtually as a legend in his own time. The winner of this gets accolades aplenty, but also receives two major perks. The first is 50,000 credits per year to the winner or his/her spouse (if the recipient dies in the action that resulted in the award) for life or until all children have reached adulthood. Second, for the same term, those affected do not pay taxes for the same period. Since this is an individual award, there is no competition for it, although it is given out so infrequently that there are rarely more than a few honoured Brakiri who possess this certificate.

Certificate of the Comet: This award is one of the few not granted annually or at some other specific time interval. The Comet Certificate is given to those who show remarkable heroism or bravery at the risk of their own lives, in much the same way as the Distinguished Service Cross is given in the Earth Alliance. The Certificate of the Comet provides a very high monetary bonus but does not otherwise directly affect one's career. Unlike many awards, this one is not competed for by individuals, so if several Brakiri in a single unit performed acts of valour worthy of the certificate, they could all receive it. There are rarely any bad feelings as a result.

Certificate of Recognition: If a Brakiri dies in the line of duty, especially during combat with an enemy, he may be presented with this certificate honouring his achievements. The certificate, along with all others he may have earned during his career, is presented to his relatives in a solemn ceremony that also brings with it a final monetary bonus. For high-ranking officers, this certificate is automatic and also provides a pension to the spouse and/or children.

Manager's Certificate: This award is given to the Brakiri in charge of the most efficient element within an organisation, which (for the military) is generally a platoon or department. The officer's direct superior nominates him for this certificate, which is awarded twice a year. In addition to a slight raise, the reward includes a week's furlough for the officer and those serving under him, plus a bonus that, by tradition, is shared with all his subordinates. Receipt of several Manager's Certificates is often an indication that an officer should be offered a higher-ranking position, but receipt of this promotion is entirely voluntary.

Certificate of Longevity: These awards are provided to anyone who remains in service for a certain amount of time, such as 5 years, 10 years and so on. Each such award carries with it an automatic raise, bonus and a chunk of vacation or furlough time that can be taken whenever desired, except in times of war or emergency.

Project Certificate: Whenever a very large project is undertaken—the nature of which depends upon the unit and corporation—a Project Certificate may be presented. Sometimes, such a certificate is promised in advance as a 'carrot' to convince those involved to undertake this difficult task. Other times, the award is given at the conclusion of the job as a surprise bonus. The Project Certificate is normally awarded to all participants equally and generally results in extra pay, a vacation or any of several other means of compensation.

CREATURES OF THE GALAXY

Within the area of space dominated by the major races and the League worlds, there are hundreds of inhabitable worlds; within the galaxy there are tens of thousands. Each of those worlds possesses a complex native ecosystem, ranging from prions to, in some cases, sentient beings. The range of life in the galaxy is amazing. Life is omnipresent. There are living things in the rims of volcanoes, in boiling suboceanic vents, high in the stratosphere, buried deep within ice. There are creatures that swim through vacuum, who dwell in the stormy upper reaches of gas giants, who lurk in the swirling fires of hyperspace. There are beings of carbon, of silicon, of energy. There are beings that live their lives in hours and those that are immortal. The diversity and variety of life defies any attempt to catalogue it. Even within so narrow a category as 'the mammals of Earth', there are tiny shrews and gargantuan blue whales and those creatures both came from a common ancestor in a mere fifty million years.

The following, then, does not pretend to be anything more than the most random sampling of creatures from across the galaxy. The creatures include their native names and the terms by which they are colloquially known to humans; most sentient races tend to describe another world's animals in terms of their own. To a human, a Narn is 'Snakelike' or 'Lizardlike'. To the Narn, a monkey is an 'Earth Vor'kha' and humans are sometimes called 'Vor'kha Narn', though, rarely to their face if there's any chance they speak Narn.

The focus of the game is not to slay these animals to see if they have any loot. Each creature has a place in the universe and has a story hook associated with it. Animals should be local colour, occasional threats or plot elements, not merely things to kill. Even if they are used as guards or are stalking the players for food, they have some purpose other than standing around waiting to be slaughtered.

Ahnall Lonar (Plasma Squid)

Colossal Alien Creature
Character Level: 20 (72 hp)
Initiative: -1 (-1 Dex)
Speed: 60 ft.
DV: 13 (-8 size, +11 Reflex)
Attacks: Melee +37/+32/+28/+23/+20 (Bite 4d10+17)
Special Qualities: Energy Immunity (Ex), Damage Reduction 5
Saves: Fort +16, Ref +11, Will +9
Abilities: Str 45, Dex 9, Con 19, Int 2, Wis 16, Cha 6
Skills: Listen* +13, Spot +16
Feats: Improved Initiative, Toughness x3

*The Ahnall Lonar 'listens' to radio and other EM-band noise in hyperspace and can hone in on the odd pulses of most drive systems or leakage from communication gear.

The Ahnall Lonar dwells in hyperspace and is considered by many to be a myth. Of all the younger races, only the Minbari, who have been travelling the starlanes for well over a millennia, have encountered them with any regularity. While Earth scientists had learned as early as the beginning years of the 21st century that some forms of energy could form cell-like structures, 'eat' and 'reproduce', few guessed that complex life forms could evolve out of pure energy and would have dismissed such concepts as suitable only for the more fantastic forms of science fiction. The Minbari and some very unlucky members of other species know better.

An Ahnall Lonar looks like a collection of translucent, glowing bubbles, surrounded by a number of small bubbles, with the smaller bubbles joined to the central mass by streams of lightning. The entire creature is made of energy fields of different types and frequencies. It may be part of a complex ecosystem dwelling in hyperspace, but such an ecosystem has never been sketched out – too few hyperspatial creatures are known to even begin constructing a food web, for example. The smallest Ahnall Lonar the Minbari have recorded had a central mass thirty meters in diameter and tentacles a hundred meters long; the largest could engulf the Babylon 5 station with ease and there is no theoretical upper limit on their growth. It is fortunate that their presence is trivially detectable by most sensors; they fairly 'scream' in the electromagnetic spectrum. Any ship which gets too close to one is likely to be destroyed utterly, another reason they are considered to be myths. The garbled reports which make it back tend to be dismissed as misidentifications of surges (see the section on hyperspace hazards) and are filed and forgotten.

The Ahnall is drawn to the energy pulsing through a starship and it will tear ship apart to get at it. The explosions which are the likely result of the creature's attack simply provide it with a massive surge of food and, sometimes, spur it to divide and thus reproduce itself. Some Minbari scientists feel that all Ahnall Lonar are descendants of a single creature, one which may well have been an artificial creation. Others believe in an as-yet-undiscovered 'hyperspace ecology' and consider the Ahnall Lonar to simply be a top predator in that ecology. Little else is know of their lifecycle, so, either theory may well be correct.

The Ahnall Lonar attacks by embracing a target ship in its tentacles. Energy pulses through them and into the ship, burning out circuits and melting hulls.

The creature then proceeds to tear this ship apart, with a special interest in the engines.

Energy Immunity (Ex): The Ahnall Lonar dwells in the chaotic voids of hyperspace and is a creature of pure energy. No known energy weapon can harm it; it ignores particle beams and plasma gouts with equal abandon. Only disruption fields tuned to its own frequencies can harm it. Most active sensors can generate such fields, but a Technical (engineering) check (DC 25) is needed to produce such a field.

Gok (Minbari Cat)

Tiny Alien Creature
Character Level: 1
Initiative: +7 (+3 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 17 (+2 Size, +5 Reflex)
Attacks: Melee +0 (1d4-3 Bite)
Special Qualities: None
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +5, Will +2
Abilities: Str 6, Dex 16, Con 12, Int 2, Wis 14, Cha 14
Skills: Move Silently +5
Feats: Improved Initiative

Nearly all intelligent species have pets. Humans have ducks (at least according to Ambassador Mollari), Centauri have vonnar (a sort of furred eel), Vorlons have humans and Minbari have, among other species, the gok. While the creature does not resemble a terran cat in any way other than that it is a furred quadruped, it shares with its Earthborn counterpart an all-consuming narcissism and sense of playful sadism that even the ascetic, spiritual, Minbari find appealing. Goks are often found in temples on Minbar, sprawled across shrines (thus reminding the acolytes that the shrine is not holy, it merely represents the holy) or curled languorously on piles of sacred scrolls, keeping anyone from reading them (thus sending the message that mere study is not enough, true enlightenment requires experience) or prowling the kitchens looking for food (thus teaching, by example, that attending to the needs of the body is of equal importance to the needs of the soul, a philosophy which the rangers, who merge lethal physical skills with spiritual discipline, take to heart).

Physically, the Gok resembles a furred, four-legged snake, closer in appearance to a ferret than a cat. The fur can be long or short, mono-coloured or patterned; there are many sub-breeds of Gok. Gok have bone outcroppings at the base of their neck and shoulders and also small bone 'spurs' at the knee joints. They have sharp, non-retractable claws, which are used for gripping, climbing and fighting. When pleased or contented, they emit a soft, musical, trill; when angered or frightened, this sound become a harsh buzzing noise.

Gok do not mate for life, but only have one mate per season, with the female choosing from among several 'suitors'. After mating, the female produces a litter of four to eight 'gokno'. A gokno is considered to be a full-grown gok at the age of one Terran year. Gok live for about 25 terran years.

Grylor (Janos Pterodactyl)

Medium-Size Alien Creature
Character Level: 4 (18 hit points)
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 10 ft., 45 ft. fly
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: Melee +5 (1d6+1 Bite)
Special Qualities: Tracking Scent, Damage Reduction 3
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +3
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 14, Con 14, Int 2, Wis 14, Cha 2
Skills: Listen +6, Move Silently +4, Spot +7
Feats: Alertness

There are few actual 'hell worlds' in the universe, worlds filled with nothing but vicious, bloodthirsty carnivores outfitted with a seemingly endless array of teeth, claws and poison. If there is such a world, though, Janos VII, a neutral world located between Markar and Gaim space would be it. A small number of research colonies dot the planet and it is known as a stop of last resort for many on the run, resulting in a fair assortment of tiny, mostly temporary, bases and settlements.

The grylor is one of the mid-range predators on Janos VII. In some ways, it resembles a terrestrial pterodactyl, although its body is thicker, almost ovoid and its wingspan somewhat smaller, due to the denser atmosphere of Janos. The creature has a heavy, well-muscled tail. The wingspan is approximately 2-3 meters and the creature can hover briefly. Speculation on how it manages this is rife, ranging from internal hydrogen bladders to some from of subconscious telekinesis, but no conclusive answer has been found. Grylors do not thrive in captivity and are dangerous to keep around, thus, study has been limited.

The creatures hunt alone and interact with others of their kind only during brief mating frenzies. Grylor mating is a brutal, violent, act and often leaves considerable scarring. Some scientists have noted that scarring in a grylor acts as a sexual signal to others of the species; much akin to bright coloration in many male birds on earth, such scars say 'I am survivor! Breed with me!'

While non-sentient, they are cunning hunters and somewhat obsessive. Once a grylor has decided on a particular target, it will stalk it almost unceasingly, giving up the chase only if the prey completely leaves the grylor's senses or if it is killed.

Kílon-qua'gra (Narn Red Scorpion)

Large Alien Creature
Character Level: 5 (23 hit points)
Initiative: +0
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: Melee +8 (2 Claws 1d6+3), Melee +3 (Sting 1d6+3+Poison)
Special Qualities: Poison, Damage Reduction 3
Saves: Fort +8, Ref +1, Will +7
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 11, Con 18, Int 2, Wis 16, Cha 4
Skills: Listen +7, Move Silently +2, Spot +5
Feats: Toughness, Iron Will

The K'lon-qua'gra is one of the most dangerous predators of the northern jungles of Narn, although, as with many such creatures, it has been driven almost to extinction by the encroachments of sentient beings. Even before the Centauri came, Narn farmers killed the beasts to protect their herds; the Centauri had a taste for the stinger meat and hunted them voraciously, often organising K'lon hunts as a sporting activity.

The creature does resemble a terrestrial scorpion somewhat, though it has only six legs and possesses an endoskeleton. The forward arms end in serrated, sharp, pincers and it has a long, flexible, tail, which terminates in a bifurcated stinger. It is a spangled reddish-brown in colour and walks low to the ground. It has a hard outer shell which can easily turn aside primitive weapons, though it is as no meaningful resistance to PPG fire or even to bullets. The females lay nests of unfertilised eggs which emit pheromones which attract males, which then fertilise the eggs; the young hatch several weeks later and must survive on their own. When Narns learned to train lokarns to sniff out and destroy the nests, the long, slow, decline of K'lon populations began. Ironically, the only reason they are not extinct yet was the Centauri, which banned the destruction of the nests in order to preserve some for hunting and did not care about the fate of Narn farmers – though taxes were due just the same.

Poison (Ex): The K'lon-qua'gra has poison in its stinger, a very nasty neurotoxin which unfortunately (for purposes of assassination) loses potency upon exposure to air, making it very hard to extract and store. It is quite potent when injected deep into flesh by the stinger of the creature, however, dealing 1d6 Dex/2d6 Str damage with a Fort save of DC 16.

Shonlath (Minbari Sloth)

Large Alien Creature
Character Level: 4 (14 hit points)
Initiative: -2 (-2 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 8 (-1 Reflex, -1 size)
Attacks: Melee +2 Bite (1d8+2)
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 1
Saves: Fort +7, Ref -1, Will +0
Abilities: Str 14, Dex 7, Con 16, Int 1, Wis 8, Cha 1
Skills: Listen +2, Spot +2
Feats: Toughness

The Shonlath is native to the moss-covered tundra of Minbar, where it roams in great herds, often clearing the moss to the ground over a large swath of land. This exposes the tundra to direct sunlight, allowing it to thaw slightly, which in turn triggers the mating cycles of several species responsible for the continued growth of the moss. This is one of the most common examples of ecological interdependence taught to Minbari children and is the basis for over one thousand philosophical treatises stored in the archives of the religious caste. However, the shonlath is more than a part of an ecosystem; it's also one of the warrior caste's most prized food animals, due in part to the fact is lethally poisonous.

The shonlath is a low-slung, incredibly hirsute beast, which has a broad mouth filled with teeth designed to scrape the moss from the ground and then grind it to pulp. The creature's head is usually angled down, so its eyes are on short stalks, enabling them to peer ahead. The tail is long, thin and hairless. As with many higher Minbari life forms, it has several bone outcroppings; these are visible along the back and shoulders and are often a dark grey or black in colour. The shonlath travel in large, slow moving herds and, from the air, a herd resembles a slow moving furry blob that leaves dark streaks of stripped land behind it in the tundra. The young are near the front of the herd, where they can feed on to the tender upper parts of the moss; as they pass, those behind chew the moss down further. Shonlath have no noticeable natural defences; their teeth are useless in a fight and they have dull hooves, not sharp fighting claws. Their main defence is their poisonous flesh; a predator who kills and eats one shonlath will not kill anymore and their odour tends to warn off potential hunters, much as yellow and black coloration is a 'warning sign' among Earth animals.

A small group of worker caste Minbari train all of their lives to learn the techniques for herding, capturing, ritually slaughtering and then preparing the flesh of the shonlath in such a way as it is unlikely to kill those who eat it. A small failure in any part of the process, the slightest misstep, can result in fatal consequences. Since non-warriors are forbidden to eat the shonlath by religious decree, there is no way to test the food before it is served. The Ritual Of First Preparation, where a newly trained worker (who will be, by this time, in his 80s or roughly 40 in human terms) serves the food to a warrior who has volunteered to eat it, is very sacred to the worker caste and it marks one of the few rituals shared between the two castes. The meat of the shonlath is a 2d6 Con/2d6 Con poison with a Fort DC save of 18.

Voloka (Centauri Riding Ostrich)

Large Alien Creature
Character Level: 5 (18 hit points)
Initiative: +6 (+2 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 50 ft.
DV: 20 (-1 Size, +11 Reflex)
Attacks: Melee +5 (Slam 1d6+3)
Special Qualities: None
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +11, Will +2
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 18, Con 16, Int 2, Wis 12, Cha 10
Skills: Jump +11, Balance +5
Feats: Endurance, Lightning Reflexes

While the Centauri developed technological means of personal transport centuries ago, moving past steam-driven cars to hydrogen fuelled vehicles without ever passing through the petrochemical stage responsible for so much ecological damage to Earth, they have never lost a romanticised passion for animal mounts (a trait which they shared with many humans and which helped create goodwill during their first contact with mankind). No longer necessary, but still loved, voloka are a common sight on Centauri Prime and some have been exported to colony worlds. Many of those were originally brought because the lack of an industrial infrastructure during the earliest days of colonisation made them once again useful beasts, not mere pets. Since then, large numbers have gone feral. Furthermore, many of the worlds where now-feral voloka herds wander are currently part of the Narn Regime, seized when the Centauri pulled back. The Narn tend to farm such herds as pet food, mostly because doing so annoys the Centauri.

In form, the voloka somewhat resembles a large, two legged bird, similar to the dromornithids which stalked Australia tens of thousands of years before the arrival of humanity. The resemblance is somewhat superficial, however. The voloka is a grain-eater; not a carnivore and its feet are six-toed and do not have a ripping claw. The head, also, is wider, affording it better vision. The greatest difference, however, are the wings, which, while not sufficient to grant the bird flight, are not wholly vestigial, either. The voloka can make great gliding leaps, carrying itself and a light rider almost twenty feet. This has led to the evolution of many sports and competitions involving leaping, gliding, voloka and daring (if somewhat light) riders. While such events are considered a bit out-of-date, even by the generally traditional Centauri, a small number of the most conservative and tradition-minded houses continue to indulge in them.

Voloka are hardy and adaptable beasts and can live in a wide range of climates. A small breeding pool was given to Earthgov as a gift following first contact; as the beasts expanded to fill zoo after zoo, some ended up in private hands and some of those, in turn, made it into the wild. Many of these grain-eaters have ended up in the North American Midwest, where their eating habits have caused them to become a minor pest. The Centauri respect the right of farmers to grow crops, but they have objected to plans for a mass slaughter and so, for diplomatic reasons, the flocks of wild voloka are not simple exterminated, though any caught in the fields are considered fair game. If relations with the Centauri sour appreciably, it is likely that a quick and efficient slaughter will take place, but for now, the overall damage they do is minimal enough that they are tolerated.

INTERPLANETARY EXPEDITIONS

Interplanetary Expeditions or IPX, was first incorporated in 2130; almost a generation before the path to the stars was opened up by the Centauri. As with ISN, the founders of IPX realised that being the first to build an infrastructure to exploit the new frontier would give them a nearly insurmountable advantage. While IPX is a private, for-profit, corporation, it has won so many concessions and exemptions to laws that it is almost a de facto branch of EarthGov and it is certainly a major player in high level power politics. Its discoveries can be world changing and it knows it.

At first, IPX focused primarily on tracking down natural resources in the solar system for exploration and in conducting experiments in non-Terran environments to see if there were things which could be done in microgravity or on Mars or on the Jovian moons, which could not be easily replicated on Earth. It was in these early years of the company, at the Syria Planum station, that the future of the corporation would be determined, when it began to dig up not exotic mineral or ores, but alien artefacts of unknown origin and purpose.

These artefacts were organic technology of Shadow manufacture, though, of course, this was not known at the time. The lethal reaction of telepaths to this technology led to the involvement of the ancestor of Psi-Corps, the Metahuman Regulatory Agency. This, in turn, led to a long entanglement between the two groups, culminating in deals with the Shadows themselves during the late 2250s and early 2260s.

Most people, though, do not know of these little sidelines. To the majority of the world, IPX is a large, but mostly benign, corporation that finds miracles and brings them home. Only a few suspect much more is found than is ever revealed and that IPX quests after power even more than after profit.

WORKING FOR IPX

Strange weapons, new medicines, alien art and music, technologies whose purpose cannot even be guessed at – all this and more, is found and exploited by IPX. Those who work for it on the front lines, exploring alien world and seeking the lost and unknown, have a chance of becoming extremely wealthy and a much greater chance of being very, very, dead. With most humans having a poor grasp of probability as it applies to them, IPX has no trouble finding willing employees.

Of course, most of those who work for IPX do not work on the front lines of xenoarcheology. IPX is a huge corporation and employs countless stay-at-home researchers, not to mention support staff, marketing personnel and so on. They maintain a small fleet of research and exploration vessels. They do not set up new jumpgates – this is an expense beyond even their budget – but they do explore as far off the main network as it is safe to go, sending unmanned probes to find likely new systems and setting up beacons to allow them to find them from hyperspace. Due to this, most of their ships are capable of forming their own jump points and they may have the largest private fleet of such vessels in the Earth Alliance.

Thus, there's a role for almost any character type within IPX, but scientists, officers with pilot training, soldiers and agents are the most likely to find their skills needed on a regular basis. IPX also regularly hires experts in specialised areas to work on specific projects and they have the networks needed to find anyone who has the skills they need.

Though based solidly in the Earth Alliance, they maintain offices with most of the other major races (other than the Vorlons, of course...), often located on the fringes of those races' territories, allowing them to launch expeditions further out. Complex interlocking treaties and contracts govern the disposition of useful artefacts or technologies found within the territory of another race, but it must

be noted that the most interesting items are often never reported as found; often, an expedition which discovers something truly fascinating will simply declare that it came up empty and pack up, keeping the find hidden and exploiting any consequences of the discovery without revealing the source.

Most citizens are unaware of IPX' more underhanded dealings and thus, are quite willing to work for or with them. Unlike Psi Corps, there is not a widespread and deep-rooted animosity; indeed, the criminal link between IPX, the Psi Corps and the Shadows did not emerge until after the Great War.

IPX is has the following structure:

Home Office: Headquartered in Toronto, the IPX Home Office handles the day-to-day corporate work which keeps a company running, as well as setting broad policies for each of the other divisions. Accounting, Human Resources, Legal and Procurement departments all work for this branch of the corporation.

Research Divisions: There are several research divisions, each focusing on different areas of technology. While there's a Research Management Department which is part of the Home Office and which oversees all research, sets priorities and decides on paths to pursue, each Research Division is quasi-independent, with its own management team running day-to-day affairs in accordance with the directives issued from above. As technologies change and the needs of the company alter, some research divisions are folded into others and new ones are created. As of 2260, the primary divisions include:

- **Linguistics:** This division focuses on translation of unknown languages, as well as building up as complete a dictionary of known alien languages as possible. This 'über-dictionary' is often combed for root words and phrases indicating contact with other races in pre-history.

- **Pharmaceuticals:** One of the most profitable, but also most controversial, research divisions, the pharmaceutical division tries to extract new drugs or treatments from IPX finds. When they succeed, the profits are often off the scale; but most of the time, years and credits are poured into a research path which yields no tangible results. Rumours of highly unethical experimental procedures continue to dog the division, although attempts to find something solid to pin on them have all failed.

- **Industrial/Fabrication:** Considered to be the least glamorous division, it is nonetheless the most consistently profitable. Materials technology, production techniques and new alloys and building materials are all researched and, in many cases, duplicated by these divisions.

- **Computers:** Attempting to understand alien computer technology is among the most difficult tasks, because so much of what is needed to comprehend the meaning of what is going on is contained in eternally lost documentation. Thus, the majority of the accomplishments of this division are in circuit design and the more physical aspects of computer engineering, with software breakthroughs coming rarely.

- **Special Projects:** This division doesn't exist, of course. It is the division where organic technology, especially Shadow technology, goes, along with psionically active tech and other remnants of the First Ones. The Special Projects division was responsible for IPX's involvement in the unearthing of the Shadow vessels on Mars and Io and in many other such activities. Special Projects exists as a shadow division inside all the others, filtering off research or discoveries which are deemed too valuable to be processed normally.

Exploration: The most exciting and most public, part of IPX, the Exploration division is the division that goes out and finds things. While press releases and propaganda focus on the big discoveries and occasional moments of excitement, the vast majority of the time spent by employees of this division when working in the field is slow, painstaking, archaeology. Granted, IPX is sometimes a lot less cautious than a purely academic concern would be, despite their ties to the xenoarcheology departments of many large universities – they have been criticised for taking shortcuts, for destroying valuable surface artefacts in order to get to underground vaults, for not being sufficiently meticulous in avoiding contamination of sites and so on. These criticisms are generally muted by the large amount of funding pouring from IPX into university coffers, however, including large scholarship funds, underwriting of research grants and lucrative consulting fees to professors.

NAMES

Each culture and species on Babylon 5 has distinctive naming conventions. No one would expect a Narn to be named Corido or a Minbari to be called G'Tal. Coming up with names on the spur of the moment can be difficult, however. The following charts are designed to allow quick and easy random generation of names which 'sound right'. It should be noted, though, that random systems invariably produce strange, accidentally obscene or wrong-sounding results. Do not be bound by the dice; change a letter, add a syllable or tack on an ending as needed. However, sometimes, an odd name is acceptable. The world of the Minbari, Centauri, Narn and other races contain *billions* of individuals from many different regions and subcultures. They are not homogenous masses and there are always going to be some names that do not fit the common pattern. Human names, after all, range from Smith to Suzuki, from Michael to Mugabe and centuries of exogamy have created amazing blends of cultural and ethnic identities. The other races of the galaxy are just as varied.

MINBARI NAMES

Minbari rarely use their family or house names and so, this chart does not generate these. Only a single name is provided, since that seems to be how the Minbari prefer to identify themselves. On formal occasions or for rituals, they will introduce themselves or refer to themselves as being "...of the house..." or "...of the family..." but, for the most part, a single name seems to suffice.

To use the following chart, either select a starting and ending syllable or roll randomly. Thirty sided dice can be found at well-equipped hobby and gaming stores or, a number from 1-30 can be generated by rolling 1d6 and 1d10, with 1-2 on the d6 indicating a number from 1-10, 3-4 indicating a number from 11-20 and 4-6 indicating a number from 21 to 30.

A few examples: A player generating a male Minbari rolls a 26 for first syllable and 5 for last syllable, resulting in Shuan. The player decides to tack an apostrophe in the middle to emphasize the different syllables, resulting in Shu'an.

A Games Master in a hurry needs a name for a female Centauri NPC was just intended to be local colour. He rolls a 10 and a 12 for the first name and gets Likli, which he changes to Likili (pronouncing is Lee-key-lee) to avoid the game degenerating into sophomoric humour. For the last name, a roll of 1d6 indicates a three part last name and rolls of 15, 28 and 26 result in Muurztu, which is changed for pronunciation purposes to Murztu. The final name, thus, is Likili Murztu.

Generating Minbari Names

Roll once for the first part, either male or female and once for the final part. Many Minbari names include an apostrophe to emphasize the break between the first and second syllables; others are smoother sounding. This is generally a matter of aesthetics.

3d10	Male	Female	Final	3d10	Male	Female	Final
1	Ash	Bal	ain	16	Lonn	Mil	mur
2	Bran	Ban	ain	17	Mar	Miy	ok
3	Brin	Bil	ak	18	Mir	Mo	on
4	Cal	Cal	al	19	Mor	No	one
5	Cop	Cha	an	20	Ne	Nu	orr
6	Dakh	Cho	en	21	No	Sal	rin
7	Dra	Chu	enn	22	Rac	San	ron
8	Dukh	Cil	han	23	Ras	Sul	ten
9	Dur	Coll	hin	24	Rath	Vaal	tin
10	Kad	Dal	hon	25	Sha	Vil	ton
11	Kal	Dee	ier	26	Shu	Vur	un
12	Kal	Del	in	27	Tur	Za	vaal
13	Koz	Dol	ine	28	Val	Zal	val
14	Lenn	Mal	mer	29	Ven	Zi	vul
15	Linn	May	mor	30	Vol	Zu	yen

Centauri Names

Centauri place great store in their family name and tend to use it regularly. It is very important, in Centauri society, to always remind someone else of who your family is. Even when meeting non-Centauri, a Centauri will almost always introduce himself by his full name.

Most Centauri names end in a vowel or in –us. If a last name does not end in a vowel, append either a vowel (usually –i or –o) to the name or add –us. In the body of the name itself, a consonant (usually 'n') can be inserted if the name is difficult to pronounce or is too soft sounding. Male Centauri names, especially, have strongly defined syllables.

Generating Centauri Names

For male Centauri, first, roll 1d6. A roll of 1 indicates a one syllable name, determined from the first column. A roll of 2-4 indicates a two syllable name, determined by rolling once on the first column and once on the second. A roll of 5-6 indicates a three syllable first name, determined by rolling twice on the first column and once on the second.

For female Centauri, roll once on the first column and once on the second.

For Centauri of both genders, in order to determine the last name, roll 1d6. A roll of 1 indicates a single part; a roll of 2-3 indicates 2 parts and a roll of 4-6 indicates three parts. All parts are rolled on the "Last" column.

3d10	Male First 1	Male First 2	Female 1	Female 2	Last	3d10	Male First 1	Male First 2	Female 1	Female 2	Last
1	Ac	air	Ad	air	a	16	Le	mo	Lom	lun	no
2	And	an	An	as	cot	17	Lond	nar	Mal	ni	ray
3	Anod	ardi	Ar	bov	cri	18	Lor	ni	Mar	no	re
4	Ant	ardo	Dag	ia	cro	19	Luc	no	Mul	ori	ree
5	Ba	bus	Fan	ia	do	20	Lun	nu	Sadi	ov	ri
6	Ban	cia	Fim	iel	fa	21	Mar	nus	San	qan	ro
7	Car	do	Jar	iko	fu	22	Met	o	Sh	sil	sus
8	Cir	fa	Jol	inar	ja	23	Mil	on	Shak	so	te
9	Dil	fo	Len	ira	ki	24	Mor	on	Tim	ta	to
10	Jan	fu	Li	iri	ko	25	Ron	pa	Tin	tair	to
11	Jon	gu	Lil	isty	la	26	Ta	ro	Tum	tari	tu
12	Ki	ji	Lind	kli	lo	27	Ti	to	Vam	tia	ty
13	Kir	jo	Lind	kol	mi	28	Turh	za	Van	tu	urz
14	Kon	ku	Lir	lo	mo	29	Ur	zi	Vim	ty	zo
15	Kor	kus	Lok	lu	mu	30	Vir	zu	Yar	us	zor

NARN NAMES

Narn are not given their adult names by their parents. Rather, they select a name based on the religious/spiritual path they follow. As with Minbari, Narn normally go by a single name and thus, only a first name generator is provided.

Generating Narn Names

To use this chart, roll 1d8 for the first syllable and 1d30 for the second.

1d8	Lead Syllable
1	G’
2	K’
3	Ko’
4	N’
5	Na’
6	Ta’
7	Tru’
8	Va’

3d10	Second Syllable	3d10	Second Syllable
1	Dath	16	Man
2	Dol	17	Mar
3	Doth	18	Mel
4	Gak	19	Mon
5	Gar	20	Nal
6	Gon	21	Nil
7	Gra	22	Nol
8	Kal	23	Quon
9	Kan	24	Sten
10	Kan	25	Ston
11	Kar	26	Tok
12	Kra	27	Toth
13	Lon	28	Val
14	Lun	29	Von
15	Mak	30	Vorn

INTERSTELLAR NETWORK NEWS

Interstellar Network News (ISN) is not the only non-governmental source of information available to the worlds of the Earth Alliance, but it is by far the largest. Its founders saw the future in the jumpgates early on and began building a transmission network when other media companies were still trying to figure out if there'd ever be enough customers off-world to make it pay. They piggybacked signals onto Centauri and League tachyon relays while EarthGov was laying out StellarCom and, indeed, a good chunk of StellarCom tapped into the relays ISN funded privately (for which ISN was suitably compensated when the entire network eventually came under EarthGov control) It was an audacious gamble, but it has paid off so well that, for all practical purposes, ISN is the media source for the Earth Alliance. Despite the name of Interstellar Network News, ISN operates two dozen major channels and twice as many specialised ones, carrying everything from political debate to live coverage of the senate at Earthdome to Centauri costume dramas dubbed in a dozen human languages.

As the dominant media outlet for the Earth Alliance, ISN has the power to tremendously influence politics, but corporate policy dictates general neutrality, at least as much for reasons of profit as ethics. For one thing, tilting too strongly to one side or the other in political and social debates could open the market for a competitor willing to appeal to the other side. For another, a strong sense of bias could breed hostility among those government officials on the other side, which opens the risk of a take-over – the sheer scope of ISN makes it a tempting target for government control. The Earth Alliance Constitution forbids such nationalisation, but laws can be changed.

This is not to say that bias does not exist, only that it tends to be spread around, with programming and commentators representing all mainstream views given some allotment of time. Naturally, the definition of 'mainstream' is fairly fluid. ISN will run interviews with 'responsible' Martian separatists, but will condemn the Free Mars faction as ruthless terrorists.

All of this changed in 2262, when President Clark seized control of the network as part of his overall bid for dictatorial power. Within hours, ISN became a propaganda tool of the Clark regime, saying only what the government told it to say. Clarks confidence in his power was such that the coup occurred live, while ISN was broadcasting information directly implicating Clark in the assassination of President Santiago. ISN went off the air for the first time in its history and when it came back, hours later, everything changed. The familiar 'talking heads' were gone, replaced by Clark's agents. Reporters who didn't toe the line without question were fired at best, simply 'disappeared' at worst. If ISN had demonstrated bias or slanting or spin, before the take-over, it was nothing compared to the total control now asserted by Clark. This is the state of affairs at the end of the third season of the series.

ISN in Your Campaign

At the simplest level, ISN is a means to impart plot-related information to the players. If a story hook is needed, it can be as simple as "You turn on ISN. They're talking about..." However, it can also be more than that.

Storytelling Tool: Throughout the series, ISN served as both an information conduit and as a sort of Greek choir, commenting on the action. If the PCs have done something newsworthy, ISN should cover it, unless it was done in secret. Even if the actions were secret, it's quite possible the consequences weren't. Did the PCs help a blip escape from Psi-Cops? Let them congratulate themselves on a job well done, until they learn he was a true rogue, wanted for the murder of several 'mundanes' and not the innocent fugitive he claimed to be. Did the PCs help a Free Mars 'freedom fighter' to smuggle weapons? ISN will be at the scene of the murderous attack on an Earth Alliance veterans hospital, not the military base which was the putative target. On the other side of the coin, ISN can also reveal growing corruption and deceit; perhaps the PCs know that it was the Psi-Cops who killed the non-telepaths in their pursuit of the runner, then covered it up. ISN is more likely to be a dupe than willing pawn while they are still free; once controlled by Clark, even the most outrageous lies will be broadcast with a straight face. (Consider events during the anti-terrorist wars of the early 21st century on Earth, where the news media of one nation denied an invasion was occurring even as fighting took place in the background.)

Character Background: For players, ISN can be a great background for a character. A character could be a former ISN reporter or a currently active one, assigned to the 'Babylon 5 Bureau'. (The non-existence of such in the series should be considered a minor impediment, at least until the third season; at this point, the reporter will either become a shill for Clark or an ex-employee in need of a new job. Either one offers good storytelling possibilities.) Ex-employees offer interesting character possibilities as well: Did the reporter leave of his own will or was he fired? Did he say too much or too little? Did he ruin an innocent man's life or did he suppress a story, which offended advertisers – but which turned out to be vital? Or did he just want a change?

It is also possible to do an all-ISN campaign. One such possibility would be to have the characters working as the staff of a current events/special interest type program, sent to wherever things are happening in order to film events and get good interviews. Of course, there will likely be many opportunities for adventure 'off the set'. The characters could justifiably be placed at almost any interesting event in the course of the Babylon 5 story, from the arrival of Kosh on the station in 'The Gathering' to being the first humans to see the battered remains of the Narn homeworld. And, of course, they'd have to deal with the Clark take-over. Do they sit by while everything they say is twisted to serve Clark or do they risk their jobs and their lives, to somehow get the truth out? If the latter, they might find themselves working for the Voice of Babylon 5 during the latter half of 2261.

STRUCTURE OF ISN

ISN is a huge, sprawling, corporation and this section will not attempt to describe it in exhaustive detail. Rather, this focuses on the broad outlines, with emphasis on those aspects most likely to be of use in a game.

- **ISN Corporate:** This is the heart of the ISN structure. Physically spread across a dozen cities on Earth, the home office is not involved with newsgathering at all, but with the business side of things. Revenue streams, advertising, marketing, the acquisition of equipment from handheld cameras to tachyon relays and human resources are all controlled by this division. This is the home of the 'suits' so loathed by creative types and dedicated reporters, but, without them, the money would not flow and there would be no news at all. At least, that's what they say.

- **ISN Broadcast Technologies:** This is the division, which actually runs and maintains the broadcast network and makes sure that the data goes through. Within the Earth Alliance, they mostly deal with small technical glitches and making sure that everything from the lights in the main studio on Earth to the downlink station on Vega colony are working at all times. Beyond the Earth Alliance, they have the more difficult task of interfacing ISN equipment with that of other nations, to make sure that, no matter where news happens, ISN will get it *as* it happens. ISN built itself on its network and even the 'suits' know that if it fails, nothing else matters. For that reason, this division is well funded.

- **ISN Production:** This division turns raw information, facts and data, into news fit for public consumption. On the simplest level, it involves feeding life streams from the field into the broadcast network, but that is almost never done except in times of serious crisis. Most of the time, production cuts, edits, slices, dices, massages and filets the raw data until it has been turned into bite sized chunks that can be explained with a fixed smile by the newscasters. Production also produces and runs the programming, everything from the hourly updates to the nightly recaps to the various specials and in-depth looks. Most of the visible faces of ISN –the spokespersons, news anchors and program hosts – work for production.

- **ISN News:** This is the division most likely to employ player-characters, except in somewhat unusual campaign. The News division is responsible for actually getting the story and includes most of the little known, but vital, field reporters. Cameramen, sound technicians and others who work 'in the field' are also part of this division, while those who work in-house tend to be employed by ISN Production. The News division maintains Bureaux on all of the major worlds and many of the minor ones. In the cases where strife hits a world suddenly, a temporary bureau can be set up in a matter of days, keeping the networks fed with information until the crisis passes. Those who work for ISN News know they can be sent anywhere, at any time and most revel in this.

WHISPERS IN DARKNESS

A Babylon 5 adventure for 3-5 beginning characters

General Plot

Someone is tipping off raiders as to where B5 Starfury patrols are patrolling, so the raiders are either where the Starfuries are not, or are there in overwhelming force. Monitoring of incoming/outgoing traffic is proving nothing. Anti-raider efforts have been spectacularly unsuccessful of late. Starfury patrols either arrive too late, or arrive to face extremely heavy resistance, with raider ships well-positioned prior to the arrival of Babylon 5 forces. The player characters must locate the 'insider' who is sending information to the raiders.

Getting the player characters involved

This adventure makes the assumptions that the player characters will not be playing members of the TV cast, and will be low-level. Following the style of the TV series, it is also assumed the player characters are not necessarily a party which seeks adventures, but individuals with their own complex, and often conflicting agendas. Thus, the following is a breakdown of ways to involve the player characters in the hunt for the traitor.

Agent: Assuming the agent is not working directly for the raiders themselves, almost any employer will have some reason to want the raiders stopped. While the player character may not be asked directly to help with the current crisis, he may consider that doing so will be valuable to his employers, and thus worth taking on as a side project.

Diplomat: The raiders may have been hitting ships of the diplomat's people particularly hard, or an important individual was killed in an attack. Either way, the diplomat sees advancement of both himself and his cause in dealing with this latest problem.

Lurker: Lurkers are likely to have been drawn in by personal ties. They may know someone killed in a recent assault, or they may owe favours to – or want favours from – other player characters with more direct links. They are also excellent sources of information.

Officer: Any officer in EarthForce could have been tasked with looking into this problem. If he is a Starfury pilot, he may have more personal reasons to get involved, as well. Officers of other governments have many of the same motives as diplomats.

Scientist: Technical specialists may be asked to help with discovering how the spy is transmitting information without anyone detecting the signal. Any scientist may also have a personal reason for helping, or may see winning the favour of another character as a good thing.

Soldier: Soldiers working for EarthForce, as with officers, may simply be ordered to become involved. Others may work as guards or assistants to other characters.

Telepath: Anyone interested in hunting down a spy will certainly be interested in hiring a telepath. Licensed telepaths may need to overcome their desire to obey Psi Corp's rules, while those from other races will be more willing to use their abilities directly.

Worker: Anyone involved in cargo handling, space transit, or any similar field will have had bad experiences with raiders, or know someone who did.

What Is Going On?

As many suspect, a pilot assigned to one of the Starfury wings has been sending information to the raiders. (It may also be that more than one pilot is involved; see below.) This can be done without detection thanks to contraband technology indirectly provided by N'Grath to the pilot. See 'Quantum Paired Transmitter', below. The pilot regularly sends information to the raiders, alerting them to ship movements, launches and so on, giving them ample time to react.

There are, thus, two mysteries to uncover: First, who is sending the information to the raiders, and, second, how are they avoiding detection?

Since the exact nature of the characters and their interrelationships is unknown, this scenario is not set up as a sequence of fixed events. Rather, the key facts are presented, and a number of possible settings and events are detailed, along with full stats for the all the relevant Non-Player Characters. This will allow the GM to pick and choose the events as needed, and the story will flow more organically from the individual characters, rather than forcing highly disparate individuals along a set path.

However, there is an overall structure to the plot, as follows:

Act I: Getting involved
Act II: Tracking down the culprit
Act III: Revealing the truth. . . and the consequences

Act I: Getting Involved

There are several ways in which the player characters can become directly involved in events. Some possibilities are noted below:

Raider Attack!

If any of the player characters are Starfury pilots themselves, the best way to open the adventure, at least for them, is with a bang! The character's squadron will be sent to a jumpgate in a nearby sector to await the arrival of an Earth transport, which they are to escort to Babylon 5. When they arrive, they are swarmed by raiders. A number of Delta-V Light Fighters immediately close in on the Starfuries, seeking to hold them off while the transport ship, which arrived earlier than scheduled, is attacked and looted. It should be emphasised to the player characters involved that this is not normal or expected; the raider ships would only have been in position if they had known the Starfuries were coming.

Post-Attack, at the Zocalo

If none of the player characters are directly involved in flying, it is likely they have friends or associates who are. There should be angry, disgruntled pilots all over the place. Someone is likely to have died recently. Anger and alcohol combine, as always, into the inevitable barroom brawl. Either a merchant or worker who lost friends to a raider attack blames the pilots for not doing enough to stop the attacks, or an alien claims that the raiders are simply a front for some more sinister plot, which is why the defences have been so ineffectual, or a pilot decides he's tired of risking his life for people who show no gratitude and, wham, the fight is on! The player characters should be in the thick of it, but not necessarily all on the same side. Any security personnel (including player characters) who try to stop will be berated by the pilots, who will ask why they are here, harassing people, instead of figuring out how the raiders are always one step ahead.

Assignment

If the player characters work for anyone in particular, especially agents, officers, or diplomats, they will be called for a meeting following the latest debacle. While the exact wording will vary, the summary will be the same: The current situation is approaching crisis. Transport ships are talking about abandoning Babylon 5. Governments are dubious of the ability of the station to provide security for trade and diplomacy. Insurance rates are increasing. If the player characters are directly involved in EarthForce, the situation is seen as even more dire. Each failure is played up by forces, human and alien, which opposed Babylon 5 in the past. One way or another, this has to be resolved. If the players work for security, they will be told that working on this is now a top priority; if they are pilots, they will be told to watch their fellow pilots and report any odd behaviour to security; if they work in other areas, they will be told simply to keep their eyes open.

Just how serious is this crime?

Very.

The crime is treason leading to the deaths of fellow soldiers. The punishment is mind-wipe. This should be kept in mind when roleplaying both the innocent and guilty suspects. If caught, they face the complete loss of their identity. In practical, though not technical, terms, the death penalty. They will act accordingly.

Act II: Tracking down the culprit

Once the player characters are involved, the next step is locating who is responsible. This is difficult, as the person involved has not been boasting or bragging, and has left few clues. The one thing all the suspects (see below) have in common is that none of them are personally, directly profiting from their actions. This means checks of bank accounts, changes in spending behaviour, and so on, will turn up nothing (except as noted below).

Identifying the suspects

The patrol sectors change on a daily basis, and it is usually not until showing up for duty each day that the pilots know where they will be patrolling. This means that the signals needed to be sent early, or even at the point of launch.

It is unlikely players will have legal access to all the Starfury pilots' personnel records. Individuals in EarthForce, acting under orders, will have access to such records, of course, but not private financial data, communication logs, and so on, unless they have sufficient evidence to place an individual

under suspicion. . . simply reading through everyone's personal mail in the hope of finding a smoking gun is not permitted. Attempting to crack security is also possible, though, again, without a specific suspect in mind, the odds of finding the right person are slim – and while Garibaldi might be willing to turn a blind eye to some illegal activity if it leads directly to a culprit, he will almost certainly not overlook someone simply prowling around in random files to see what he can find.

However, one thing which will come up, if anyone thinks to look, are correlations between compromised missions and pilots assigned to them. While there is no perfect smoking gun -- that is, no one pilot was involved in every compromised mission, or missed every compromised mission -- three names show an exceptionally high correlation between missions flown and missions which were believed compromised.

Once the players have identified the three most likely suspects, they will probably begin looking for other evidence. The following are some of the more likely clues they will come across during their investigations.

- Analysis of the station's normal communication logs will show no unusual signals, though, of course, the contents of the 'usual' signals are encrypted. If anyone decides to check if the logs themselves have been tampered with somehow, a DC 20 Technical check will show very tiny irregularities in the timing sequences – there are sections where the regular ticks of the timestamp are off by a few milliseconds. Added up, all of them together are not more than a second off, but most of the deviations occurred just as the ships were launched.

- Further research (a DC 15 check) will indicate that, of all the things which could interfere with the signal tracking, the most likely is a quantum spin communicator being used. Quantum spin communicators are extremely rare, and highly illegal to possess by private citizens, although it has been known. . .

- If the players go back over two months – a month before the problems began – they will find, in the records, a very poor attempt at cloaking a signal headed towards no known system. This is from Angela Morales, and it is to her brother, Robert. The relevant conversation went as follows:

Robert: 'Don't preach to me! I do what I have to do! It's better than risking my life every day for a tiny room and a tinier paycheck!'

Angela: 'You think there's a future in what you're doing? You think you're going to strike it big and retire rich?'

Robert: 'Better chance for me than for you! You're just going to be their servant until you die, like Mom and Dad. Not for me!'

Angela: 'What if I see you? What if I have to shoot you?'

Robert <sneering>: 'Better not miss if you get the first shot, because I won't.'

Robert is a young man, about 19 or so, with distinctive facial scarring typical of gang members.

- Checking with the casinos will show that Richard Chen has run up excessive gambling debts, and owes a lot of money to T'lok, a minor-league Narn loan shark who has established a small, stable business which he runs with reasonable efficiency. If the player characters can gain access to the surveillance cameras for the casino area, they will have records of T'lok talking with Chen. A DC 15 Gather Information check will reveal Chen's gambling problems; a DC 20 check will reveal the link to T'Lok. Bonuses to the checks should be given if the player characters are 'regulars' at the casino, or have any ranks in Knowledge(underworld). Any player characters who are pilots might have overheard Chen discussing his problems.

T'lok has no criminal record and there are no grounds for arrest. If asked about Chen, he will first deny knowing him; if any evidence is presented, such as the video, he will say, 'Oh, *Chen!* I am sorry, I still have trouble with the human accent.' (If a Narn spoke to him, he would say 'All human names sound alike to me.') 'Yes, I helped him out when he needed assistance – it's my pleasure to share with others. However, he paid me back some time ago, and I haven't had any opportunity to help him since then. Give him my best wishes.'

- Michael Fargo seems clean. A DC 20 Forgery check, though, will show that his personnel records are faked. A genetic scan shows that 'Michael Fargo' is actually Milton Ford, who has a healthy list of warrants for a string of burglaries. There is no indication of him having committed violent crimes, however. If confronted about this, he will of course deny it; if the genetic evidence is presented, he will break. 'Yeah, yeah, look, I used to do that stuff…it was wrong, I know. I was a dumb kid. I finally got wise and had a friend clean me up, give me the new face and the new ID, and joined Earth Force on the up-and-up. It was right after the Minbari War, so they didn't look at the records too long, you know? Not too many people left, back then. I kept my head down and my nose clean and here I am. Please, I'm sorry about what I done, but it was so long ago…I've worked hard since then, put my life on the line for Earth. I've paid it back!' If he is not the traitor, any Sense Motive check will give the impression he is being honest; if he is the traitor, a DC 25 Sense Motive check or a telepathic scan will be required to realise he is hiding something.

- All three suspects have been seen meeting with N'Grath at some point in the past few months. Each will have an excuse:

Angela: If the player characters haven't revealed they know something is up with Angela's brother, she will claim she met with N'Grath to try to secure some mildly illegal Centauri beverages to bring back to Earth with her. If the issue with her brother has been raised, she will claim she just wanted N'Grath to arrange for the delivery of a data crystal to him, one containing assorted recordings of them together with their parents.

Richard: Richard will admit he met with N'Grath if some evidence is offered, but will claim he was just trying to get some money moved through the station without it being logged to his personal accounts and taxed.

Michael: If the player characters have presented evidence that he is not who he claims to be, he will say that he dealt with N'Grath to try to send money, anonymously, to the family of the man he killed. If the player characters either do not present, or do not have, such evidence, he will insist that the growing crime on the station has made him nervous, and he was trying to secure a weapon for personal protection. He will also claim that N'Grath wanted too much, and he does not have such a weapon.

Getting on track

The core plot consists of narrowing down the suspect list. However, it is possible players might veer away from the pilots to pursue other angles. If this seems to be taking the players further and further away from the plot, it may be necessary to nudge them back in the right direction. Some options for this include:

- Having a player overhear a pilot talking to a friend about how the fact that there is a traitor flying with them makes them nervous.
- Having a pilot talk about 'not knowing where we're flying until we launch'.
- Having a character's superior or contact say that they will investigate one angle, while the player should 'check into the pilots'.

The Telepath Problem

Running a mystery when telepathy is available is difficult. While player telepaths will be low-powered if this scenario is run for beginning players, as intended, they can still cause trouble. There are several things to keep in mind.

- Scanning without permission is illegal, at least for human telepaths. The evidence found by telepathy would not be admissible. Scanning an *innocent* is even more problematic. Some slack might be cut, behind the scenes, if a telepath fingers a traitor, but any unauthorised scan of someone who is wholly innocent is going to be trouble. Even if the telepath is non-human, treaties will still protect the right of Earth citizens to be free of unwarranted 'alien mind probes', especially given the growing xenophobia on Earth.
- The traitor will not, most of the time, be consciously thinking of his treason. An 'accidental' scan will not reveal anything, unless circumstances have been arranged to cause it to be likely that the traitor will be thinking of his crimes right at that moment.
- Since unauthorised scans are illegal, even if the players do use telepathy to pick out the guilty party, they must still find other evidence before they can get legal action taken. (Of course, the players may not wish to take legal action. . . see below.)

As a last resort, it is always possible that the guilty party has had some training in mind-shielding. Very few mundanes learn such skills – the most likely of all the suspects to have done so is Michael Fargo.

The Quantum Paired Transmitter

This device is not manufactured by any current major race, but like the chameleon net and similar artefacts, enough examples have been recovered that it is not considered a one-of-a-kind item, though it is still extremely rare. The device consists of two parts, a transmitter and a receiver, which use photon entanglement to communicate instantly and undetectably. The transmitter, which is owned by the guilty party, resembles a small bead of glass, with a faint, green, inner luminescence. There are slight indentations in the surface; when pressed, the glow brightens. At this point it is active and will convey vocal communication to the receiving unit. The raiders always have someone monitoring their receiver.

As the name implies, the two halves of a paired transmitter are always linked. It is not possible to use a receiver from one set with a transmitter from a different set.

The raiders recovered the current set from an attack on an exploration ship operated by Universal Terraform and subsequently arranged for it to be transported, via N'Grath's networks, to a chosen agent on Babylon 5.

Act III: Revealing the truth. . . and the consequences.

So, who is guilty? This is up to the Games Master. All of the suspects have a strong motive; all have been in contact with N'Grath. All also have plausible excuses for their actions *other* than being guilty of the crime in question. This does not mean they are saints – all three are guilty of something, though not a crime as serious as sending information which endangers the lives of their fellow pilots, the security of the station and free trade in the sector. Even the innocent have something to hide, and that can be used for later plot hooks.

The ultimate proof is the paired transmitter. The guilty party will not let such a rare artefact out of their sight, even for a few moments. It will be with them at all times (except, perhaps, while bathing). Anyone caught with it is *almost* certainly guilty. If the Games Master wishes to be truly underhanded, he may have the guilty party plant the device on another suspect though this will only happen if the players tip their hand too soon – the transmitter is far too valuable to simply dump indiscriminately.

If the players believe they have hard evidence proving one of the three is guilty, they have several options. It is quite likely some of the players may disagree about what to do, and may take conflicting courses of action. This is entirely in the spirit of Babylon 5.

Some possibilities are:

- Present the evidence to the authorities, and have the suspect arrested and tried. As humans, all three suspects are under Earth jurisdiction. However, if one or more of the players is an ambassador or agent for a race hit hard by raiders, they may demand the suspect be turned over to their justice.

- Deal with it directly. A PPG shot in the dark, some sabotage of a Starfury, or an exotic, nearly undetectable Centauri poison slipped into a drink at the Zocalo can all remove the traitor without anyone being the wiser. Unless, of course, someone chooses to investigate *that* death.

- Blackmail. Not everyone on Babylon 5 is a shining knight -- indeed, few people are. Some might be willing to overlook treason, if it means an advantage to themselves later. Someone willing to sell out to raiders will probably be willing to commit other crimes, as well.

- Nothing at all. File the information away for future use. It could be used to earn favour with Garibaldi or Sinclair, if revealed at the correct time, or to permit blackmail in the future.

If the players confront the guilty party, but do not show they have proved his guilt and simply walk away, said party will know the noose is drawing shut, and will act accordingly. See the individual descriptions, below.

The Suspects

Three suspects present themselves:

Richard Chen

3rd Level Human Officer (Spacecraft Branch)
Hit Points: 11
Initiative: +1 (Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 10
Attacks: +3 melee or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: Rallying Cry
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +2, Will +5
Abilities: Str 11, Dex 12, Con 11, Int 13, Wis 14, Cha 12
Skills: Pilot +7, Sense Motive +6, Computer Use +5, Spot +6, Listen +6, Knowledge (Gambling) +4
Feats: Dogfighter, Evasive Action, Spacecraft Proficiency, Weapon Proficiency (Spacecraft Weapons)

Of Asian origin and in his late twenties, Richard is stockily built, with close-cropped black hair and bright blue eyes. He is always crisply dressed, and moves with careful precision. His record as a pilot is superb. He is easily offended and quick to anger, a trait which has landed him in more than one brawl and has earned him a few scars. He has, or had, a serious weakness for gambling, one which may have caused him to make a particularly bad deal to get out of debt. Richard has a number of casual friends who might be sources of information, but has no truly close comrades.

Possible motive: Richard owed a large amount of money to T'Lok, a Narn loan shark. He recently paid this off, but there is no record of the money entering his accounts, or any obvious source of sudden wealth. No one at the station casino will remember him winning big any time in the recent past, either. The money could well have come from the raiders.

Explanation if innocent: Chen actually won big on a trip off-station, but didn't want to pay the associated taxes. He paid N'Grath to launder the money. What was left went to T'lok. He's giving up gambling. He will be quite angry with the player characters for 'harassing' him for the 'minor' crime of laundering a few thousand credits. If any of the player characters work for alien governments, he'll threaten to lodge a formal complaint. (Whether he does or not is up to the Games Master) If the player characters work for EarthForce, or are private agents, he will make similar threats ('Your commanding officer is going to hear about this!')

Actions if guilty: If he thinks the player characters are closing in and have evidence, he will try to flee the station. If he has to fight to escape, he will, but not against overwhelming odds.

Angela Morales

2nd Level Human Officer (Spacecraft Branch)
Hit Points: 9
Initiative: +2 (Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 10
Attacks: +2 melee or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: -
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +3, Will +6
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 14, Con 11, Int 12, Wis 12, Cha 14
Skills: Pilot +9, Computer Use +6, Spot +6, Listen +6, Technical (electronics) +6
Feats: Skill Focus (Pilot), Iron Will, Spacecraft Proficiency, Weapon Proficiency (Spacecraft Weapons)

Angela is in her mid-twenties, of the type more likely to be described as 'striking' rather than pretty. She has an athletic build, and a businesslike demeanour. Her family is military; she lost both her parents during the Earth/Minbari war. She and her brother Robert were raised by an aunt, but they drifted apart. She followed her parents into service; he did not. Any investigation of her background will probably reveal his criminal record, with a note that he disappeared some five months back. Angela has no close friends on the station, and is seen by those who do know her as committed to her job, with few interests beyond that.

Possible Motive: Investigation will show that her brother is working with the raiders, having drifted there after a life of progressively serious crime. She is trying to keep him alive, even at the cost of betraying her allegiance to EarthForce.

Explanation if innocent: She deeply regrets her brother's choice, and almost certainly would not fire on him, but she will not betray EarthForce either. She is scared of the secret leaking out, however, because she thinks others might suspect her of exactly what she is now suspected of. If she can convince the player characters that she is innocent, she will ask them not to talk, and promise to try to get transferred elsewhere, so she will not have to face that choice.

Actions if guilty: Given the seriousness of the crime (see above), she'll run. She might well join her brother if she can get away. She was willing to let other pilots die to protect her brother; she'll kill to protect herself if she has to.

Michael Fargo

2nd Level Lurker, 1st Level Human Officer (Spacecraft Branch)
Hit Points: 10
Initiative: +1 (Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 10
Attacks: +4 melee or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: Lurker's Knowledge, Survivor's Luck, Rallying Cry
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +3, Will +0
Abilities: Str 13, Dex 12, Con 12, Int 11, Wis 11, Cha 15
Skills: Bluff +7, Search +5, Escape Artist +6, Gather Information +7, Listen +5, Sense Motive +5, Pilot +5
Feats: Lightning Reflexes, Run, Point Blank Shot, Spacecraft Proficiency, Weapon Proficiency (Spacecraft Weapons)

Michael Fargo always looks tired. A tall, thin man in his mid-thirties, with blond hair, he seems a bit old for his relatively low rank. He joined EarthForce late in life. According to him, he did it after the Earth/Minbari war showed him the need to serve his planet. He moves through several social circles with relative ease, but always shows the same face – a basically 'nice guy' who likes the 'simple things' in life, such as beer, women and sports. If any of his closer friends can be convinced to talk about him, they will say he sometimes slips into periods of brooding melancholy and that he occasionally says or does things which are out of character. His only black mark is a few days in the brig for getting involved in an exceptionally brutal bar fight about six months ago; the records also show he went out of his way to make amends with the man he injured. If asked about this, he will admit he was drunk and lost control, but that it has not happened before and he has a handle on it.

Possible Motive: He is concealing a criminal past and has been living under a false identity for the past eight years. This exposes him to considerable blackmail opportunities.

Explanation if innocent: He is guilty of the crimes on his record, and of the forgery, but he has indeed been totally clean since then. His career as a petty crook ended in a violent moment of tragically poor judgement, when he killed a bystander during a robbery, whom he thought was drawing a gun. Wracked with guilt over this, he took all the money he had to buy himself a new life and dedicated

himself in service to Earth. He *is* a murderer, but one trying to reform. How the player characters react to this is up to them. They could let him go on with his false life, demand he leave the station, or turn him in. More nefarious player characters could blackmail him themselves.

Actions if guilty: If Michael Fargo is the traitor then his actual personality is very different from that presented. Rather than being driven to service by guilt, he created a new identity solely to get away, and has stayed in EarthForce because it seemed better than the alternatives. He may well be wanted by underworld figures, so he is actually safer as a pilot. The guilty Fargo is utterly ruthless. He will kill to get away if he can, as soon as the opportunity presents itself. If he feels the players suspect him and are at all likely to catch him, he will plant the transmitter in the Starfury of another suspect and then lead the players there, saying something in the order of, 'Hey, I know what you're snooping after, and I have to tell you. . . Angela's been acting real odd. When I flew past her on our last sortie, I noticed she seemed to be talking to someone, but she wasn't transmitting on our channels. I'd check her ship out, if I were you.' (He is as likely to finger Chen; the Games Master should pick whichever innocent will be more likely to be believed guilty by the players, or whichever one has the most plot potential.)

Follow-ups

This adventure can spin off several additional scenarios. Some concepts are:

- **Revenge**: The raiders are going to want to know who ratted out their inside man. If the players were blatant in their investigations, someone may come looking for them.
- **Connections**: The investigation will certainly put the players in contact with several individuals, such as T'Lok, who may be useful in the future. Any players working for a higher power, such as EarthForce or a corporation, will have impressed their superiors. (Assuming they did the job well.)
- **Ambush**: It may be possible to use the transmitter to lead the raiders into an ambush. This will only work once, of course, but that may be enough.
- **The Transmitter**: If the players retain control over the transmitter, others may want it, to study the exotic technology. Mr. Morden might have a use for it, as its possible his 'associates' could recapture the receiver with ease. All the players have to do is say what they want in exchange…

ANCIENT ECHOES

INTRODUCTION

'I have been here since the beginning. I will not leave you now. I will go with you beyond the rim. And we will see again all those who went ahead of us, all those who we have missed for so long.'
-Lorien, The First One

The Babylon 5 universe gave to us a look at the future of the space faring races that evolved alongside of human beings—races that all stemmed from the machinations of elder races that became known as the First Ones. Through the various episodes of Seasons two through four of the television series, we were shown that the First Ones—the Vorlons and Shadows in specific—had a very heavy hand in our evolution. Both of these galactic giants left their distinct impressions upon the younger races. These impressions can be seen or felt throughout the galaxy.

We also were shown glimpses of a handful of the other First Ones, even more ancient and powerful than either of the major players in the Shadow War. What manner of fingerprints or impressions did these other, more powerful ancient races leave behind for the younger races to stumble upon? Those who seek the answers to that question may very well wish to leave what they find in the void where they were uncovered—some things are better left in the past.

The First Ones

A techno-mage named Vecris—who survived the happenings of the first Shadow War—spent his existence searching out and researching the enigmatic and powerful beings known as the Ancients. He dedicated his life to the ongoing research of their role in galactic evolution and was labelled as the foremost authority among the techno-mages concerning anything related to the First Ones.

In his studies he categorised eight separate *species* (if one can truly use the term when dealing with such beings) of Ancients—Vorlons, Shadows, Triad, Mindriders, Torvalus, the Kirishiac Lords, Walkers and the Transcendental Beings. Vecris had actual dealings with several of these beings and even was reported to have been invited beyond the rim by one (or possibly more) of them. In the centuries that passed after him, a vast majority of his work faded into myth and legend. Some have discovered pieces of his original findings, but even then it is fragmented and philosophical at its best.

After the second Shadow War, when the last of the First Ones came together and joined Lorien in leaving this galaxy, thousands of witnesses saw them and could not refute their existence. Afterward many took up the yoke of labour that Vecris had set down centuries ago and began to look for anything they may have left behind.

Their search has not been without merit or gain. A few adventurous explorers and treasure-seekers have claimed they found traces of Ancient technology or met with ancient beings touched by the First Ones. Be it foolishness or fact, some of their findings are real—and their steps retraceable. It seems that the Ancients left tangible marks in our galaxy after all.

The seekers have to have faith, guts and a whole lot of luck—they will need it where they are going.

The Vorlons and the Shadows

While the galaxy never truly learned much about the Vorlons or the Shadows while they played the races against each other like masterful puppeteers, a great deal more is known about them than the rest of the First Ones all together.

Both of these ancient and powerful races came out in full force in 2260 when the second Shadow War became an open and devastating hostility that saw the destruction of several worlds and billions of sentient beings. They were phantoms and enigmas no longer. Overnight they had become very real to every knowing soul living in the galaxy.

While these two manipulative giants are indeed First Ones, and have left a great deal of their own influences—the Minbari, the Drakh and so on—they will be receiving a much more in depth look in a later volume, *The Vorlons and Shadows*.

The Triad

Vecris spoke of a race of beings 'born of the void' and 'comprised of energy and nothing more.' This race of beings has no real name of their own—as they predate the need for titles—are affectionately called the Triad. The Triad are ancient even amongst the First Ones, younger only than Lorien and the other Transcendentals. The Triad exist as forces of emotion. Capable of

matter/energy manipulation or alteration, travel between dimensions and more with just a thought, they are difficult to imagine by standard comparison. Instead they are classified by their current mood or state of being—Order, Chaos or Neutrality.

From their genesis in the days of Lorien's people, the Triad have used their vast power and resources to keep the galaxy in balance with its constant ebbs and tides. When the growing races of the galaxy began to fracture or become unstable the Order portion of the Triad would become dominant, while Chaos would throw a metaphysical pebble into the pond when it became too still. Often during long periods of growth or evenness Neutrality would stay completely out of the affairs of others—seeking only to balance itself.

The Triad had often used their abilities to create 'Tri', or avatars of matter and energy they could use to physically interact with the universe. These Tri could be as small as a single cell to look in upon the tiniest of lifeforms, or as large as the enormous spacecraft reported to have been seen at the end of the Shadow War. Most were aligned to one mood or another, but rare examples of when the Triad worked as one were spectacular to say the least. Vecris had written once about the Tri he encountered looking much like segmented armour or a plated carapace of sorts—which shifted and transformed before his very eyes as the Triad switched moods!

When the Triad left with Lorien for the last time to head beyond the rim, it stands to reason that there may have been places where the Tri may have been left behind. Depending on which version of the Triad had left its mark, these sites could be a hidden treasure or a deadly trap.

The Mindriders

Once a race of flesh and form like almost every other, the creatures known now as the Mindriders were actually beings completely crafted of thought—achieving such a feat through an experiment of their own design called the Great Birth. Vecris said that they would gather together in numbers that the minds of men could not fathom and perform their primary function—they would think. They would trade new theories, comprise new ideologies and plot immensely intricate schemes. Their existence was to grow in understanding of all things.

Vecris claimed that the Mindriders were absolutely capable of literally anything—if he was able to think it, they probably already have countless times before. They experimented, meddled, created and died to expand their libraries of thought with the hopes of one day eventually reaching true omnipotence. In their quest for infinite knowledge they participated in wars, manipulated the thoughts of alien beings throughout the galaxy and learned from behind the eyes of a million sentient beings.

The Mindriders realised that even the thoughts of lesser beings were sometimes original in nature, and soon became part of their overall plan. For countless centuries they drifted from one mind to the next—watching and evaluating each thought—until they found another that might expand their personal library of knowledge. Every race since their inception to their exodus beyond the rim has been host to them at one time or another.

The Psi Corps has been curious concerning the possibility of recreating the Mindriders' 'Great Birth' from beings of flesh to pure thought, although they would never admit to such a measure while they are still technically under Earthforce command. Powerful telepaths have claimed that they have found themselves in someone else's mind on a higher level than just a scan or deep probe—that they feel like they are actually dwelling inside the other's thoughts. This could very well be some leftover talent seeded in our ancestors by the Mindriders, or something perhaps uncovered by one of the several research teams sent by the Corps.

The Torvalus Speculators

When last the Ancients warred amongst each other, the Torvalus were primarily spies of unbelievable ability. They mastered true cloaking and hyperspace capabilities very early in their evolution, and used several younger races to make up for the holes in their technological progress. Vecris made record of one of these creatures—the Noil—who actually crafted the designs that the Torvalus would invent. These 'Noil' are assumed to be extinct for centuries, but as they had access to invisibility based on hyperspace-folding and light-bending camouflage, it is a question as to if they are merely hiding.

Although one of the youngest of the Ancient races, the Torvalus's homeworld Torvalu is rumoured to have existed at one time near the edge of Vorlon space—where they had bargained for protection long enough to become a true power among their peers. If Torvalu was indeed a planet inhabited by these powerful beings, it would be an epic find.

The few remaining records of the battle between the Vorlons, Shadows and a combined fleet of younger races at Corianus Six were able to capture a Torvalus vessel for a few moments during the battle. By studying these documents for long hours some have verified that the Torvalus cruiser was indeed capable of true cloaking—running silently without a trace on visuals or sensors. If this technology could be retrieved or recreated from the ruins of one of their servant races, the Noil perhaps, it could give a single faction or government an edge in interstellar intelligence gathering that would baffle all others for centuries.

The Kirishiac Lords

Vecris went into great detail concerning the Lords of Kirish. The planet Kirish was an enormous rock-base orb nearly three times the size of any of the current space faring races' homeworlds. Having a solid core of compressed stone and below freezing temperatures covering its entire expanse gave Kirish a gravity so strong that even the atmosphere was as thick as liquid. Anything other than the planet's native inhabitants would be crushed into pulp instantly.

This is why, Vecris stated, that the Kirishiac people evolved into the race that they did. Seven meters tall and long-limbed, they had a total of eight hearts connection several independent circulatory systems—the only way to pump blood through such a large body in their massive gravity. Having to battle against their gravity gave the Lords reason to advance their gravitic sciences far faster than any other race. In a relatively short amount of time (everything is relative when dealing with beings thousands of years old) the Kirishiac Lords learned how to break away from the titan's grasp of their planet and search the stars above.

The Kirishiac Lords were a race of overachievers. They expanded quickly and conquered several hundred worlds—an easy feat for the seven-meter tall masters of gravitic science capable of crushing the densest of materials in their palms like chalk. They are said to have even breached Ancient protocols and waged a war against their fellow First Ones.

They must have been defeated, as the Vorlons and Shadows still lurked in our galaxy centuries later. In their wake they left their crushing handprint on several worlds and systems. Vecris claimed he had actually met one of the last Lords in person—so strong was it that it had a dozen servants to manipulate the world for it, lest it destroy what it touched itself. Vecris called these humanoid servants the 'Kirisz'. What might have happened to these servants when the Lords fled beyond the rim?

It is a fact that the planetoid Kirish suffered a great cataclysm at some point, possibly breaking apart under its own immense gravity to become one of the thousands of asteroid belts in the galaxy. There are however dozens of worlds that have ruins and idols surviving from their own pre-histories that resemble giant beings—surely at least one of these could be the vestiges of a Kirishiac's holdings. The Kirishiac Lords had a sizeable empire at one time and it would be impossible to completely erase every trace of their passing.

The Walkers (of Sigma 957)

The Ancients often seem godlike or incomprehensible by the younger races—with good reason. The Walkers are possibly the finest example of this. They are noted as to being one of the oldest races in existence, having abandoned their physical bodies eons ago. The Walkers devoted their millennia-old lives to the expansion of their own understanding—eventually the essence of understanding itself. They looked upon the state of reality and the universe as a laboratory for experiment. Bored with the creation and alteration of existing matter and energy, the Walkers looked deeper into cross-dimensional travel and manipulation.

How successful they may have been is greatly up to speculation. Save for a single leftover of the Walkers' experiments, another dimension that was later given the name 'Thirdspace.' Thirdspace was another dimension found and catalogued by the Walkers thousands of years ago. Sometime ago the Vorlons tried to reach this dimension as well, but creating a stable gate to it proved to be folly at best. It was quickly sealed and sent adrift in hyperspace for safety, but eventually found its way back into the hands of the younger races after the second Shadow War. It proved to be too powerful of a thing for them, and was destroyed by John Sheridan.

Even taking in to account a small taste of what the Walkers were capable of and how it nearly allowed a berserk race of Ancients into our universe, the younger races still seek their remnants. It is unknown as to whether or not they

In the Babylon 5 movie *Thirdspace* Lyta Alexander explained that it was actually the Vorlons 'great failing.' This statement is an enigmatic confession of blame the Vorlons had left in Lyta when they had altered her. The Vorlon's admission of guilt was—much as to everything they do—not quite a straight answer. The Vorlons discovered what the Walkers had created in finding Thirdspace, and used their existing jump gate technologies to build the artefact seen in the film. Their 'failing' was not Thirdspace, but rather their inability to use it as the Walkers once did.

left anything else behind, or if they truly did pass beyond with all of their knowledge with them. The only clue left behind is the last passage in Vecris's findings, 'The Walkers have invited me along to join them in their dimensional travel beyond the rim and I have agreed. I must now leave this recording where someone will find it, for when the gates close no one will be able to enter the portal. This is goodbye my friends.'

If this portal is behind the closed gates Vecris spoke of, who knows what else could be locked up behind them to be discovered by the younger races? The Walkers' power and possibilities were endless—for good or for ill.

The Transcendental Beings (Lorien's race)

The first one among First Ones, Lorien is the last of his kind still within the confines of the galaxy. His people transcended (hence the name Vecris gave them) the need for flesh ages before even the other Ancients arrived. These transcendental creatures are made up of an amalgam mixture of sentient energies—a state far beyond description by 23rd Century science. These beings can feasibly take on any physical form they wish, as Lorien chose to become an unassuming elderly humanoid when dealing with Captain Sheridan during the second Shadow War. Other than his influence felt during the war's last ordeals, next to nothing is known about Lorien or his people. They are—even to the finest and most learned scholars anywhere in the galaxy—a mystery.

It is unlikely that anything linked to the Transcendental Beings would survive the countless ages that have passed since they touched this plane. If even the smallest artefact could be discovered that bore a fraction of the Transcendentals' influence upon it—it would more than likely advance the discovering civilization centuries. Unfortunately the only place related to Lorien or his people was Z'ha'dum—which self-destructed in 2261.

Others

While Vecris never named any other Ancients in his texts, he did imply there might have been others—some even from other dimensions—that could have been present in our galaxy during our primordial years. There is little to suggest that these far and few between minority Ancients had any influence on the younger races, but any possibility could be enough to draw adventurous explorers into the void.

Before Shadows and Light

'How long have you been here?'
'A long time. So long. I was old when the molecules of your world joined and called themselves land and sea and fish ...and man.'
'One of the First Ones.'
'No. Not one of the First Ones. I am ... the First One.'
—John Sheridan and Lorien

How the Ancients came and passed...

No one in the entire universe can define exactly when the galaxy began or how it came together. The eldest beings in the galaxy—Lorien's race—have existed for several millennia. They have overseen the birth and passing of countless civilizations, witnessed entire solar systems collapse into gravitic singularities and felt the entirety of the galaxy shift through space and time. When discussing the Ancients, these beings are beyond description and comparison. They are the beginning of life. After them came all others.

In the flow of infinite possibilities, an unknown quantity of lifeforms shared the cosmos with the Transcendentals for a very long time. It was not until the void gave birth to the Triad that they had any real companionship. The Triad sprang from the vacuum of space as powerful entities capable of interstellar travel, interdimensional clairvoyance and the ability to psychically manipulate matter and energy. Things that have taken other races thousands of years were instinctively part of the Triad's thought processes. They were truly at home anywhere their minds would take them.

Lorien and the others of his race welcomed the Triad with open arms. Even with the diametrically opposed viewpoints of the various moods within the Triad, the Transcendentals saw kindred spirits within them. Finally another race of beings had come. Lorien's people saw these newcomers as friends and students to be moulded and taught all of the various things they themselves had discovered. The Triad

argued viewpoints with themselves, but still managed to learn a great deal from the elder race.

Eventually the Triad looked outward to the emptiness to experience new things for themselves. In their travels they did indeed find many new places and species to interact with, using their crafted Tri encounter constructs to interact—so as not to overwhelm the lesser beings with their true image. Some of these encounters did not go peacefully. The Chaos mood of the Triad would sometimes choose uncomfortable or angering imagery for the Tri on purpose in order to experience conflict and war.

It was during some of these conflicts that other races began to reach into the stars. The Walkers had left their bloated fleshy bodies and entered the stars as beings of energy, the insect-like Shadows were growing their nightmare crafts and the Vorlons created their living transports and encounter suits. Soon the stars were becoming frequented by several Ancient beings. The Mindriders completed their Great Birth, which allowed them up into the galaxy among the others as thoughts and ideas far before they learned that hyperspace even existed. More races travelling the stars created more tension. More tension created the need to draw lines in the galaxy.

This tension and territoriality made Lorien and his people concerned. Not for their own safety, as these new races could do little to compete with the Transcendentals, but for the state of this galaxy. They could help usher in the new races as best they could. It did little to dissuade them from carving space into sections, and did even less later to keep them from warring. Regardless how much they tried it seemed the future was preset to get beyond their ideals. So the Transcendental Beings left this galaxy—perhaps even this dimension or reality—for places beyond. Only Lorien stayed behind.

The newer Ancients—Vorlons, Shadows, Mindriders and Walkers—began their own searches for new power and influence in their own ways. Most became worrisome of the growth and progress of the others, or jealous of what they might have. Some were just curious.

The Walkers began their mapping of dimensions with some slight guidance by the Triad (when they were feeling cooperative) and collected unthinkable amounts of data and knowledge. Their section of space became little more than a stopping point for their travels. Even so the others stayed away from Walker controlled systems—for fear of what the powerful beings would do. Once the Vorlons tried to search the protectorate of the Walkers for the secrets of hyperspace travel—a coveted thing as soon as the Walkers discovered and mapped the new dimension. To protect their massive stores of information while they were away in their dimensional travels the Walkers devised two enormous databases within their territory. The first database was destroyed by what at first seemed to be an accident. A massive asteroid changed course unexpectedly and tore the database's planet nearly in half. The other base survived on Sigma 957—and is rumoured to still be there.

The Vorlons started using planetoids as listening posts and mobile bases of operation. They learned how to wield electromagnetic fields to their advantage early in their space faring, and became extremely proficient at their use. They sought the knowledge of hyperspace from the Walkers—and were ignored or refused. It was no surprise to the others when a wayward asteroid sailed out of Vorlon space and demolished a very specific planet owned by the Walkers. The Vorlons had no other contact with the Walkers until the Ancient Wars, and then again in the second Shadow War. The Vorlons themselves made very few friends amongst the other Ancients, so they turned their eyes to the order of lesser things within the galaxy.

The Mindriders left their worlds in the hopes of seeking a higher plane. They would appear now and again to look in on their neighbours and stay current with the minds of the times. It was a small thing though, and every generation more and more of their kind floated out beyond the rim like the Transcendental Beings. It was a surprise that any Mindriders were around at all whenever conflicts arose to hostility—but they always were.

The Shadows dug deep into their planets and built hive-bases that would rival entire continents of the younger races. Instead of caring much about what the others were doing, they became extremely insular and cared only for the survival and subtle manipulations of lesser races. They would even slumber for long periods of time while their machinations evolved. Aiding lesser creatures in becoming stronger meant bringing new players into the Ancients' games—an idea that worried and angered the Vorlons, who would much rather control such growth. The Shadows grew in their own ways and became the force of chaos and evolution that the galaxy has felt for eons.

Somewhere during these races' development—perhaps at the prodding of the Shadows, perhaps not—a pair of new Ancients joined the galactic struggle. They were the Torvalus and the Lords of Kirish. It marked a new era in the time of the First Ones. These new races were not beings exploring as energy or thought, but of flesh and science.

The Torvalus were huge, chameleonic aquatic flatworms with energy-absorbing cilia and virtual cellular immortality. They learned quickly on how to construct starships and used their inherent penchant for blending in and observing in their technologies. They devised new cloaking and space-folding techniques that baffled other races and in doing so accidentally found a way into hyperspace. Once hyperspace became a viable transportation option, the Torvalus found other races to include in their expanding territory. They began to become a contender in the cosmic race for territory and the others took notice. The first to investigate were the Mindriders. They swept in on Torvalu (the Torvalus homeworld) to begin a thorough telepathic investigation on how far along the flatworms had gotten. Much to

the Mindriders' surprise they were found out by the crafty Torvalus—who were aware of their visiting ship the instant it left hyperspace near Torvalu. After immediately sending a complex demand to the Mindrider homeworld of which they complied, the Torvalus became highly interested in their borders. More importantly they became interested in the affairs of others.

The Torvalus began a lengthy campaign of intelligence gathering upon the other Ancients. They easily slipped past defensive measures and hyperspace blockades in order to look in on their neighbours. Even when they were located or detected violence rarely ever occurred. Violence could possibly spell the demise of an Ancient being—which was unacceptable by all First Ones. It was an unspoken code that all beings of that age believed in.

The maturing of the Kirishiac Lords changed that. The enormous creatures that ruled the rocky planetoid called Kirish reached out with a singular vision toward the stars. Having to overcome the massive gravitational pull of Kirish on an everyday basis made the Kirishiac Lords physically powerful, technologically advanced and thickly ambitious. They looked into the starry skies with a great hunger.

It was this hunger that gave them the drive to break from their planet's pull and begin to put lesser races under their yoke. The Kirishiac Lords learned that they were more powerful than most races of their era, and grew to understand just how powerful they were. Soon they had carved out a massive section of space for themselves, and dozens of young races looked to them for protection. When they reached further into the stars the Kirishiac Lords were surprised to see other beings with power equal to their own. The other Ancients were a shock to them, and they immediately turned inward to the youngest races instead of expanding outward. Several evolving species were either subsumed or destroyed utterly by the Lords as they perfected their technologies.

They were so pleased with their inner conquests that they eventually shattered the barriers of hyperspace and began to swell outward into the younger races outside of their own domain. The first boundary they stretched out was into Shadow territory, who were hibernating as they were want to do. Even if the Shadows were unaware of the Kirishiac's invasion, the Triad—who were acting as one at this time—saw the incursion and looked to their peers for advice against the new expansionists.

The Triad claimed the Kirishiac Lords were as powerful as any other First One. The Ancients were sceptical at such allegations and were hesitant to look into the matter. It was not until the Kirishiac Lords themselves made the other Ancients take notice that they looked at the newcomers. By that time however it was far too late. The Kirishiac War had begun.

The Kirishiac had already stepped deeply into space controlled by the Walkers. They easily took a handful of bordering systems from the often-absent Walkers. While the invasion may have been merely overlooked by the powerful beings, this fuelled the Lords' inner ambitions to greater aspirations. They continued their conquest like a spear into Walker territory, only stopping once they hit some heavy resistance at Vorlon space. Until that point the Kirishiac Lords had not truly known opposition. Unfortunately for the galaxy the challenge only spurred them on.

The Vorlons contacted the Walkers, who were very unhappy about how long it took for any of their so-called neighbours to inform them of the Kirishiac Lords' impudence, and began to defend their territory. By the time it took the Walkers to recall all of their ships from the countless of dimensions they frequent their invaders had mostly moved along. The Kirishiac were now fully entrenched in Shadow space. The Walkers saw the heavy-handed force that the Lords of Kirish used at every opportunity and even they wondered if they would be in danger should they move to stop them. They decided to call in some old friends to help.

The Walkers contacted the Triad—who still had connections to Lorien and the others—and travelled all the way to Z'ha'dum. The Vorlons used the resources of the Torvalus to look in on the expanding Kirishiac Lords, discovered the gathering Ancients and sent emissaries of their own. It was decided shortly that the Shadows must be reawakened and the few remaining Mindwalkers informed. Never before had there been an actual danger to their existences like these upstart Kirishiac Lords represented. The decision to stop them was reached.

The first true war amongst the Ancients, the Kirishiac War was all consuming and galaxy-wide. The Triad, who were sure to keep their peers in check, so as not to merely extinguish the Kirishiac with the combined might of the Ancients, oversaw each and every offensive. The Lords of Kirish were indeed a powerful force to be reckoned with against any single member of the First Ones—but nothing could withstand all of them. Nothing can hide from or out manoeuvre the Torvalus, who were feeding intelligence to the others. The Vorlons and the Shadows were singularly quite powerful, especially with the backing of the Mindriders. Soon the Kirishiac Lords came to understand just how far they had overstepped their bounds when the Walkers finally decided to fully enter the conflict.

To show the Kirishiac Lords how serious they were about ending the war, the Walkers assembled a powerful fleet of their Traveller class warships and appeared without warning surrounding Kirish. With one massive pulse of their cross-dimensional drivers they enveloped the homeworld's primary moon and immediately vanished along with it. The whole process was too rapid for the Lords' to launch any manner of response, and wreaked immense havoc on the planet below. The atmosphere of Kirish collapsed in upon itself like a bursting bubble—volcanoes, hurricanes and earthquakes shattered the rocky surface of the Lords' home planet.

Before the planet was subjected to a complete cataclysm the Walkers returned, moon in tow. The damage had been done in all senses of the word and the Kirishiac Lords realised they were not going to be able to defeat their older brothers. They had gotten a taste of the true power of the others and they immediately surrendered. The war was over. The Kirishiac Lords took the greater portion of their people and belongings from their broken planet and headed beyond known space. Anything was better than remaining in the wake of their defeat to stare at their victors.

The victors were not entirely complacent however. Even though they won the war with minimal casualty the Ancients had suffered a fate worse than being conquered or destroyed—they came to realise how far they had outgrown the galaxy. Lorien went back to Z'ha'dum to wait for the next time he would be needed (and he would wait for a very long time it turns out). The Mindriders had all but vanished from this galaxy already, so their decision to pass beyond the rim was nearly unnoticed. The Torvalus, having heard so much from their peers during the war, looked outward to new galaxies and the unknown that might still hold some mystery to them. The Walkers and the Triad dispersed once more into their own dimensional travels. Only the Vorlons and the Shadows remained. While the other First Ones left behind handfuls of ways for them to come back or look in upon their old holdings in this galaxy, it was primarily up to these two.

Thus the eternal argument began between the Vorlons and the Shadows. The Vorlons felt that by directing the structured growth and advancements of lesser races they could keep them from rising too fast and becoming another Kirishiac. This is why they seeded the galaxy with jump gates that could reach hyperspace. They felt that by giving the technology freely, it would sate the lesser races' need to make the advancements themselves—thus continuing the First Ones' superiority. The Shadows disagreed. They felt that the best way to keep lesser races from growing too quickly was to continually strike them down with wars and conflicts between them in order to form a rigid degree of superior beings to watch or mould if necessary. Only the strongest and most worthy would survive to a state mentionable advancement.

The arguments stayed verbal and theoretical for millennia. Until the two sides became so opposed and offended by the other's viewpoint that hostility would commence. Thus the happenings of the Shadow Wars and the eventual calling of the last Ancients to the battle at Corianus Six took place. Such events are detailed further in *The Coming of Shadows*, *The Point of No Return* and *No Surrender, No Retreat*.

After that decisive battle in the second Shadow War the First Ones were—truly for the first time—gone from this galaxy. They had left behind hundreds of thousands of years of progress in their wake. Some of their influence can be seen in objects as large and as breathtaking as the Great Machine on Epsilon 3, or as small as the heightened abilities of some species' telepaths. From the lowliest Pak'ma'ra to the most regal Centauri, every being in the galaxy has been touched by one of their passing thoughts or ideas.

Only a few truly know just how much or what they left behind. Those special few—or any who might follow their lead or tracks—have the opportunity to unlock secrets older than the first spoken word in any language being used in the 23rd Century. Where there is power there will always be danger. Uncovering some secrets come at a great price.

May those who find them know how to wield the responsibility—for everyone's sake.

Finding Footprints in the Void

'They are a mystery and I am both terrified and reassured to know that there are still wonders in the Universe. That we have not yet explained everything.'
—Ambassador G'Kar

Looking for the traces of the Ancients

The galaxy is seeded with numerous examples of the First Ones' influence if someone knows where to look for them. Scholars, adventuring types and treasure seekers tend to be the most common lore-hunters in the quest. It takes a very strong will and a particular drive to venture out to unknown or possibly hostile worlds on what little information they can find on the remnants of Ancient technologies. The First Ones were not generous with their information in their time and erected unthinkable defences in a myriad of forms to keep unwanted intruders from getting it. The best defence was an accidental one—absence over time.

Many of the locations detailed in this book have not been looked upon by outsiders in several decades or even centuries—maybe even millennia. Those who may have once remembered where one artefact or clue might lurk are just as likely to have passed on or forgotten the exact details years before the next person happened upon it. For those who might stumble upon this information by accident, it takes a great deal of research and perseverance to follow it to the prize. Accidental finds are extremely rare and should barely be considered as a viable option when searching for Ancient technologies. All too often these

accidental finds are never recorded anyway, as those who clumsily uncover the leftovers from the First Ones' era rarely survive to tell the tale.

Every government has extensive files on possibly Ancient technology caches and some have even proposed and funded private (or sometimes secret) investigation into their discovery. In order to further their own research in the savage competition with other governments many of these special programs are hidden away under the guise of other companies or projects. As it tends to be in the current day and age, corruption and selfishness run rampant through a great number of these agencies, making the competitors just as dangerous as the goals sometimes. It is a difficult and perilous occupation, but one that could mean fantastic riches or more if successful. Most find it fruitless, unsatisfying and ultimately seek other employment. Even with deterrents such as poverty or an untimely demise the galactic governments still find ways of setting people to the task.

The Earth Alliance

Earthers—as one of the last races of the age to gain access to hyperspace—had very little knowledge of the Ancients until after the Earth-Minbari War. After the war ended the Minbari shared some of their information and allied contacts with their unexpected bedfellows. Among this information was a small introduction to the Vorlons. Curious as humans are they quickly moved on this information, sending several unarmed Interplanetary Expeditions (IPX) transport vessels to the edge of Vorlon space.

These ships stayed for as long as they could, hailing in every language known to humans at that time. They never received a single response until two risky IPX captains—Captains Alejandro Forth and Blake Helms—decided to push their luck and moved forward into the Vorlons' space. Once they moved outside of visual contact of the rest of their ships, it was the last they were ever seen.

Humans have never been known to be shy away when threatened, so it is no surprise that the Earth Alliance put several under-the-table Ancient finding programs into effect almost immediately. If even a single piece of true Ancient technology could be found it would mean vast advancements in several fields of study for the up and coming humans.

The main governmentally funded program for interstellar archaeology and research is a small branch within IPX called the Galactic Genesis Administration (GGA). The GGA is comprised of a few dozen scientists and explorers at any given time. Originally it was used for looking in their own solar system for alien influences otherwise unknown to them, but during President Clarke's reign they became far more secretive and expansive in nature.

It was the GGA who were called in to excavate the Shadow vessel found on Mars. It was agents of the GGA who performed the mainstay of the tests on the captured Shadow vessel before it was reawakened on Ganymede. The hybrid Shadow-Omega squadron that nearly killed Susan Ivanova was partially designed by scientists working within the GGA, although a number of them were killed while still on board the vessels doing test-run maintenance. It is unknown how many of Clarke's supporters were rooted out of the Administration when he removed himself from power.

After the Shadow War the Psi Corps formed a splinter cell of powerful telepaths designed specifically to research Psi-ability in relation to the First Ones. It was quite evident that telepathic abilities had a direct influence on Shadow technology and several members of the research group theorised as to why such powerful beings as the Shadows were so susceptible. In their research they uncovered enough about the Mindriders to know they liked the idea of 'beings of pure thought.' This cell of undercover scientists does not have an official title for their organisation, nor do they officially report to anyone within the Corps. The only real outside knowledge anyone has ever uncovered about these 'special interest telepaths' is that they answer to a commercial telepath named Abraham Evercall.

There are rumours abound that speak of countless military research teams funded by Earthforce. GROPOS marines whisper about black-jacketed scientists that block off interesting finds. Star pilots have areas of Earth-controlled space they are forbidden to enter, even with the highest of clearances. Even Babylon 5—the way station of neutrality—has its protected Great Machine on Epsilon 3 that is almost entirely left out of Earthforce's records. Hidden projects and secret agencies inside the EA government are commonplace, and their discovery rarely surprises those in the know.

Not all of the teams dedicated to Ancient research are secretive in the slightest. There are dozens of privately funded expeditions to uncharted or uninhabited worlds that often have a sub-directive concerning First One technology and its retrieval—even if the researchers themselves may not be aware of them! In 2262, after it began to circulate that the last of the First Ones had left for places beyond, IPX funded a massive explorer ship to the edge of Vorlon space near the Dorac system. The ship, the *Prophet*, has remained in a cyclical orbit in Dorac ever since. Its mission has been to send probes, unmanned shuttles and scanning beacons into Vorlon territory looking for some sign of a safe way to enter it. Even though it has not truly discovered anything humans did not already know—that the Vorlons left massive asteroid listening posts behind with extremely powerful automated defences—IPX continues to supply the *Prophet* quarter after quarter.

There are no Earth Alliance laws that prohibit personal expeditions, nor does any government agency claim any sovereign rights over what they might find while on

them. Generally it is just far too costly for civilians to undertake such missions without some manner of military or commercial backing, so precedent has never been set. If any of these rare exceptions did ever come back to the Alliance with something genuine, it would surely find its way into the government's hands—one way or another.

The Minbari Federation

Of all the younger races that have had contact with the First Ones it is the Minbari who have had the most direct dealings. The Minbari have worked alongside the Vorlons for well over a thousand years in their war against the ideals of the Shadows. Although little more than pawns in the hands of the Ancients, the Minbari did learn a great deal about the other First Ones by comparison. Much of their own technologies are attributed to their constant exposure to the higher sciences and theories of the Vorlons.

Although they may have had the best contact to the Ancients, the Minbari actually did not actively seek out other First Ones until after they were gone. While the Vorlons still remained in such direct contact with them, the Grey Council handed down express orders not to seek out the others in fear of tipping their hand concerning the war against the Shadows. It was only after the First Ones left and the Grey Council was re-established by Delenn that the castes began to search for the Ancients' leavings in the galaxy.

The official search is actually being handled by the Worker Caste. It is thought that their skills would allow them to easily appraise an item's worth to the Federation and its veracity as an Ancient artefact. They also have the least biased views upon their findings—the Religious Caste tends to over deify anything the First Ones have touched while the Warrior Caste's personal pride blinds them to the usefulness of some items. There is no particular society or commission within the Workers that handles the research on the Ancients. Instead they choose those who feel the call of the past like a passion and allow them to spend their lives in the quest.

There is a little known drive to find lost technologies of the Ancients by the mysterious Shadowsouled—a sub-race of the Minbari that was modified by their dealings with the Shadows. One Shadowsouled in particular, Rathe Zha'lunn, leads an underground effort to scavenge as much Ancient technology as he can. He calls this organisation the Eclipse Caste, and it is composed of thirteen scattered Shadowsouled Minbari inserted deceptively in the research efforts of a dozen other races—including the Worker Caste. Zha'lunn wishes to gather his remaining Shadowsouled brethren and—using the stolen artefacts of the First Ones—become as powerful as they once were during the Great War. To date he has single working hybrid Minbari/Shadow technology starship attuned to his genetic codes. The Eclipse Caste is almost entirely unknown to outsiders and only the Drakh as a whole know of their existence.

The Centauri Republic

A long time ago when the Centauri were indeed the 'lions of the galaxy' and stretched across a great number of star systems, they knew the importance of discovery. Their interrogators would find out many rumours and folk tales from their conquered populations in order to uncover all manner of treasures. It was upon the shoulders of the Grand Chancellor to pick the true finds from the random junk that turned up from countless heaps of spoils. The Grand Chancellor all too often would be a pure politician or a royal puppet and the vast opportunities that might be lying under a pile of taxation collections would go to waste.

It was not until 2236, at the rise of Alkar Hessius of House Hessius to the position of Minister Tempor that the actual search for First Ones' leftover technologies becomes a constant—if ill-advised—effort. Alkar Hessius was a scholar and knew of the powerful techno-mages when he found an unfinished copy of the texts of Vecris. He devoured the information inside and soon hungered for more. The Centauri have never been known for their ability to do anything in small portions, so when Alkar formed an inner sect of treasure-seekers within House Hessius it came as little shock.

This group is responsible for a great majority of the concrete finds that have been attributed to the Centauri. House Hessius holds the greatest amount of alien artefacts and foreign technologies among all the noble court, some of which has roots in the First Ones. Their research and reverse engineering has given the house an edge when politicking—a possible reason why the house was given such leeway by Emperor Turhan. When Alkar died suddenly of a twin heart attack in 2243 his dream of finding Ancient tools to further the Republic faded away into memories of a dead noble. Now there are countless Centauri privateers that scour the galaxy for their reasons (and a hunger for power and fame!), some of which include seeking out what Hessius has whispered about for decades.

After the Shadows came to Centauri Prime nearly all efforts ceased. They had, after all, an entire race of First Ones using their homeworld as a base of operations! The search for other Ancient tech was stifled by the associates of the Shadows to keep the Centauri from discovering other paths to power that might not include them. It was not long after the Shadows were violently removed from the planet by Londo Mollari's fusion bomb trap that the Drakh began to steer the upper echelon of the Centaurum. Their long lasted and underground direction of the Centauri has left the search for other First One technology in the hands solely of privateers and civilians. The dreams of Alkar Hessius—along with those of many others—are all but dead in the royal houses after 2263.

The Narn Regime

Within the highly spiritual and organised ranks of the Narn people their have been countless records and holy books that outline and allude to several of the First Ones—some even by name or title. For this reason the Second Circle of Narn society has been the greatest influence on their seekers of lore and the Ancients. Working hand in hand with the researchers of the Sixth Circle, the holy leaders have steered their people to great finds in times of peace. In times of war there is little room for uncovering fables and children's stories, so the Narn have large holes in much of their Ancient research.

One group that the Kha'Ri has access to is the Journeymen of G'Quan. These adventurous Narn were handed several of the Second Circle's finest long-range explorer and science vessels and sent to the edges of known space to seek the fabled 'Lightbringers' spoken of in the Book of G'Quan. These 'beings of light to fend off the darkness' were in fact a combination of the Vorlons and the Walkers—who were responsible for chasing away the Shadows in the last Great War when they destroyed the last of the Narn mindwalkers. It became quite obvious to the Journeymen after the second Shadow War that they could not find the actual Lightbringers—so they turned to instead seeking out their traces. Now the Journeymen search the galaxy for the remnants of the Ancients' influence upon their worlds.

The Narn as a whole have never been quiet or elusive about their search for Ancient aid in their wars against darkness, oppression and tyranny. Narn explorers are quite blunt when doing research or treasure hunting in places already sought by others. They would much rather ask plainly to those who have done the work before them if they had been successful—and then read into their reactions to such brazen curiosity before choosing to pursue the matter further. One example of such an encounter is from the dig site on Sin'talith 6, where a brutish explorer captain named J'kuhr held an entire mining camp in a faked quarantine for thirteen days. He claimed that each and every one needed to be 'briefed against the symptoms and causes of a strange off world illness.' His claim to the cause of such a horrible contagion was contact with unknown and derelict artefacts that could have been dug up from the mine of course, and J'kuhr was happy to remove the offending item when everyone turned out to be 'infected.'

At least a dozen 'private' explorer programs run through the Narn government unofficially in an effort to steer Centauri supporters away from possible finds. Most of them also sought League or Earth Alliance spacecraft during the Narn-Centauri War and have continued to do so long after the war had ended.

The League of Non-Aligned Worlds

In a theatre of competitive species like the League it comes as no surprise that each and every member race has their own styles and programs concerning the discovery of the leftovers from the age of the First Ones. The League of Non-Aligned Worlds controls upwards of a third of the galaxy amongst its members, much of which had been tread upon by the Ancients at one time or another. As with much else concerning the League, several member governments would benefit from bits of information secreted away by the other members but refuse to share these in favour of one day finishing the research on their own. To them it seems like a sure way to get a huge boost to their prestige within the League—and to keep anyone else from getting the same.

The Brakiri made extensive advancements in their own gravitic sciences from the early excavations they made at the ruins on several of the planets within the Krish system before the Cascor Commonwealth declared the area contested and all research was halted. The Brakiri had barely scratched the surface of what they might have uncovered on Krish Prime before the work stoppage. The Cascor have not officially sent any researchers to the planet nor blockaded it from private vessels but merely kept the Brakiri government from having a legal claim on anything they might find. The Brakiri—amongst several other League members—have sent non-sanctioned or covert research teams to the system with very high casualties. These casualties are solely attributed to other covert teams or the harsh conditions of the planet and are rarely brought up by anyone in League meetings, as it would mean that the offended party was also trespassing on an official level.

The Vree have a general neutrality about them that makes most League races very nervous when they frequent any particular section of space for too long. The Vree are well aware of this fact and commonly use out of the way jump gates or way stations to lure the League's eyes away from their current interests—sometimes even using their massive wealth and clout to obtain civilian or foreign starships to throw their neighbours off of their trail. One Vree ruse worked so well that it nearly got two of their neighbours into a small border war due to an unknown travel infraction on a disguised Vree transport. The two governments never came to open aggressions but relations have been tense ever since.

The Drazi have never been noted for their subtlety or their fantastic ability to work well with others. They horde what information they get and do everything but outright steal (or at least deny any allegations of theft if an agent is caught) what they cannot get themselves from their fellows. They have been known to send 'wounded' agents to League outposts on other worlds in order to get closer to sensitive sites or rumoured finds. Some agents even ask to actually be wounded in order to bypass any suspicions!

The strangest and most diverse collection of Ancient research is actually in the hands of the Pak'ma'ra. From their extensive travels to places they are often overlooked or ignored, the carrion eaters have found their way into dozens of places where others are barricaded or forbidden from. They are allowed in nearly every League world's collection places and sometime unassumingly find special

items that—like the Pak'ma'ra themselves—get overlooked and passed by. They have an enormous library of antiquity on Melat that contains numerous records and examples of the First Ones' era. This library would be a boon to any race willing to come to the Pak'ma'ra homeworld, survive the unfathomable disgust and peruse the vast collection of the forgotten.

The League as a whole does enrol one single group with the collective idea of collective research—the Corps of Associated Minds (CorAM). When the horrible Draffa plague wiped out the Markab population (see *The Coming of Shadows* pages 94-100 for details on the event) the League put forward an effort to seek advanced medical and healing technologies in case the threat of biological weaponry was ever raised again. They have had great degrees of success in the short term, but have yet to truly uncover anything of the Ancients.

The Interstellar Alliance

After President Sheridan's ordeals during and after the Shadow War he was well aware of the First Ones and their absence from the galaxy—as told to him by Lorien himself. In the light of this information he has neither forbidden nor encouraged the search for their fingerprints on our galaxy. There are several Rangers that spend their so-called free time in search of fabled lore or hidden ruins but none are official missions. If called upon for Alliance business they would be expected to drop their adventuring immediately.

In the mid 2266 the Drakh attacked the homeworld of the Alliance's president—Earth. In doing so they unleashed a powerful biological weapon of Shadow design onto the actual planet itself. After defeating the Drakh, the Alliance was forced to immediately help the Earth Alliance find a cure if at all possible. Along with a healthy donation to the League's CorAM project, the Alliance sent out the prestigious and experimental *Excalibur* hybrid destroyer in an active search for a method to stem or cure the weapon's effects, probably through finding the leftover technology of the First Ones.

Becoming a part of the team...

In the preceding sections there are several examples of governmentally funded or protected affiliations that deal with the research of First One technology that player characters may wish to be a part of. Games Masters can always arrange for circumstances to allow their player characters membership or affiliation with these groups at their own discretion. In case of unexpected interest by the players, we have included a brief list of suggested prerequisites for each group's membership.

Galactic Genesis Administration	Contacts feat, Cha 13+, Humans only
Psi Corps Evercall Unit	Contacts feat, Human telepath rated P-8 or higher
IPX crew of *Prophet* Explorer	No requirements necessary, most applicants accepted
Eclipse Caste	Agent class level 6+, Shadowsouled Minbari only
Hessius Royal Researchers	Agent or Scientist level 5+, House Hessius Centauri only
Journeymen of G'Quan	Knowledge (G'Quan) skill 5+ ranks, Contacts feat, Narn only
Corps of Associated Minds	Character level 4+, Cha 12+, Medical skill 5+ ranks, League races only
***Excalibur* Research Crew**	At least two Contacts feats focused on the Interstellar Alliance, Scientist class level 7+, special invitation only, must be after 2266

Where the Giants Once Stood

'The giants have left the playground, but they left their guns behind.'
—President John Sheridan

Ancient Remnants and Echoes of the Past

The following is a collection of several locations throughout the galaxy that have some connection to the First Ones. From ruins to forgotten peoples, this section will give Games Masters an assortment of strange and wonderful places to take their player characters to. Included is also a pair of very elaborate hoaxes that might be a good subplot as well.

Preceding the narrative information for each entry is a short list of data necessary for the entry's placement in the galaxy. This data will include which planet and system the entry is located in, the entry's progenitors and the Difficulty of an extended Gather Information or related Knowledge skill checks (along with the number of successes) it would take for a player character to research the information themselves. As with any skill check, these Difficulty numbers can be adjusted by Games Masters to reflect certain circumstances. After the entry will be a short list of Scenarios and Campaign Hooks for the entry to become part of a Games Master's chronicle.

Some of the following really should be for Games Masters' eyes only, and could spoil some interesting surprises for any player that reads further. Continue at your own risk…

The Great Machine of Epsilon 3

Location: Epsilon 3, Epsilon Eridani System
Created By: Combined effort headed by Walkers
DC to Research: Three checks at DC 20, 15 while on board Babylon 5.

The Great Machine was designed by the Walkers eons ago with some assistance from the Mindriders in order to create a nexus for all of the First Ones to communicate to one another across dimensional and spatial barriers. The machine was a huge success and the Walkers were extremely satisfied with the results. The Great Machine could send and receive imagery and information as fast as it could be thought using an interesting version of the psionic receptors the ships of the Mindriders used to collect their scattered population. The Machine worked fantastically and the Walkers were happy to share it with their peers.

It was during the Kirishiac War that the Great Machine became a commodity in which battles were fought and arguments burned over its use. The Vorlons claimed that the Machine could be used against the First Ones in its current unguarded state. It was not until the Kirishiac came to Epsilon 3 to rape the Machine of its information stores that the Walkers agreed to their worrisome younger allies. The Walkers dissuaded the Kirishiac Lords from the Machine long enough to equip it with a vast array of automated defences more than capable of keeping even the Lords' powerful ships at bay long enough to bring in reinforcements.

Once the war was over Lorien commented that maybe the Great Machine should be saved for another time. The other Ancients protested at first, but soon agreed to their elder. The Great Machine stood dormant for millennia—driven and warded by the occasional chosen caretaker.

Since that time it has only been fully reawakened a few times—once to find a new guardian and once to aid the Army of Light in finding the remaining First Ones. These special occasions are explained in much greater detail on pages 241-247 of *The Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book* and pages 36-40 of *The Point of No Return*.

The Defences of Epsilon 3

The Great Machine's defences are extensive, as noted from *The Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book*—

'In game terms, the Great Machine can destroy any spacecraft within one round with a maximum range that exceeds Babylon 5's orbit, though he will normally wait until it is clear that a) the intruder is, in fact, trying to force a landing and b) Babylon 5's forces have failed to stop them. Games Masters should make it clear to their players that any landing on Epsilon 3 will not be tolerated and any attempt will result in their deaths. As Varn said, the Great Machine is not for them and not for this time.' (Taken from page 247 of *The Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book*)

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

5 Friends or allies of the player characters could be sceptical of the true existence of the Great Machine and its ability to obliterate any trespassers, or maybe just pressing their luck thinking about heading down to the planet. They claim to have bought a clear window in the starfury patrols but do not have the manpower or the ability to crew a landing shuttle themselves. The player characters have a dilemma—do they try to stop their friends themselves or enlist the help of station security even though the friend claims to have an 'in' that could get them into even more trouble? If they do nothing they are surely to lose an ally one way or another, but getting involved might risk them a great deal more.

5 A League cargo ship that tried to use Epsilon 3 as a great low orbit to avoid scanning—due to the immense amount of illegal weaponry and precious metals in its hold—was destroyed by the Great Machine's automatic defences less than a day ago. The League of Non-Aligned Worlds is in thick debate over whose government is so foolish and has denied Babylon 5 the ability to clean up the debris floating in orbit around the planet. During the political stalemate a salvager/raider contacts the player characters and asks them to give him a late night hand on his shuttle—picking up what intact or repairable cargo is floating around out there. He offers them a heavy ransom for their silence and their service. The player characters might not want to anger the raider, but may know better than to risk drawing too near to the planet. To make things worse if they do agree, the League has hired dozens of thuggish privateers to 'covertly' reclaim the goods as well—no matter who they run across in the process.

Eternal Battles of the Chaos Anfrani

Location: Anfran Prime, Anfra System
Created By: The Triad (Chaos), protected by Shadows
DC to Research: Four checks at DC 17, one check for Shadow Agents.

A few days in hyperspace away from Z'ha'dum, the Anfra system once was a binary star system thriving with resources and indigenous life. The Chaos mood within the Triad chose the relatively out of the way system for its meetings with the Shadows.

The Triad and the Shadows would come together at Anfra in order to discuss the best methods to sculpt the life of the galaxy with random bio-engineered events and conflicts. It was a perfect place to conduct experiments and pit the results against one another—a sort of 'laboratory arena.'

During the Kirishiac War the system was one of many places the Lords saw as a possible threat. They were aware of the generally theoretic nature of the Anfrani projects and, in turn, were concerned by it. With massive gravitic pulsars they pounded the system into ruins. Only the largest planet, Anfran Prime, was spared the orbital bombardment by the fast reactions of the Shadow ships lurking at Z'ha'dum.

While the destruction was halted at Anfran Prime, the Shadows no longer wished to participate in experiments so close to home. So the Anfra system went dormant and forgotten. Without the Ancients to oversee what was going on with the experiments they ran amuck—and survived for several thousand years. Now it is a desert of blackened sands layered with danger. Sinkholes that can swallow a starship, storms that might strip flesh from bone, atmosphere pockets as volatile as petrol and horrible mutations of millennia-old creations threaten any who would dare come to the surface of the deserted planetoid.

Anfran Prime is strikingly terrifying to behold from orbit as lightning storms dance throughout the atmosphere igniting pockets of flammable gases that spring up from the surface occasionally. One pilot claimed it 'looked like rolling fireworks a few miles across at a time, until we tried to land through it—then it just looked dangerous.'

Trying to pilot through the thick and turbulent atmosphere of Anfran Prime is a test of a pilot's patience and skill. A good pilot will not try to rush a landing, as the heat from an incoming vessel will often ignite the atmosphere pockets and either a) burn the hull of the landing craft very badly or b) suck the air out of engine intakes and cause the ship to stall or crash. It takes three successful Pilot skill checks (DC 16) to land properly. For each of the checks that fail the ship suffers 2d20+30 hp of heat-based damage, but a Reflex save by the pilot (DC 15) will negate half of the damage, rounding up.

The atmosphere is a mixture of Oxygen, Nitrogen and Carbon Monoxide with pockets of Nitro Methadine. It is breathable by Oxygen-breathing species with little difficulty. The pockets of Nitro Methadine are easily seen as cloudy bubbles that seep up through the sand at particular vents in the planet's crust. These pockets are enormous and can sometimes reach well over a hundred feet in diameter. They rise extremely quickly if witnessed at ground level and, while highly toxic if breathed (Fortitude save DC 22 or suffer 3d6 temporary Constitution damage immediately), are difficult to get caught exposed within for too long.

Most land travel over Anfran Prime will be over *rocky desert* and *sandy desert* style of terrain, using all of the appropriate modifiers to movement and terrain features of regions of those types (see *Core Rulebook I* pg.164 and *Core Rulebook II* pg.91). The occasional oases lies hidden in desert caverns, normally covered by crusts or dunes of sand and are difficult to keep track of.

The weather itself changes rather drastically in the chaos of Anfran Prime. To show this, every four hours the Games Master should roll a d6. If that roll comes up a 1 or a 2, the weather may shift. To calculate these weather shifts Games Masters should use the *desert* column on the Random Weather

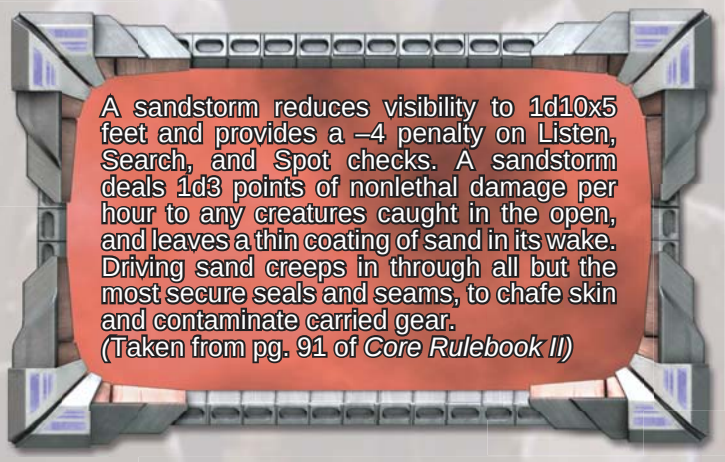


table (Table 3-23, *Core Rulebook II* pg.94), replacing any roll of "Downpour" with "Sandstorms". Sandstorms are described in the *Core Rulebook II*, but are reprinted here for your benefit.

Because of the thousands of miles of open ground, the flatlands of Anfran Prime get very windy. At any given time the winds out in the desert are thick and strong, sometimes gaining in strength quite rapidly. On the Wind Effects table (Table 3-24, *Core Rulebook II* pg. 95) Games Masters should almost always keep the wind force at the *Moderate* or *Strong* levels, with the capacity of *Severe* or *Windstorm* levels. There have been known to be the occasional *Tornado* level winds—which pressurise and ignite to create super-heated dust devils that can be seen for miles around.

Dotting the landscape are huge caverns that can shelter travellers from the elements. Inside these caverns are the leftover denizens of the Anfrani Chaos Projects thousands of generations later. These creatures number in the hundreds across the entire planet, wandering around with the one simple genetic instruction—find, combat, absorb and regenerate. Due to their single-minded search for one another the rest of the planet has eroded into a wasteland devoid of useful artefacts or information—unless of course you count the Abominations themselves.

Anfrani Abominations

The First Ones built these lifeforms to last, and last they did. On a cellular level the original Chaos projects were created with the capacity to evolve quickly due to outside stimuli. This made them infinitely capable to adjust and adapt, but it made them also very unstable. Once abandoned they shortly ran out of outside stimuli and instead turned on one another for their genetic imperatives.

They began to confront one another, fight vicious and bloody battles with the victor often eating a portion of the defeated. With such adaptable cellular structures, they began to shift and mutate with the attributes of one another. Given the centuries of these visceral mixings, the Abominations are hordes of mismatched attributes trying to meld into the perfect being. Without new material to add however, they are caught in a genetic stall. While once they may have looked like distinct and definite creatures, they all look twisted and patchwork—like a jigsaw puzzle of different attributes and body segments. Each Abomination is drastically different than the last, but here is a good guideline on how to create the statistic block for one.

Medium- to Large-size Alien Creature
Character Level: 1d6+5 (4d6+8 hp)
Initiative: +2d6-1d6 (capable of a negative number)
Speed: 1d6+2 x 10 ft.
DV: 13+d3
Attacks: +4+d3 melee, +4+d3 melee
Damage: 2d6 +Str modifier melee
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction d3, Cellular Reconstruction
Saves: Fort +2d6, Ref +d6, Will +d3
Abilities: Str 10+d6, Dex 10+d6, Con 18+d6, Int 3+d3, Wis 5+d6, Cha 1
Skills: Climb +2d6, Hide +1d6, Jump +2d6, Listen +2d6, Move Silently +1d6, Spot +2d6
Feats: Ambidexterity, Blind Fight, Improved Unarmed Strike, Run

Cellular Reconstruction: Whenever an Anfrani Abomination is reduced to 0 or fewer hit points, it falls into a regenerative coma that could take days or even weeks to fully rebuild its body. It will regenerate d3 hp every 36 hours until it reaches its maximum, which then it will reanimate and begin searching for genetic material yet again. Unless every cell of the Abomination is completely destroyed—a truly difficult feat—it will eventually reconstruct itself and regain consciousness.

Whenever new material becomes available the Abominations seek it out and attempt to add it to their own. This makes Anfran Prime a very hostile environment for treasure seekers. Their ability to reconstruct their own tissue from basically nothing is in and of itself a great boon to both the medical and military sciences should a living specimen be captured and held for extensive study. It also makes this task extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

5 A medical scientist with one of the player character's governments calls upon he and his most trusted allies to see a strange bio-sample. One of the scientist's agents gave his life to smuggle the sample in from a neutral system full of dead planets between Earth Alliance and Minbari space. It contains DNA codes from lifeforms not found anywhere on the common record, and the scientist suspects that it may be a new species. By the time the player characters get to the scientist's lab, the sample—which was taken from a badly injured Anfrani Abomination—has regenerated into a horrible creature that is running amuck in the medical complex!

5 An explorer vessel trying to take routine samples of the Anfra system hit some unexpected turbulence and crashed into the largest planet in the system. One of the player characters is informed that a member of the ship's crew was a friend of theirs and managed to send a distress call specifically to the player character from the surface before losing contact. IPX is prepared to fund a rescue party based on solely the player character's knowledge of the distress call. It isn't company policy to act so humane about an expensive failure like the Anfra exploration—maybe someone at IPX knows exactly why that ship went down and is trying desperately to cover his tracks?

The Mines under NAC-12

Location: NAC-12, Nacambad System
Created By: The Triad (combined)
DC to Research: Five checks at DC 18, three at DC 12 for Vree, Gaim, Llort or Yolu

These long forgotten mines are located on, or rather under, the gypsum-laden crust of the twelfth planetoid of the Nacambad ternary system. The three blue stars at its centre made a perfect symbol for the cooperating Triad after their combination after the Kirishiac War. The twelve intersecting and erratic orbits made all but the final most planetoid oddly shaped and completely inhabitable. The twelfth planetoid, designated NAC-12 by the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, is a small sphere capable of sustaining life easily on its own for small herd animals and sparse civilised life. It is honeycombed with ancient tunnels that the League had openly called 'mines' when they sent their first waves of explorers and surveyors.

The planetoid is thick with several metallic ores and a decent number of minerals needed for certain starship alloys. The League has set up several mining facilities manned primarily by the most local of the League populations—the Vree and Gaim, with a few Llort and Yolu representatives. These mines are actually a very elaborate network of working excavations that the League is using to cover up a deeper excavation of a hidden depository of the Triad's unused and vacant Tri.

The Triad stored the last of their partisan Tri after the Kirishiac War in the hollows of NAC-12, keeping the three moods of Tri separated by tons of stone and soil. Even though the Triad do no longer inhabit them, the Tri are still comprised of Ancient energies and very capable of reacting to outside influence. A single breath upon their glassy and seamless surfaces will bring them back to 'life' for a short while—normally long enough to make those responsible sorry for their intrusion.

The League have actually only discovered upon one of the Tri holding cells—those of Order. A Gaim excavation team stumbled upon the Order depository during a legitimate mining effort in 2249. They accidentally shattered a retaining wall and fell into an enormous sculpted crystalline room lined with strange apparatuses. The Gaim have very explicit rules laid down by the Queen concerning first contacts and discovery, so the excavation team immediately moved to take a small sample. At the first touch of the cutting tool to the Tri of Order awoke and protected itself from the two Gaim wielding the tool. The rest of the Gaim retreated at the show of force, and ever since the research of the depository (and the search for the others) has been handled by a combined underground effort and policed by the League.

In fact the three depositories are linked by a strange tachyon tether that keeps each piece aware of the state of the others. The current state of the three depositories as of 2260 is as follows:

Tri of Order

The cavernous depository of Order is a slightly oval-shaped opening roughly two hundred feet from its longest end to the other and not quite that distance wide. The opening to the room is guarded by several automated heat and motion sensitive Antimatter Projector Array (APA) tripods trained on the mineshaft entrance and more than capable of stopping even an armoured intruder. These weapons will fire ceaselessly at any target larger than a foot across as soon as it gets within thirty feet of the doorway, stopping only when the remains are no longer large enough to trigger their sensors. The APAs are monitored by remote at a control office a hundred feet closer to the surface.

Antimatter Projector Array

This powerful heavy weapon was designed by the Vree for use on their atmospheric capable assault craft, but was eventually replaced by the more sleek and powerful Antiproton weaponry. The APA was instead redesigned into a mounted device to aid in base or station protection.

It uses a charged particle dissolver inside its heavy housing to strip tiny slivers of antimatter off a larger ammunition core and—using a simple vacuum principle—hurls them at great force at a target. The result is a highly accurate saturation of the target with deadly antimatter bolts.

Normally the APA is attached to a firing mount in high-risk areas of League military installations. The weapon is very heavy and cannot be wielded by hand effectively unless the bearer has a minimum Strength score of 16. Even then he suffers a –4 penalty to all to hit rolls.

A version was designed for absent warding of high security areas that uses a sensitive tracking and sensor suite to home in on possible targets. It was reliable and deadly, but could only be used effectively in low-traffic sites—as the weapons do not designate friend, animal or passers by from target! The sensor suite has a Spot skill modifier of +15, an attack bonus of +10 and will fire automatically at any object larger than one foot in diameter that crosses into its field of fire (as set by a technician up to 360 degrees around and 40 feet from the weapon's mount).

Weapon	Cost	Damage	Area of Effect	Critical	Ammo	Range Increment	Size	Weight	Type
Antimatter Projector Array	5,000 cr. (10,000 cr. For automated firing model)	2d10+2	—	19-20/x2	100	40 ft.	Large	110 lb.	Energy

Reloading the weapon with a new ammunition core is a difficult and dangerous task that requires a skilled technician (3 ranks or higher in a related skill) and the proper tools. The process takes two full combat rounds, requiring a Concentration check if reloading under combat situations. Ammunition cores can only be purchased through the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, and cost 200 credits each.

Special Note: These devices are not common, but the Vree are happy to sell them to anyone with enough money to do so. Every APA that the Vree have made for outsider use is installed with a tracking beacon near the particle dissolver—making it almost impossible (DC 35) to find or detect. They use this to track former customers and the travels of militant organisations able and willing to purchase such weaponry.

The depository itself is lined by 17 humanoid shapes that are featureless and seamless, made of a strange combination of metal and plastic-looking alloy and stationary in rows along the walls of the room. Each one is exactly ten feet three-and-a-half inches tall from its pointed feet to its smooth head. Except for the one that was activated in 2249—which is crouching low to the ground a few paces out from the wall—the 'statues' are upright and at attention. These are the actual Tri.

At the farthest end of the room from the doorway is a tiny crystalline matrix that is covered in dust and rather unassuming to the untrained eye (DC 18 Spot or Search to locate). This is the power source to the tachyon tether constantly communicating back and forth to the other depositories. Should this be disturbed or damaged in any way, it will expend its last energy activating *all* of the Tri in the room—a defence mechanism that the Triad installed to keep upstarts like the Kirishiac from capturing their demilitarised shells.

Defensively the Tri of Order should be considered nearly indestructible by any younger race's technology short of starship weaponry and have the following traits: Damage Reduction 8 and 100 hp apiece. Offensively they can focus massive energy emissions at a single target within 60 ft., automatically hitting to cause 5d6 damage that ignores Damage Reduction from armour completely. The Tri will only attack those it directly considers a hostile target, but will not cease the attack until the target is destroyed utterly.

Tri of Neutrality

The Neutrality Tri are housed in a corridor-like depository a mile or so deeper into the mine complex. The mining efforts of the League have come very close to finding it on several occasions, but still have yet to open the room itself. It is encased in a very thick vein of ore deposits and will one day surely draw their surveyor sensors' attention.

The corridor is actually a tube that curls around in a circle to itself, intersecting in the middle forming a three hundred feet long figure eight carved out of the planetoid's mantle. The tube is fourteen feet wide and tall with smooth sculpted walls that blend up into the ceiling. Every ten feet in the centre of the tube there is one of 14 remaining Neutral Tri—most the size of a man or smaller. They were designed as quadrupeds, but are almost symmetrical in shape so as to not have a head, flank or posterior. They are thick-limbed and featureless, not having even an area one could determine as a face or manipulative digits. When active the Tri use energy fields to affect their surroundings, steering the world around them as they see fit.

The Tri of Neutrality are powerful creations designed solely to bring balance back to any situation—attacking when outnumbered, ceasing when it might seem foolish to do so or even retreating when a battle has only barely been joined. In combat they perform just as the Tri of Order with one exception—they will only ever deal as much damage as they have received the previous turn. They are extremely difficult to gauge what they are going to do at any moment, and even more difficult to urge into action.

On the floor at the intersection of the tunnel there is another crystalline tachyon matrix that connects the Neutrality Tri with the depositories of the other moods of the Triad. Should any of the Tri in this room be destroyed (a feat in and of itself) the matrix will activate all of the remaining Tri—in all three depositories. This matrix is the main power cell for all of the tachyon tethers and is designed to send a final activation burst to all of the Tri before the tether network fails.

Tri of Chaos

Much deeper into the planetoid, almost a half mile beyond the Tri of Neutrality lies the storage facility for the savage Chaos Tri. The room is roughly cube-shaped fifty feet on each dimension with a pillar of smooth stone rising up out of the centre of the floor twelve feet. Perched atop the pillar is the last remaining Chaos Tri—a single beastlike creation of segmented plates and jointed legs reminiscent of an eight-foot diameter spider. The Tri has a total of thirteen appendages similar to legs surrounding its spherical body, each tipped with a cluster of hooked blades and spines. The body section is pitted with deep holes and protruding ridges, but has no discernable eyes or other sensory inputs.

Under the Chaos Tri is a much smaller tachyon matrix that links directly to its underside. The matrix is purely a receiver, not sending any information to the other depositories even if disturbed or destroyed. The Triad constructed the Chaos tether to be used only to activate the lone inhabitant from the other rooms in case of an intruder, not to alarm the others if Chaos is disturbed. The Triad knew that if someone awoke the Chaos Tri and could not stop it, alerting the others would be unnecessary.

It would be futile because the Chaos Tri is nigh unstoppable short of a ground zero nuclear detonation—if even that could destroy its constantly reconstructing shell. No weaponry of any younger race can truly even harm the Chaos Tri and current era armours will not protect against its scything limbs. In game terms the Chaos Tri cannot be destroyed successfully by non-First One technology, only slow it down. Should any player characters actually activate the Chaos Tri without first activating the Tri of Order—which will instinctively hunt down each other and battle to a destructive stalemate—they will surely perish quickly and without mercy. Games Masters should try to give some warning to their players before unleashing this doomsday device, as any character it touches will be killed instantly.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

- The Gaim mining crew that were digging near the Depository of Neutrality had a serious equipment malfunction and a laser drilling device went haywire. A cutting beam sliced neatly through the room's wall and nicked the tachyon matrix inside—sending the activation code to all of the Tri. Now the Tri of Order are surging deeper into the mines looking for their adversary the Chaos Tri, and the Neutrals are wandering about setting the balance where they can. The problem is that the massive tachyon burst shorted out all of the communications equipment, and several dozen League miners are trapped in an Ancient war zone. The League is looking for anyone within the vicinity they can trust with sensitive information—or anyone they can silence later—that can help with the evacuation. A friend, or possibly a rival, gave them the player characters' names.

- NAC-12 was never meant to be mined as heavily as the League has been and a massive earthquake has caused a work stoppage. The Yolu are concerned that the quake is really the 'ancient gods of this planet' releasing their servants of the apocalypse. They refuse to allow the Gaim and Vree to continue mining until someone 'untouched by the sins they have caused here' explores the mines first. The player characters, having never been on the mining crew before, are offered an exorbitant wage to carry a recording device and camera rig into the mines for them. The quake may or may not have triggered any of the Tri, and the player characters find themselves free to roam the entire mining complex unsupervised—or are they?

Bio-Science Lab of Ikarra 7

Location: Ikarra 7, Ikarra System
Created By: Ikarran Republic, as instructed by Torvalus Spectators
DC to Research: Two checks at DC 15

It has been a well known fact that the people of the Ikarran Republic were subject to countless attacks by alien peoples. It is a fact that they had responded to these attacks by creating powerful bio-weaponry that rivalled the soldiers of the Ancient races. It is a fact that the bio-weapons were flawed in some way and ended up turning on the Ikarrans and quite possibly destroyed them in an ironic turn of events. What is not known is why.

During the growth of the Torvalus's intelligence network they discovered the Ikarran Republic and saw their slowly eroding defences. The Torvalus chose to aid the lesser race as they had done with so many others in exchange for a small base of operations to work from—which was very near the elusive Shadows, who were particularly hard to reconnaissance upon. It was the Torvalus who showed the Ikarrans great leaps and bounds in biological technology. It was not until after the Torvalus had left for the Rim that the Bio-warriors they had helped design turned on the Ikarrans—to which they no longer had the Ancient race to turn to for advice. The Ikarrans were destroyed by their own creations, leaving their highly advanced civilisation to the forces of absence and entropy.

Ever since the discovery of one of the Ikarran Warriors on Babylon 5 (see the episode entry *Infection*, pages 183-187 of *The Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book* for more details) pirates, explorers and treasure-seekers have gone to Ikarra 7 in search of more of the advanced biological science. Most have found very little in the hundreds of ruins layering the once lush planet, but a rare few speak of a hidden Biological Laboratory guarded by the remaining active Ikarran Warriors filled with the last vestiges of an Ancient and powerful science.

The Bio-Science Lab on Ikarra 7 is truly a leftover from the golden age of the Ikarrans. It was the only place untouched by the Ikarran Warriors when they scoured the planet of its native inhabitants. It is located under a ruined building near one of the planet's red sand poles, and is virtually invisible to all but the most advanced planetary scanners. It may only be found by following the tracks of the Ikarran Warriors—if one of the nine remaining can be found on the heavily forested planet. The Ikarran Warriors return periodically to the Lab in search of their prime target (other than any alien intruders that they might cross paths with, of course)—the last Ikarran.

Using the advanced bio-sciences locked away inside the lab, Ha'ta'zan Kok'r has granted himself almost infallible cellular immunity to aging, disease, dehydration and starvation. Kok'r was a lower echelon chemist in the lab complex when the Bio-Warriors began

their ethnic cleansing of the Ikarrans. While many ran out to try and stop the deadly creations or to see loved ones Kok'r hid away in the vaults of the laboratories until he felt it was safe. Several times he heard intruders outside—or the cries of his people asking to be let in—of which he stayed silent and prayed to the long absent Torvalus to keep him safe. Eventually he left the vault and sealed in the lab complex itself, turning his scientific knowledge to furthering his own life and protecting his laboratory fortress.

Originally there were twelve Ikarran Warriors that turned on the Ikarrans. Two were destroyed by the Ikarrans themselves during their initial attacks. One went into a dormant state and was later recovered and brought to Babylon 5. The other nine still roam the ruins of their former civilisation in search of the last Ikarran—who they can sense is somewhere on the planet. The statistics for one of these powerful warriors is as follows:

Ikarran Warrior

Character Level: 16 (88 hp)
Initiative: +0
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +19/+14/+9/+4 melee or +17/+12/+7/+2 ranged
Damage: Slam 1d8+5 or bio-energy blast 3d6 (range 30 ft. max)
Special Qualities: Armoured Skin (DR 10)
Saves: Fort +13, Ref +4, Will +5
Abilities: Str 17, Dex 8, Con 16, Int 7, Wis 10, Cha 8
Skills: Climb +6, Listen +8, Spot +7
Feats: Far Shot, Point Blank Shot, Rapid Aim, Weapon Focus (bio-energy blast), Weapon Focus (slam), Weapon Specialisation (slam)

Inside the laboratory there are several examples of Ikarran bio-technology that has survived due to the centuries of diligence of Kok'r. These examples can be found in the Equipment section of this book. More information on Ha'ta'zan Kok'r can be found in the Personalities section.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

5 When the Ikarran Warrior reactivated on Babylon 5 and was later destroyed, several security personnel saw what had happened on secure cam footage. One of them had contacts in several privateer circles and saw an opportunity to make some extra credits—by selling the information about Ikarra 7 to his less savoury allies. The player characters may have heard about the rush of privateers to the system and wish to investigate, or might be among them.

5 A rich cooperate entrepreneur discovered he is dying of a degenerative disease and began a galaxy wide search for a cure—to no avail. In his research he had spread his quest far and wide in several circles, and one reclusive historian of which sought him out. The historian told the man about the bio-sciences of the Ikarrans, and gave him hope that a cure might still be available in their ruins. Now the entrepreneur has turned his influence to sending skilled salvage teams—or anyone who claims to be—to the ruins of Ikarra 7 to look for a cure. A friend of the player characters' thinks he could make all of them a great deal of money if they give him a hand on the ancient planet. When he contacts the players he chooses to leave out the detail about the possible super soldiers running amuck on the planet's surface, maybe even in an attempt to cut the number of times the healthy reward will be split.

Last Bastion of the Noil

Location: Roth, Roth 'System'
Created By: Torvalus Speculators
DC to Research: Three checks at DC 16

The Noil were just one of several lesser races used by the Torvalus to build their intricate designs, a difficult task for flatworms with no true digits or telekinetic abilities. Being hiving insectoids, the Noil had a biological knack for building complex structures and fortifications. It was very easy for the super intelligent Torvalus to manipulate that strongpoint for their own use. Due to the Torvalus's steering the Noil came to be a thriving civilisation with several colonies on more than five systems.

Then the Kirishiac War shook the galaxy, and the Torvalus forced their most loyal servitors to fight against the agents of Kirish—and countless thousands died on faraway worlds. Towards the end of the war the Noil decided to take a stand for their survival, lest the Torvalus deploy them to extinction. The last three breeding queens gathered on a small world whose star was on the verge of collapse. They were going to make a final stand against their 'masters.' The war ended prematurely and the Torvalus went beyond the rim with the other Ancients. The Noil never had to actually revolt and chose to stay in the smallish system and keep to themselves. So they did—until their dying star finally collapsed and the planet froze in the void.

That planet was Roth. The star that it revolved around went supernova before collapsing, swallowing the three other planets in the system and leaving Roth alone as a huge ball of snow and frozen oceans. During the five hundred years that the Noil lived happily on the once fertile planet they constructed three huge hive cities—one for each of the breeding queens—that still stand as ruins in the Third Age. Each city once held over a billion of the hardworking arthropods. Then the star died and the planet froze completely within the next generation of hatchlings.

Hurricanes of sleet buried the surface under layers of ice as clear as glass, turning the entire planet into a floating sculpture of a time long forgotten. It is a breathtaking sight and has been an attraction to thrill-seeking tourists and explorers for decades. At one time there was even a Brakiri travel agency that shuttled people to the planet for a small fee. Roth was a strange and fantastic place until a massive tectonic shift cracked the surface and made the planet dangerous and terrible.

Without the gravity well of the star to hold it stable, Roth's orbit has faltered a fraction each year. In 2241, as the trajectory widened and widened Roth came into the path of a huge asteroid that missed the planet itself by a matter of miles. The gravitic shunt that resulted shattered the frozen core—beginning a chain reaction of pressurised gasses, thawing the planet. It started a slow process of steam venting and surface quakes that brought much of the planet's life back from the cold void. The changes were acting like the reawakening of a planetary cryogenic unit. At first it was purely mosses and lichen that began to live again, then small rodents and vermin—then the first recorded Noil sighting took place in the summer of 2258 by a Narn Journeyman of G'Quan.

The Noil survived in their frozen state by huddling into caverns and tunnels in huge numbers, except the queens—their bloated and soft bodies succumbed to the cold long ago. The remaining Noil who were vigorous enough, such as soldiers and the noble male caste, broke free from their icy shells and began to scour their thawing planet in search of food. This, of course, includes any and all intruding sentient beings they might find there.

Included is the statistics for the reawakened Noil, who may be encountered on Roth anytime after the thawing began in 2241.

Noil Noble/Soldier Caste

Noil Nobles are large insectoid humanoids with russet exoskeletons as thick as any armour, fanning sensory crests behind triangular heads and three pairs of limbs that can act as arms or legs depending on the need. Soldiers replace the upper limbs with crushing pincers that can bisect a man at the waist with a gesture. Both have grinding mandibles designed to mash organic matter, plant or animal, into a paste that their long digestive systems can take days to break down.

At their prime the Noil took pheromone-based commands from the queens, but since their passing the Noil are run by little more than instinct—surviving at any cost on their wayward planet. They will attack anything composed of flesh except the Gaim, of which they seem confused and bewildered by. Without the queens' commands the Noil will live out their existences until their planet drifts into another hazard like it did ages before.

Large-size Alien Creature
Character Level: 13 (74 hp)
Initiative: +7 (+3 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 40 ft.
DV: 18
Attacks: Claws +16/+11/+6/+1 melee
Damage: Claws 2d4+6 (2d8+8 for Soldiers)
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 5, Adaptability
Saves: Fort +12, Ref +10, Will +6
Abilities: Str 22 (26 for Soldiers), Dex 16, Con 18, Int 11, Wis 10, Cha 6
Skills: Climb +12, Hide +6, Jump +16, Listen +8, Spot +9
Feats: Ambidexterity, Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (claws), Weapon Specialisation (claws)

Adaptability: The exoskeleton of a Noil is incredibly adaptable and evolves with every attack or outside stimuli. Every successful attack on a Noil increases its Damage Reduction by 1 against attacks of the same type (energy, blunt and so on) for the remainder of the combat. This ability is cumulative and automatic.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

5 A Gaim expedition to the thawing planet of Roth was to be a sight seeing trip for one of the High Queen's royal offspring—one who may be a Queen someday. When they reached the planet they were set upon by a number of Noil nobles. They killed the whole group except for two survivors. The royal female was taken hostage after a strange exchange of looks the Gaim could not decipher. The ship's pilot escaped to tell the tale. The High Queen has put a huge bounty on her daughter's return, and the player characters may be able to collect upon it.

5 The Abbai Matriarchate has calculated the eroding path of the wayward planet and is sure it will eventually drift into the path of a nearby asteroid belt that will surely destroy the planet within two decades. The Abbai are not concerned with the state of the planet, but their historians and scientists want to amass samples of the flora and fauna of Roth. They will gladly pay handsomely for frozen, living samples of Roth's inhabitants. Both they and the player characters—who they might hire for such a task—will find out what happens when these samples begin to thaw, on or off the planet.

The Database on Sigma 957

Location: Sigma 957, Sigma Sector
Created By: The Walkers
DC to Research: Two checks at DC 15, One check for Narn

The sixth planet of the Sigma sector has always been actively avoided by the Narn since 2240, when they left their mines abandoned and began to warn others of the mysterious 'traveller' that appeared. They tried to tell others verbally or through common parlance, but had to rely on an active warning beacon in orbit around the planet—which vanished without a trace a year later. From that point word of mouth told of enormous vessels that could appear and vanish at will. The planet became a source of endless speculation and the occasional suicidal explorer. Dozens of foolhardy intruders had ignored the warnings and were never heard from again. The Walkers were never too far from home and kept an eye on their last remaining database in this dimension. After the First Ones left in 2261 the planet was again safe for outsiders to explore, even if very few are brave enough to test it.

Originally the Walkers had built two information databases. One was destroyed by the 'miscalculated' Vorlon asteroid crash and the other was kept safe on Sigma 957. Having learned that even their fellow First Ones could not be trusted they protected the database the best way they knew how—they kept warden over the base itself. Their Traveller ships would never stray too far from Sigma 957 to be able to answer any threat to the collection of unfathomable knowledge.

They also fortified the structures themselves. The base itself is a spherical shell nearly two full miles beneath the surface of the rocky planet made from the strongest materials the Walkers could find across a dozen dimensions. There is not a force strong enough to bend or even scar the six-foot thick walls and the material is so dense that planetary scanners mistake the base for the planet's core.

The base also needed technicians, custodians and guardians. The Walkers could not trust anyone anymore except *maybe* the Triad and the Transcendentals, so they invested in the creation of the Caretaker. The Caretaker is a being the Walkers crafted from hundreds of bio-samples taken from hundreds of lifeforms across a dozen dimensions. The Caretaker fills all of the staff requirements for the database by itself. It is an androgynous being with powerful psychic abilities, unquestionable loyalty to the Walkers and access to unthinkable knowledge literally at its slender fingertips. It was ordered to remain in the base—until one day when the Walkers would return with further instruction.

Sigma 957 was abandoned by the Walkers when they left this galaxy, and the Caretaker was instantly aware that it was truly alone. It opened the several hidden entrances to the database invitingly, hoping that someone would eventually find them. After several hundred years the Caretaker has learned nearly everything that can be learned from the database and would enjoy any friendly company. Not all intruders are friendly however, and the Caretaker does not take well to data-pirates with ill intentions. The Walkers forbade it from allowing wide scale information downloads by lesser races, but the Caretaker is never against some simple conversation—a game of chance perhaps? More information on the Caretaker can be found in the Personalities section of this book.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

5 The Caretaker is a powerfully psychic being that often looks in on other races for entertainment using a form of telepathic projection. A Psi Corps scientist discovered the high P-rating 'mind waves' coming from the forbidden planet. Using connections with other circles, the Corps has roped the player characters in with an undercover Bloodhound unit to find the source of the powerful psi-signal. Whether or not the player characters are for protection, their skills or as an expendable mundane resource is up to the Games Master—and their affiliation according to the Corps.

5 When word began to spread that the Traveller was no longer watching over Sigma 957, several Narn explorers headed immediately to the newly available territory. Some were harmlessly exploring or searching for treasure, while others had less benign ideas for conquest and piracy. The player characters are contacted by a planetary exploration group that are suffering greatly at the hands of some of these roughneck Narn, and are asked to come and dissuade them from further altercations with the science teams. Such a valiant act—if they perform it—might get the attention of others in the area. Possibly even a lonely soul looking for someone good-hearted to talk to, like the Caretaker.

The Timbari Anomaly

Location: Marigol (Third Planet), Marigol Centauri Protected System
Created By: Mindriders
DC to Research: Six checks at DC 16, Four checks for Centauri Telepaths

The freshwater planet of Marigol lies on the rimward edge of the Centauri Republic near the edge of the galaxy, primarily used as a naval transfer point and a source of drinkable water for the numerous planets that have little or none. From very early on the Centauri learned of a sizeable section of the planet where no living creature goes without duress. They called this place the Timbari Anomaly after the naval captain that bravely sailed a vessel through the area unharmed or unhindered. The Centauri have done little research in the area save for a few rogue theorists, and there are no natives to Marigol that can be questioned. (See *Centauri Republic Fact Book* page 122 for more details)

The Anomaly is actually a hiding place used by the Mindriders to store their original bodies of flesh in stasis in case they ever needed to go back to them. A massive cluster of spike-shaped tubes at the ocean floor—several thousand feet from the surface—contain over two hundred empty husks. Within each of the cylindrical sarcophagi is a single Mindrider husk, equipment to reinsert the psyche to it and all of its necessary items of survival.

Mindrider bodies were lanky and thin, topped by sloping heads containing several brain stems working in unison. They were once the colour of charcoal but eons of stasis under millions of gallons of water have lightened to the shade of paper ash. They had weak physical frames that required their focused telekinesis for heavy labour or feats of strength. In their current state they would die from exposure in minutes if the sarcophagi were opened without the proper instruction.

Those instructions left this galaxy with the Mindriders, and the Anomaly remains filled with this Ancient tomb. Undersea currents have caused several of the stasis chambers to fill with water, crushing and washing away the priceless artefacts inside. The remains are torn apart by ocean tides well before they ever reach the surface, so no satellites or craft have had reason to explore its depths—even if they could overcome the Mindriders' telepathic defences.

The reason why all life—including most sentient life that travels near its borders—avoids the Timbari Anomaly is due to the enormous coral reefs that the Mindriders grew specifically in and around their burial ground. These coral are the equivalent to hundreds of thousands of telepaths working in unison to keep anything with a thought pattern out of the area. These 'mind polyps' emit a constant pulse of telepathic warnings that set off the most basic of flight instincts.

In game terms the mind polyps force any living being to pass a DC 25 Will save every ten minutes or flee outside of the polyp colony's range (which is roughly 1,000 miles in diameter). Telepathic characters are more resistant to this psychic barrage and may add their P-rating to the Will saves. Also, anyone with the Mindrider Descendant feat (found in the Feats and Skills section of this book) may add double their character level to the saves as well. Captain Fronnor Timbari was one of these rare few, which was why he was able to cross the Anomaly unhindered.

Another odd fact about Marigol is the abundance of hal-vek sharks throughout the planet—another of the Mindriders' natural defence mechanisms. The hal-vek is a twenty to thirty foot long predator with rows of hooked teeth, a very high intelligence and low-level telepathic abilities to home in on the thought patterns of potential prey. The Mindriders created them to scour the planet of telepaths, whom they knew might be able to overcome the mind polyps. The hal-vek have become the primary predator on the planet, and while they hunt down any telepaths that touch their cold, blue world they make no qualms about attacking anything else edible in the depths.

Hal-Vek (mindshark)

The mindsharks of Marigol are true terrors of the deep. They slide effortlessly through the cold blue freshwater oceans of their home planet in search of their favourite prey—telepaths. Ever since the Centauri have come to the world to use it for its obvious resources, the hal-vek have had ample prey. Some say that the huge schools forming within a few miles of the Fendo Transfer Point have actually learned to get a taste for the noble blood of the Centauri!

Their long slender bodies are slate grey, with their fins tipped often in brown or a golden colour. Their eyes are unlike an Earth shark's, slitted like a reptile instead of jet black. They are heavily muscled and their jaws distend disproportionately when attacking. They bear live young deep in colder waters, protecting entire schools of young while the older adults hunt and bring back prey—occasionally even living—for the growing young to learn how to kill upon.

Large- or Huge-size Aquatic Animal
Character Level: 12 (60 hp)
Initiative: +8 (+4 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: Swim 80 ft.
DV: 16
Attacks: Bite +12/+7/+2 melee
Damage: Bite 3d8+4
Special Qualities: P-Rating 3, Telepathic Hunter
Saves: Fort +11, Ref +8, Will +4
Abilities: Str 18, Dex 18, Con 20, Int 14, Wis 5, Cha 3
Skills: Jump +5 (for leaping out of water only), Listen +10, Spot +8
Feats: Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (bite), Weapon Specialisation (bite)

Telepathic Hunter: The Hal-Vek may add a target's P-Rating, if any, to the following rolls: Spot and Listen skill checks, any saves required while within 100 ft. of the target and to-hit and damage rolls.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

A zookeeper on Centauri Prime wants a rare specimen for his new aquarium segment of his zoo exhibits. He has had his eye on the 'killer sharks' of Marigol for a long time now, but only recently received key information on how to lure them—the proper bait. The zookeeper has enlisted several unknowing telepaths, possibly even one of the player characters, to do some 'telepathic scanning' nearby the Fendo Transfer Point to search for survivors from a supposed sunken vessel.

A freak chemical accident spilled hundred of thousands of gallons of fuel oils into the oceans of Marigol, poisoning them in a way they have never seen before. The spill has caused the mind polyps protecting the Mindrider sarcophagi to withdraw and stop emitting their frightening aura. Environmental clean up teams have noticed the Timbari Anomaly has recently begun swarming with activity, and reported sightings of strange objects floating to the surface—objects that must be thousands of years old. The area is dangerous and deadly, so it comes as no surprise the Centauri look to outside freelancers, like the player characters, to reclaim the artefacts.

Great Mistake of the Hunters

Location: Ralga, Gigmos System
Created By: Mindriders
DC to Research: Five checks at DC 20, One check at DC 18 for Soul Hunters

The paradise planet of Ralga, the fifth planet of the Gigmos System, was once home to the descendants of the Mindriders. Like their ancestors they too dreamed of one day walking amongst the stars as beings of energy or thought, and focused much of their research into the discovery of the Great Birth. After hundreds of years of research they succeeded, and began the preparations for their entire species—billions of minds—to join the Mindriders in the cosmos. The Ralgans initiated the early treatments to their bodies, essentially slowly killing the flesh so the mind could evolve.

The transformation sent out the metaphysical signals about their bodies' demise, which alerted the infamous Soul Hunters (see *The Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book* pages 176-180 for more on Soul Hunters). The Soul Hunters were concerned that the Ralgans' highly advanced culture was dying in some sort of mass genocide—a fact that the very nature of the Soul Hunters was designed to circumvent. So they came to Ralga, hundreds of their ships, and sought to preserve the souls of the Ralgans.

Very few races in any era enjoy the presence of Soul Hunters so it came to no surprise to them when the Ralgans resisted their claiming. The dying bodies were calling out to the Soul Hunters, and they were blind to whatever excuses the Ralgans gave to avoid them. The truthful nature of their near transcendence was not enough for them, and they were forcibly claimed. The Soul Hunters left with a billion souls that were not ready to die—in fact, they were the farthest from it. These souls laid dormant for tens of thousands of years until an IPX exploration uncovered them in 2263 and brought them to Babylon 5. More information concerning these souls and the Soul Hunters' involvement with them can be seen in the Babylon 5 movie, *River of Souls*.

Ralga itself slowly eroded away under its own unchecked wilderness, creating at first a thick jungle that in turn eventually outgrew itself to become a desolate wasteland of broken ruins. In the Third Age the planet is little more than a desert of basalt sand and whipping winds. There are still several small ruins that have nearly survived the ages, but are still just a few standing walls and rubble. Nothing of worth remains of the Ralgan civilisation but dust and faded memories.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

If the player characters were on board Babylon 5 during either of the Soul Hunter visits (see above) may be interested in the source of the Soul Hunters' great power. It is unknown where the Soul Hunters are from or where they lurk, but some very strong information could lead the player characters to the site of their Great Mistake—something that they are very ashamed of. So ashamed, some think, that they might have trapped or seeded Ralga with several deterrents or worse. If the player characters get to Ralga, who knows what the Soul Hunters may have left for them, on purpose or by accident.

IPX has sent dozens of explorers to Ralga to no avail, but recently one of their probes picked up an energy spike coming from the surface of the planet. Further scans verify that a small craft of some great power landed upon the surface and has remained their for several days. While officially they know very little as to what might be there, they think it may have been one of the mysterious Soul Hunters themselves checking on old projects or similar reasons. IPX would pay anyone a small ransom for their technology, and would gladly pay criminals, raiders or the player characters to get it—whatever the means necessary.

Shipyards of Mitoc

Location: Mitoc 2, 3 and 5, Mitoc System
Created By: Kirishiac Lords
DC to Research: One check at DC 14

The Mitoc system is a chain of rock worlds and asteroid belts surrounding a stable black hole where a large red star once was. None of the planetoids or any of their moons have ever truly been able to sustain life, and are comprised of vast amounts of minerals and ore too dense or resistant to be used by common races. During the days of the Ancients, Mitoc was used only for building the warships used by the Kirishiac Lords—as their warships were composed of rocklike orbs and ore-heavy hulls. Mitoc was perfect for their needs. It was an empty and unclaimed system filled with raw materials nearby their homeworld with a dangerously unstable star (which later collapsed into a black hole).

The Kirishiac Lords seeded the entire system with massive shipyards built to rip the planets themselves apart for their base materials, assemble the components they need and drop the newly crafted ships into hyperspace for later retrieval. During their use of the system-wide shipyard they had built, the Kirishiacs totally demolished four of the original seven planets. By the time the war had ended they had built the crystalline rings of the shipyards around the last three planets, but never activated the powerful devices.

The 'shipyards' remain around these lifeless rocks, a reminder of how powerful even the last of the First Ones were in their time. The rings are nearly a mile wide each, and circle the planets completely. They are made of a crystal similar to rainbow quartz in appearance, but as strong as any metal forged by younger races. Inside each ring is an elaborate and meticulous array of gravitic pulsars and gravity bolters used to cut huge chunks out of the planet it encircles. Secondary systems within the rings begin the assembly of the ships as instructed by the Lords' on hand crewmen—who have been absent for thousands of years.

For many centuries the Mitoc shipyards have been a seldom-travelled sector of space used by pirates and raiders for cover from all sorts of authorities, using the sensor interference from the black hole and the gravitic drives within the shipyard rings to their advantage. Several of the League governments take sizeable bribes from the pirates that thrive in the Mitoc system, unknowing that combined they would easily be able to route the shoddy forces themselves.

The shipyards are self-powered and mostly automated, but would require a massive gravitic boost to start the planet stripping/shipbuilding processes. Several of the pirate bases would be torn apart along with the planets they hide upon if this were to happen—a fact that might give them pause from experimenting new weaponry as close to the rings as they have been in later years.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

Azarra Chaklan, one of the pirate commanders controlling the Mitoc system's illegal inhabitants, has recently purchased an array of powerful gravitic weaponry from the Brakiri black market. Someone privy to the transaction is a learned scholar of the past and has reason to believe that the Ancient rings around the Mitoc worlds will chain react like some form of doomsday device when Chaklan begins using the weaponry. This subordinate contacts the player characters—the only people he thinks he can trust outside the pirate communities—and gets them involved in stopping the weapons from being used one way or another.

The League of Non-Aligned Worlds is collectively tired of paying bribes to the Mitoc pirates, and has been looking for a fast and easy way to eliminate them without dirtying their hands, hopefully without costing them too many credits in the process. Researchers have explained what would happen to the pirate bases if the Ancient shipyards were activated. Their weapon technicians have designed a massive 'gravity well generator' that should give off enough energy to start the rings' inner mechanisms. They want an expendable but reliable delivery team—the player characters—to bring this anonymous package to a specific point in the system before the League detonates it from hyperspace. Whether or not the player characters are aware of what they are doing is up to the Games Master, but the League rarely leaves loose ends as large as this lying around.

Krish (formerly Kirish)

Location: Krish Prime, Krish System
Created By: Kirishiac Lords
DC to Research: Three checks at DC 15

Once the homeworld of the Kirishiac Lords, Kirish was a planet of unbelievable gravity and an atmosphere thick as any ocean elsewhere in the galaxy. It was the birthplace of the powerful creatures known as the Kirishiac, who rose up into the stars against their oppressive gravity to wage an impossible war against the other First Ones—a war that shook the very core of the galaxy.

During the war the Kirishiac Lords fortified their homeworld against the other Ancients. Huge bunkers and shielded starports protected the thousands of Lords and their countless servants from the possibility of counterattack. Planetary cannons aimed enormous hypergraviton beams toward the sky, awaiting them to darken with the ships of enemies. The Kirishiac and their servitors were ready to defend their planet against conventional attacks.

Except the greatest attack against Kirish was not a conventional one—it was a godlike gesture performed by godlike beings. The Walkers came in several of their titanic Traveller ships and took away their moon, and the only counterbalance to Kirish's awkwardly powerful gravitational field. The result was a massive upheaval of the balance of the world itself.

Earthquakes splintered the ground like cracking glass, swallowing entire cities into the deepening abyss. Volcanoes shot up into the stratosphere and covered the ground with bubbling magma. The liquid-thick atmosphere boiled into a hostile thing—forcing the Kirishiac to their ships and their servitors underground for safety. The moon was replaced after a fashion, but the damage was done nonetheless. So much of the gravity of Kirish was stolen by cataclysm. The planet Kirish was little more than a wasteland. Even so, life remained.

The strongest of the servitor races, the Kirisz, carved a life out of the failing planet even after their Lords had gone. They treated the surface of the planet like a forbidden place, using their higher technologies and the technologies the Lords left behind they created a world within the shell of Kirish. Kirish faded away as an afterthought through the ages and became the often-overlooked planet called Krish.

The 'underplanet' the Kirisz created inside of Krish is a stone and crystalline megalopolis that rivals the cities on Minbar in beauty and size. They had a working knowledge of gravitic systems under the rule of the Kirishiac and it turned to mastery over the hundreds of generations. Massive equalisers keep the gravity constant and heavy where they live and work, but lightened where liquid must flow freely. It had become a paradise for the Kirisz, and a dangerous legend to outsiders.

Krish is watched closely by the neighbouring League worlds, myths and fables about what once strode that broken place keep them wary. The few landings that have taken place have almost always ended in disaster, with survivors speaking of stone-skinned men with the sciences of the First Ones at their fingertips. All stories involving these beings are mythic in nature, and no documented evidence of their existence exists in League records. Races that served other First Ones directly—the Minbari or Drakh for instance—know of the Kirisz and would like to extend a hand to them, but are all too often mistaken for interlopers by the reclusive beings. For more on these beings, the Kirisz, see the section on them further in this book.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

A routine deep scan performed by a passing IPX explorer ship happened upon a large vent in the surface of Krish. The vent led down into the unknown underworld of the planet—directly into a surviving ruin of the Kirishiac Lords. IPX will award any who can bring back even the smallest scrap of their technologies from the planet. The corporation is prepared to throw life after life for this endeavour, even the lives of hired help like the player characters. IPX have sent several armed landings down and 'secured the area', but are not aware of the real dangers that lie near the ruins, where the Kirisz watch for thieves and grave robbers.

Very few sightings of the fabled Kirisz have ever been truly documented, and proof would stir a great trembling in scientific and political circles throughout the known galaxy. That is why the only man to ever survive a Kirisz attack has taken every precaution to stay hidden from such circles. This explorer might need to contact someone close to the player characters, or the characters themselves, who might be able to protect him until he can reach whichever government or corporation offers him the most. The player characters will find themselves in a strange spot, caught between ideals and credits—or maybe even their morals as well.

The Kokkaran Palaces

Location: Kokkar Alpha, Kokkar System
Created By: House-in-Exile Sorrati (Centauri)
DC to Research: Two checks at DC 14, Five checks at DC 16 to uncover hoax

A small planet outside of the Centauri Republic, Kokkar is a temperate planet covered by brine oceans and thick forests dotted with even thicker swamplands. It is home to over a thousand species of rare birds—the Kokkaran Moonhawk, Orchella and Ravenette are just examples—tourists from all over the galaxy frequents the area just to see. The weather is constant and varies from pleasurable to downright perfect. The planet has over a dozen open landing ports and dozens of reasons to visit the veritable paradise. At least, that is the way it was before 2246.

In 2245 there was a massive plot against Emperor Turhan that spiralled out of the conspirators' control, ending in disaster. While many nobles felt the sting of accusations and implications the lion's share of the blame fell upon the lesser House Sorrati—a House filled mostly with con men and gamblers. The Sorrati fell completely out of favour with every other house in the Centaurum, and found themselves fighting for scraps with far less influential families. In response they chose exile over public dishonour.

House Sorrati liquidated most of their resources, purchased several starships and headed out into neutral space to find a new home. By a matter of coincidence the Sorrati came upon the paradise of Kokkar. Several other governments had once tried to settle on the utopian planet but the Centaurum would always manage to steer them politically or through treachery—something that the Sorrati were well aware of. The house's patriarch, Diro Sorrati, chose to settle on Kokkar regardless of outside influence. He had a plan.

Diro was brought up in the academies to actually be a historian before his interests steered to games of chance and he knew very well the fear and reverence the galaxy had for the First Ones. He and his house stripped the hulls from their ships and constructed a series of deep swamp and forest bases from the cast off parts—using his adolescent knowledge of ancient history to make them look as alien and Ancient as possible. The result was a scattered pattern of 'ruins' that baffled the minds of scholars that 'discovered' them in 2250.

The Sorrati constructed a network of tunnels and hideaways that have allowed them to primarily go unseen while they stage elaborate—and sometimes dangerous—shows for all those who explore their well-crafted hoax. These shows are often as simple as using old engine coils to heat up a room or enclosure to dangerously high temperatures in seconds, but one of the Sorrati favourites is jamming all outside communications at night while a subsonic wave just barely enough to feel across skin is emitted all around. These distractions are primarily used to keep explorers out of areas that the Sorrati themselves frequent, but occasionally someone so determined comes along to ignore the warnings and look further.

In the early 2260s, after all of the Ancients left, First One scholars began to become more brazen about their studies and their research—something that has made the Sorrati nervous about their twenty-year ruse. When these steely explorers started to delve deeper into the Kokkaran Palaces the Sorrati called upon a very old talent that their time in the Centauri Republic had honed to a fine edge—murder. Sorrati assassins in the house's prime were stealthy, efficient and knew how to make any murder look like an accident. Once exiled their role took on a much darker role—to leave bodies for explorers to find that have been mutilated by unknown Ancient protectors of Kokkar.

Their victims are often flayed and lashed to posts as a warning. Strange runes—that are gibberish and meaningless—are burned with a laser scalpel into the flesh and bone for scientists to ponder over for years trying to find a pattern of language. Sometimes the assassins will remove the hands, feet and head of a target and cremate them elsewhere, making those who find it wonder why such bloody surgery was called for.

The Sorrati will go to great lengths to stay hidden in their jungle paradise. They will—and often—kill, steal and terrorise to keep their privacy as is. They use the services of smugglers and poachers to gain access to goods and resources, but always use assumed names of other houses to keep up the mystique of their own. When dealing with those ignorant of the Centauri inner politics they remain secretive and hidden—no one can be trusted considering they have fooled every government for over twenty years.

The following is an addition to the list of Noble Houses seen in *The Centauri Republic Fact Book* starting on page 63.

House Sorrati (pre 2245)

House Patriarch: Diro Sorrati (Status 89, Social Debt (-12))
House Symbol: A pair of Coutari on either side of a blood-dripping Ducat
Notable Assets: Gambling houses, sporting events, hunting and safari, assassination
House Alliances: Refa, Varga (strained)
House Enemies: Lurshan
True Alliance: None
True Enemy: None

House Sorrati was a hub of the many vices the Centauri noble houses revolve around. Gambling, women, illicit substances and high profile poaching were all their major sources of known income for centuries. Every other house had at one time thrown a 'Sorrati party', and every noble has been a patron of one. All Centauri are known for their love of excess, and the Sorrati personify that flaw better than anyone else in the Republic. They are not fools however, and use the drink-loosened lips of their patrons to goad many nobles into hiring their less known services against their enemies—as assassins. Their 'Bloodcrests' are some of the most skilled and infamous murderers in the Centauri Republic. When a noble wanted another noble dead, didn't want to be subtle and wanted to make a bloody example out of them they hired a Sorrati Bloodcrest to do the deed. There was a time when the whole Republic would pay respects to the Sorrati just to keep them low on their lists of potential targets. In fact it was one of these bloody assassination attempts on Emperor Turhan conspired by several other allied houses that caused the fall of the Sorrati.

House Sorrati (post Exile in 2245)

House Patriarch: Diro Sorrati (No status, presumed dead by Centauri Republic)
House Symbol: A pair of Coutari on either side of a blood-dripping Ducat in front of an image of Kokkar Alpha
Notable Assets: Illegal animal trade, mineral and resource smuggling, off-world fencing
House Alliances: Kodiro (in secret)
House Enemies: Hessius*
True Alliance: None
True Enemy: Hessius*

* House Hessius still retains a great number of alien and First One research explorers that have come very close to finding out the truth about Kokkar. Every Sorrati are expected to thwart the efforts of any Hessius to keep the secret safe.

After their banishment, House Sorrati became little more than the largest ring of conmen and criminals in the Centauri bloodlines. The Bloodcrests keep the House-in-Exile safe from outsiders, occasionally taking missions away from Kokkar when rumour surfaces about the planet's true nature and the Sorrati hoax. Few members of the house openly use their surname any longer, choosing instead to mar the name of their former peers when smuggling or worse. Among the powerful houses in the Republic only Kodiro still keeps official ties secretly with the Sorrati. The Sorrati help the Kodiro with particularly nasty politicians or obtaining certain illegal goods, while they in turn keep the Sorrati up to date with current events within the Centaurum and supply enough credits to continue their shadowy trades. Diro Sorrati plans to eventually seed the Centaurum with agents of his so he may eventually countermand his house's banishment and come back to the Republic with a whole new planetary system to add to the Empire—a feat sure to put his family name back on every noble's lips across the whole galaxy!

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

5 A smuggler that the player characters have met comes to them with a sweet offer to make some quick credits. All they have to do is take his ship to the paradise of Kokkar, pick up some goods from his contact and come back to Babylon 5 where he is laid up in sick bay—the reason he is handing the mission off at all. He will offer the player characters a decent salary and a percentage, and should offer more if they promise not to ask too many questions. The only problem is that the smuggler had angered the Sorrati on his last run and now he and his crew—the player characters on this trip—have been marked for examples by the Bloodcrests. If the player characters decide to do a little sight seeing on the paradise planet they could be in a great amount of danger.

5 A rich noble Centauri wants to send the player characters to Kokkar to hunt and trap some rare species of birds for his private aviary on Centauri Prime. He arranges for a guide and even a landing craft to take the player characters deep into the forested areas of the wild planet. There is only one complication—the noble is a well-known researcher from House Hessius who is really looking for First Ones on the planet and is using the player characters as disposable scouts or bodyguards.

The Mindscape Ruin of Regula 3

Location: Regula 3, Regula System
Created By: Alexander De'Fay, Society for Private Thoughts
DC to Research: Three checks at DC 15, Two checks if Psi Corps, Five checks at DC 14 to uncover hoax

The Regula System is a small piece of space that once belonged to the Centauri; the Earth Alliance now controls it—even if the Centauri ever neglected to make it official. Regula 4 has a low-technology Earth colony upon it and swore off its use. It makes sense then, that Alexander De'Fay chose the system for his 'project.'

Alexander De'Fay was a powerful Martian businessman who lost his wife early in their marriage to a nasty form of bone cancer. He had a single son named Douglas who planned on taking over the business when his father passed it on to him. Until the day the Psi Corps tested Douglas positive for telepathic ability and requested he join the Corps. Douglas did not want to leave his 'mundane' life, so he chose the chemical suppressants the Corp prescribed for him to avoid enlisting. These drugs are normally quite safe for the user—but not so for the De'Fay family. It seemed that the De'Fays carry a rare gene that causes the drug to be painfully toxic, irreversible and eventually fatal. It is a slow and agonizing death—one that the Corps refused to acknowledge when Alexander went to them for help. It had gotten so bad that Alexander personally helped his son along into the next world. Alexander was crushed to have to bury his own son because of the Corps.

It was at that moment that he knew that Psi Corps—maybe all telepaths—were a danger to people like him and his son. He knew he had to stop them some how. So he began his private circle of likeminded individuals, a group he calls the Society for Private Thoughts (SPT). The SPT was composed mostly of middle-aged industrialists and corporate executives tired of being snooped in or checked on by commercial telepaths. They had a great deal of clout between them, and when Alexander came forward with his grand scheme—they all wholeheartedly agreed to enact it.

The Regula System had only a single low-tech colony on its fourth world, and no other real presence anywhere within its area. The colonists on Regula 4 would not have access to long range scanners or communication equipment, so the SPT would be able to work generally in private. They chose a small crater-pocked planetoid heavy with metal contents in its crust—Regula 3. The SPT began to construct a very elaborate and complex building around one of the most powerful supercomputers known to humankind at that time. The building would be a mix of odd metals and strange designs to throw off the casual onlooker and would house a variety of slightly modified virtual reality modules found in many of Earthforce's training centres.

Using stolen or purchased information from the Psi Corps itself, the SPT built a gigantic 'mindscape' generator for the virtual reality modules to hook up to. These mindscapes are used by Psi Corps to train newer telepaths in group contact procedures by placing their minds in evolving scenarios pumped directly into them through the generators. Alexander's dream was to build a sort of bait that would draw countless telepaths to the planetoid—where he would exact his revenge for what he considers the murder of his son.

They are brought to Regula 3 by a series of extremely well paid informants who leaked the building's existence to the Corps 'by accident.' It is difficult to reach by anything larger than a fighter, so most explorers must come alone or in pairs. The whole building is a series of mazelike hallways and dead-end doors that lead to even more strangeness. It has an internal air supply and circulation system that is mixed liberally with the drug Dust, which enhances telepathic ability. While the 'Dusted' telepaths wander through the halls in search of rumoured treasures and Ancient technologies, they will stumble upon eccentric and organic-looking (a fake addition to the machine, but effective in making the building strange and alien in origin) virtual modules and be drawn to use them.

The modules pump nightmare images into their minds filled with dread and loneliness while tiny microscopic injectors fill the telepath's capillaries with a powerful stimulant—making the telepath frantic and jumpy to the point of self-injury. The modules also trigger changes in the maze of hallways, making it almost entirely impossible to escape the building once a telepath has triggered the mindscape. The deeper they go into the building, the deeper the nightmares and the greater the stimulant. Eventually the telepath will overdose or go insane, or both.

Unknown to the SPT is that the Psi Corps has become so interested in the Mindrider's Great Birth, and that a wing within their affiliation has their eyes on the so-called 'Mindscape Ruin' on Regula 3. The SPT, while powerful and influential to some degree, should still worry that the Corps will discover their plot and take revenge upon them. Some members of the Society feel they have gone too far, while others wished they could have done this long ago.

Scenarios and Campaign Hooks

5 The Society for Protected Thoughts needs some hired help to spread the rumours about the Mindscape Ruin, and feel that the player characters are perfect for the job. To make it as real as possible the SPT has decided not to inform them at all of their involvement with each other. Instead they use a chain of gossipers and information brokers up and down brown sector to convey the rumours. One such broker also reaches the ears of a Psi Corps undercover agent, who attaches the information to the player characters for investigation.

5 The Centauri have heard about this special telepathic facility supposedly built by the Ancients on their former holdings of Regula 3. They do not want to tip their hand concerning the information by contacting Earth Alliance, nor do they wish to send starships into foreign space without knowing if it is necessary. Instead one of their prestigious Mindhawks will contract the player characters' help in going there to research it. When they get him inside they will soon feel the effects of the Dust in the air, and become susceptible to the modules as well—unless of course they smell a trap and leave the Mindhawk to his long and agonizing doom.

KEEPERS OF THE PAST—THE KIRISZ

'Now we await the passage of years. We are very patient.'
—Unknown Drakh

CHILDREN OF THE KIRISHIAC LORDS

The most loyal of the Kirishiac Lords' servant races, the Kirisz (pronounced *Keer-**eez,*** both singular and plural) were their greatest legacy they left behind when they fled the galaxy—even if the Kirishiac thought them doomed. When the Walkers caused the massive catastrophe on Kirish and the Lords had surrendered, leaving never to return to their cracked and broken planet, they assumed the Kirisz would perish without them. They were wrong it seemed, as the servitors had been taught well and fought hard to survive in the failing planet. They fought hard and beat the odds, becoming the inheritors of an age wrought on their own backs.

Kirish—now named Krish by younger races—was inhospitable above the crust, and even below it took all of the Kirisz's extended knowledge of gravitic fields to shape an ecosphere they could survive within. Shielding protected them from the radiation tearing through their fluctuating atmosphere and the constant pressurised volcanic venting. Crystal matrices grew into entire cities protected by their own inner graviton pulses, with only a few dozen Kirisz needed to upkeep their maintenance. Over the centuries, as Krish's ecosystem began to stabilise, the Kirisz created a massive underplanet they could live and grow within.

The following is a great deal of information regarding the Kirisz—inside and out. They are a powerful race that once served a race of power hungry First Ones hand in hand, and while they may not share their former masters' hunger they are a force to be reckoned with.

Games Masters take note, the Kirisz are a very powerful species to use as a player character. They are reclusive and very rare away from Krish, only sometimes venturing out into the stars to look for their long lost masters. These Kirisz pilgrims know the reputation the Kirishiac Lords had with the other First Ones, and would like not to make the same name for themselves with the younger races. Primarily the only races in the galaxy that know exactly what the Kirisz are, where to find them and why are those other races that have had dealings with First Ones directly in the past.

The Minbari believe the Kirisz could be a great asset in the wars against darkness, and after them—the re-building of the galaxy torn asunder by the wars. They have records of the Kirishiac War given to them in fragments by the Vorlons and would like nothing else than to make sure the Kirisz do not follow in their masters' galactic footsteps. The Drakh however, only remember the efficient Kirisz shock troopers coming to Z'ha'dum in the wake of their Lords—and would enjoy seeing them turned against their new enemies, the Interstellar Alliance.

Kirisz characters are likely non-player characters, but players may wish to experiment with the powerful beings. If so, they are most likely one of these Kirisz pilgrims looking for signs of their Lords' passing—or are being lured out of hiding by dark and sinister foes they are probably unaware of. Even being so powerful they are easily manipulated and controlled, possibly a leftover genetic code in them from the days of the Kirishiac.

Kirisz Anatomy

Taken from the medical notations of famed Minbari Doctor Hylenn Modroma, Worker Caste

The subject was discovered on an uninhabited planet near a crashed spacecraft. It was the only organic matter our recovery team was able to salvage from the crash site, as all other occupants were atomised when the fuel cells ruptured on re-entry. The craft itself was ruptured during the crash and it is a shock that anything is left of the subject at all.

The subject is 2.43 metres tall, weighing 210 kilograms. At first inspection the being seems mineral in nature rather than animal, as it is covered in a faceted exoskeleton the texture and colour of volcanic onyx or smooth basalt. The subject is humanoid and long limbed, with each arm ending in a four-fingered hand or foot. Its head is angular and thin, similar to a streamlined helmet or mask that has no discernable facial features save for a thin ocular ring surrounding the head. From texts preserved in the Age of Valen we know this creature may be one of the fabled Kirisz, roughly translated from the old tongue as 'Keepers of the Past.' If this is not so I cannot say, but I feel confident that I may have one of these Ancient beings on my examination table.

Until further autopsy and dissection can be undertaken, initial observations show that the being is young by pollen dating but yet is more resilient to our surgical tools than most metals used in the Warrior Caste's armour. We have several technicians looking for a safe way to further the dissection, with the primary tool thus far being a subsonic sculpting tool the architects use in shaping the crystal spires in our buildings. Even so, this will be a long arduous process—but one my heart sings in undertaking.

Kirisz Outer Biology—Exoskeleton and Sensory Organs

The Kirisz are covered seamlessly in a thick smoke-coloured exoskeleton. It is smooth and has several facets upon its surface, similar to a crystal or gemstone, possibly to give it more resilience to atmospheric pressure or intense gravity. The material it is comprised of is difficult to describe on a chemical level, as it bears properties of both inorganic elements such as silicon and those found in common keratin structures such as horns or fingernails. It is incredibly resistant to any sort of energy based cutting tool, and would not crack under several standard levels of focused gravity.

When I was finally able to remove a sizeable sample with great difficulty I tested it against many types of stimuli and found it to be of a better material than the vacuum suits used by the breaching marines of many galactic governments. It bore many layers similar to the rings inside of a grown tree, meaning that it does not shed its exoskeleton as it grows. Instead it excretes or produces new layers under the old ones to fight erosion or damage to outer layers. Upon a cellular inspection the material is interwoven with chains of electrically sensitive fibres that—when I sent a low current bioelectric charge through them—allowed the exoskeleton material to become as pliable as cloth on an atomic level. I conclude that these fibres are sent constant charges from the Kirisz nervous system to allow the exoskeleton to bend and move like the flesh of mammals rather than needing jointed segments like an arthropod. This design allows for no foreseeable weak points in the outer layer, and would suggest surprising strength and endurance.

The surface of the exoskeleton seems glasslike and smooth to the naked eye, but closer inspection reveals millions of tiny raised nubs. The great concentration of these miniscule bumps on the palms and bottoms of the feet could mean they have some role in traction or tactile friction. Each nub has an electric fibre running to it from the closest nerve cluster, having a near constant charge. This makes the surface of their hands and feet pliable and formable around the most difficult objects with ease.

There seems to be no orifices for the intake of oxygen or nutrients anywhere on the Kirisz, only the 'ocular ring' situation around the creature's head like a hollow circlet. It is three centimetres deep and six centimetres tall, ringing the Kirisz's head roughly where a Minbari or human's cheekbones would be on their head. Millions of bioelectric sensors and reactive fibres intertwine with the exoskeleton itself under this ring, and must serve as a multi-purpose sensory organ.

The exoskeleton seems to have a cellular structure focused primarily on providing protection and stability in adverse conditions, while still allowing vital chemicals and energy into the body via several molecular vents and intakes too small for any but the strongest microscopes to see. The outer layer of a Kirisz is a fortress of biological sciences and we would be hard pressed to simulate half of what grows naturally for this being.

Kirisz Internal StructureóFluids, Organelles and Nervous Web

Once I removed the frustrating and nearly impenetrable exoskeleton I was amazed at how alien this being truly was. It has multiple tubular systems wound throughout the body cavity—which actually extends like the marrow of a mammal's bone structure throughout the Kirisz's body and limbs. The exoskeleton is truly a shell around a flexible mass of metallic fluids, transport organelles, structure reinforcing pillars and a powerful nervous web attached to the being's massive cerebral core.

The 'blood' is actually a green metallic compound that occupies all the areas within the Kirisz like a viscous cushion of nutrients and chemical stimulants. It has no true circulatory system, the fluid serving as a chemical transference system while only moving on a bioelectrical level. Inside of this specimen I have found no fewer than a dozen pooling points of the fluid around nerve nodes, where the creature unconsciously controls its organs' functions no doubt.

When my assistant applied a cardio-electric pulse to the fluid several of the organelles began to function once more for a few brief—and exhilarating—moments. I suspect that like we carry our messages from out brains to our organs with our nervous systems, this fluid serves as a similar purpose on a different scale.

Kirisz 'Blood'

The green metallic fluid is a compound unknown to our sciences, and has no equivalent I can find in any of our allied records. It has an extremely high copper content, a reason why the Kirisz rely so heavily on bio-electric reactions throughout their bodies. Similar to the Earth octopus, whose blood is copper-based as well, it can fire nervous commands through the medium exponentially faster than iron-based circulatory systems.

This blood does not circulate; instead it remains as a cushion between organelles, the exoskeleton and outside harm. It dries very quickly into a durable patch when left in open air, filling any wounds a Kirisz might suffer that would penetrate their outer layer. It is rife with the building blocks we found in the exoskeleton itself, and I do not doubt that the hardened fluid is the basis of its repair.

The most striking part of the fluid is the massive amounts of plant-like photo synthesisers used to create nutrients for the body using solar energy—it seems these fabulous creatures might have been primarily solar powered! The tiny vents in the exoskeleton would allow miniscule amounts of solar energy into the Kirisz, where the cells within the fluid would transform it into raw nutrients to be passed around inside the body. I tested the photosensitivity of the

fluid, but without commands from the various attached organelles and nerve hubs it did little but speed up the hardening process.

This discovery of the fluid's photosensitivity did allow us to explore the cavity a bit more thoroughly. In darkness (which we could work in with our lighted masks) the Kirisz was much easier to work in and around, as the blood actually seemed to make things more pliable and not as resistant to everything we did. I wonder if this would be true were the Kirisz alive, or if it is just a post-mortem oddity?

Kirisz Organelles
Nearly every thirty or forty centimetres within the Kirisz's body cavity is a cluster of multi-purpose organelles we were able to extract and dissect with little difficulty. Each cluster has an array of chemical processing and producing glands, several regulatory sensors and a single powerful bioelectric generator. It is quite similar to the ones found in the Earth electric eel or the Centauri Jekt hunter, but offers a much greater yield—saturated with the metallic cells of the Kirisz fluid. My assistant went so far as to activate the gland and nearly knocked the air from his own lungs by the resulting charge.

It seems that the organelles are actually rather basic in their role—the breaking down and restructuring of chemical compounds created by the photosynthesis in the blood, then sending it to the portion of the body most in need of it at the moment. This chemical cargo is ferried along powerful bioelectric currents in the blood. The organelle clusters could also command the higher functions coming down from the cerebral core, but is hard to tell without a living specimen to study.

Each organelle cluster also has a single layer of crystalline material (exactly the same as the outer exoskeleton) wrapping around it in a honeycomb of armour, protecting it from injury. Unlike the exoskeleton this layer does not have any marks of regenerative growth or aging, which probably means that the inner layers are formed only once at their current size.

Several special organelles are tightly interwoven in the centre of the sensory ring, directly above the cerebral core. These organelles are a complex array of bio-luminescent decryption devices that take in the stream of complex input from the ring itself—light, dark, ultraviolet, electromagnetic fields and even the ebbs and tides of gravitic shadows made the organelles pulse slightly. It is unimaginable exactly how the Kirisz 'see', but I suspect they are far more aware of their surroundings than the best of our scouts in their most familiar territories.

> In my studies I have yet to find any organs or organelles related to speech, auditory reception, gender, respiration or reproduction. More studies would need to be undertaken to be sure, but I am perplexed to say the least.

Kirisz Nervous System(s)
I believe the central most important structures found within the Kirisz are the highly advanced nervous systems woven throughout the being's body, cavity and exoskeleton. A central nerve core about the size of an adult Minbari's fist sits at the centre of the Kirisz body cavity, protected by a thick wall of dense exoskeleton material. The core send bioelectric signals through the complex fibre network into the hundreds of thousands of nerve nodes and hubs which in turn fire constant signals to the millions of fibres driving the Kirisz's every function. The main fibres and nodes are suspended in their fluid solutions and encased in thinner casings, protecting them from most harm.

However, in my autopsy I did find what I thought was a section of 'dead nerves' in a bundle nearest to the massive contusion that probably killed the specimen. I was horribly incorrect, as there was no damage whatsoever to the node—but in fact was obviously shut down for the long distance travel between planets. I believe that maybe the Kirisz can put themselves on a sort of biological auto-pilot that keeps them dormant except for their life functions while moving silently through the stars.

If this is truly the case, that they are in fact capable of 'turning themselves off' for periods of time, they would never be forced to endure mentally taxing trips through space. Combined with their constant cellular regeneration they could be actually immortal, as far as natural causes go. It makes me truly wonder just how old the creature lying in front of me was before it perished. Who or what did it see or meet in its time here? What was it looking for out here? Most importantly, why have not we seen more like it?

Kirisz in the Babylon 5 d20 Roleplaying Game

All Kirisz characters share the following racial traits. These traits are explored in greater detail in relevant sections of this text, but they are summarised below.

Kirisz Racial Traits

- +2 Strength, -2 Dexterity, +2 Constitution, -4 Charisma: Kirisz are extremely hardy and very physically powerful due to their exoskeletons. This makes them slow but deliberate. Their reluctance to look outside of their own civilisation makes them alien in deed and perception of the deeds of others.
- All Kirisz are of medium size.
- Kirisz have a base speed of 20 feet.
- Kirisz have incredibly durable exoskeletons. Because of this all Kirisz are considered to have a Damage Resistance of 5, but are unable to wear any armour.
- **Natural Resistances:** Kirisz are naturally immune to all radiation, disease and hostile environments. They are considered to automatically pass any Fortitude saves they are required to take for

Kirisz Ageing Effects

While the Kirisz cannot actually die from old age, their exoskeletons do grow thicker and less reactive by their race's standards. A Kirisz character should start as a freshly crafted being (see Reproduction later in this section), with all characters being of a neutral gender.

Kirisz Character Age

Race and Gender	Base Age	Variable
Kirisz, Neuter	2	+ 1d3

Kirisz Age Categories

Race	Adulthood	Middle Age*	Old**	Venerable#	Maximum Age
Kirisz	5	30	100	500	n/a

* -1 Dexterity, +1 Strength, Constitution, Intelligence, and Wisdom.
** -1 Dexterity, +1 Constitution, Intelligence, and Wisdom.
# -2 Dexterity, +2 Constitution, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

All of these effects are cumulative, though no ability score can be reduced below 3. These age categories are visible as rough spots on the surface of the exoskeleton from uneven regeneration, and a darker tone on all of its facets.

natural reasons. They are resistant to a true vacuum for a number of hours equal to double their Constitution score.

- All Kirisz are well versed in the use of their powerful Kirishiac gravitic weaponry and technology. Every Kirisz character is proficient automatically with any Weapon, Armour and Spacecraft with 'Kirishiac' in its name.
- Being the inheritors of countless super-sciences from the Kirishiac Lords, the Kirisz gain a +5 racial modifier to the following skills: Computer Use, Concentration, Intimidate, Knowledge (Ancient), Medical, Pilot (any gravitic-drive driven craft), Technical (any), and Telepathy.
- **Automatic Class Skill:** Telepathy. All Kirisz use a complex form of telepathy to communicate, and should be automatically considered a P10 for saving throw purposes. If a Kirisz character takes any levels in the Telepath class, they must be a P10 or higher.
- **Solar Fuelled:** Kirisz do not truly sleep, eat or need water to survive. They must have contact with any type of solar radiation for at least one hour each week or they will begin to shut down to preserve their energy stores. For every extra hour in direct natural sunlight the Kirisz may postpone this requirement for an additional week.
- **Automatic languages:** None, Kirisz can telepathically speak and understand all spoken language.
- **Favoured Class:** Worker. A multiclass Kirisz's worker class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.
- Average Height: 7'2"
- Average Weight: 500 lbs.

Kirisz Psychology and Sociology

As annotated by the techno-mage Vecris

The Kirishiac have gone, and now I walk amongst their children—their legacy of flesh. The Kirisz may have initially been lost without their former masters, but just as the baby bird finds the will to fly when hurled from the nest, the Kirisz have found the will to exist. They are strong and inventive, and I see much of my own people's drive in their mannerisms. With the touch of pride I sense in them I feel they will succeed in their rebuilding, if only to prove to the universe that it could be done. They seem driven to one day find the Kirishiac and show them what they left behind, the son searching for a prodigal father.

Today I meet the High Prelate I am told, and I am hiding my excitement and my fear. The Kirisz are terrible foes to have, and to speak directly to their highest noble is an honour I must not take lightly. They rarely allow anyone into their underground cities, let alone show hospitality for

it. My nano-cells are crying out to my logical side that this is some form of trap, but the excited side wants to follow just in case.

From what I have witnessed so far the Kirisz are driven to excellence, like a child waiting for praise from a nearby parent. The problem being that the parent is billions of light years away, far beyond the rim of the galaxy. Everyone in the Kirisz society works to fulfil tasks for the Prelate Council, led by the High Prelate itself.

I have been here for six days and I noticed yesterday that there was no young anywhere in the city. When I asked, I was brought to the reproduction chamber in the city. It was a multi-incubation complex where one Kirisz brings adult cells from its own body to the chamber to be crafted into a new Kirisz. While they are seemingly immortal, they have perfected a manner of clone reproduction—without the genetic flaws inherent in human cloning technologies. They create more when they can, but also do not have qualms about destroying those in their society that might be outcast or fallen out of touch with the Prelates. Which is why a few have apparently gone missing, and are out searching the galaxy for signs or clues to their masters' retreat.

Kirisz Psychology

From the beginning when they were serving the Kirishiac Lords as slaves, the Kirisz were moulded into reclusive, untrusting survivors. The Kirishiac used them as soldiers and labourers. It was upon the backs of the Kirisz that a great majority of the Lords' empire was built. Even though they were mistreated, driven well beyond their means, and genetically altered to better suit the Kirishiac—they admired their masters' every move.

Every Kirisz has a genetic imperative to better themselves and their surroundings in hopes of one day being equal to their Ancient masters. When the Kirishiac left the galaxy the Kirisz were not truly angry or dejected, they merely looked upon it as a way to show their masters how far they had come. It is an admiration for the Kirishiac—and their way of life—that drives the Kirisz.

Every Kirisz lives to serve the High Prelate Abrckxxs, who is the oldest Kirisz in existence at this time. He remembers the day the Travellers came and stole the moon, and he remembers watching the Kirishiac Lordships vanish into the sky never to be heard from again. Abrckxxs hands down the goals of his people through the Prelate Council, and the rest of the Kirisz serve it as law. Dishonesty is nearly unheard of in their people, with only the want to serve better than your peers coming the closest to selfishness.

(See the Personalities section of this book for more on Abrckxxs)

With such a strange mindset concerning their own people's role in the galaxy, it seems odd that they would look so poorly upon the other races they come across. The Kirisz feel that the other First Ones—and therefore the multitude of races they helped spawn—were wrong in vanquishing the Kirishiac Lords, and they hold a very strong distrust for them. A Kirisz would rather float adrift in a runaway Honourcraft for days than send a distress signal to a 'lesser' species. As far as the High Prelate is concerned if a Kirisz needed to look to them for help it was a weak link in their society, and would not have survived to eventually join the masters anyway.

Kirisz Social Customs

There are actually only two holidays in the Kirisz calendar—which is based on a 1,244 earth-day cycle. On the first day of each Kirishiac year is the Defxxs, or 'growth point.' It is the day every year that the newest Kirisz being crafted in the reproduction labs are broken free of their nutrient capsules and their 'birth' is celebrated by all Kirisz as a sign of the race's closeness. All work is ceased and every available Kirisz comes to the nearest crafting spires to witness the event, and then the entire undercity of Krish fills with mile-wide lines of Kirisz who have come to pay their homage to the new generation—and donate a thought or two to their growth and adaptation to the new world. It serves as a fantastic way to accept them into the society at the same time filling their minds with the knowledge passed on from generation to generation.

The other holiday happens on a different day every cycle, and only when there will be a total lunar eclipse that lasts for a full 32-hour day. It is the Xxsz, or the anniversary of the day the Travellers came and stole the moon. It is a solemn day and night where every Kirisz seals off its mind to outsiders, keeping utterly silent in reverence to the day the Kirishiac lost their war against the Ancients. The next day is normally filled with general overtones of anger and vengeful thoughts, and almost all construction is angled toward technologies of war or conflict.

While it is observed that 'birth' is important to the Kirisz, death is treated almost as an afterthought. There are no funerals or even a mark of their passing. Their bodies are essentially immortal, which would make it seem that even a single death should be titanic in comparison to their long lives. It is not, actually quite the opposite. If an accident takes the life of a Kirisz those nearby would claim the body and send it to the nearest crafting spire to be reduced to its components and re-used in the next generation.

Generally Kirisz treat each other all as siblings of a sort. Each one feels like a piece of the great machine that moves their race along in the universe. They are still very much individuals and have their own personalities and quirks, but have a familial bond with any member of their kind. The only differential on how a Kirisz might feel to another is if one would be a Prelate. The Prelate Council does not ask for any more respect from their people, merely for them to follow the laws handed down from the High Prelate. There is nothing that sets a Prelate

higher socially than another Kirisz, save for their ability to pass orders amongst their people.

Kirisz Crime and Punishment

In a society made up of mostly equals it is hard to actually come up with situations that the Kirisz would inflict harm or transgress upon one another. When left to their own devices, the Kirisz are a flowing community. They are not alone in the galaxy however, and the social molestations of other races will sometimes cause even the stalwart Kirisz to falter and become tainted by such thoughts. There have been rogue Kirisz who ventured out to try and become conquerors in their own right—acting much as their masters once did. These rogues are considered anomalies and are treated extremely harshly by the remainder of the Kirisz.

Since crime is so rare, Kirisz punishment is fast and severe. For even the tiniest infractions of the Kirisz social mores death and immediate genetic reclaiming is the sentence passed down from the Prelates. A sentence passed in such a way is fired through the minds of every Kirisz in telepathic range of another, and soon the entire undercity is aware of the criminal—and the expected sentencing. Kirisz fugitives will often flee into the galaxy in order to escape persecution as only the pilgrims are allowed to leave Krish, and they are rarely armed well enough to war against a desperate Kirisz on the run.

Kirisz Reproduction

Kirisz were once bi-gender creatures that reproduced as most others do. The Kirishiac Lords felt it was imperfect and wasteful, so the bio-engineered the Kirisz into asexual creatures that bred through cellular cloning in enormous broods of 'crafted' bodies. The process was slow and arduous, but always resulted in a perfect specimen. When the Lords left, the process was so ingrained into them the Kirisz continued the process instinctively. The original technique was altered to accommodate the new world, and resulted in variables in the crafting. Even with such unstable variables the Kirisz used the crafting instead of more conventional methods.

The process itself takes nearly two standard earth years to complete, and begins with the sample nerve cells of the 'parent.' The cells are submerged in a roughly Kirisz-shaped hollow casing, which is filled with the copper/enzyme fluid that will serve as the blood of the creature once it is fully crafted. The organelles are cloned from working specimens elsewhere in the crafting spire and inserted into the fluid as well—where the genetic coding will place them as needed throughout the body. The craft chamber is constantly being charged with a steady flow of electric currents, stimulating the growth of the protective layers around the organelles and the exoskeleton itself. When the body is nearly complete, just hours before the next Defxxs, the body is assaulted by dozens of focused stimuli that would kill lesser creatures. Radiation, plasma, supersonic and even low-grade lasers are beamed directly into the new Kirisz. If the shell is ready then the Kirisz will survive, if it does not then the whole process will be for nothing when the gravitic shielding around the craft chamber are shut down and the resulting soup spill out lifelessly.

The new Kirisz will then emerge in a confused state into the hordes of its ancestors waiting in the streets of the undercity. In the celebrations of the Defxxs the newly crafted Kirisz is assaulted for hours telepathically by hundreds of its peers—sending centuries of schooling, knowledge and traditions directly into its mind. In a single night the new Kirisz is ready to join the population. They go from craft to adulthood in a few hours with an eternity to find their niche in the galaxy.

Kirisz Cultural ElementsóArt and Music

The Kirisz may sound stodgy and boring but they actually have many talents, ones they were able to come into once the overbearing Kirishiac Lords had moved on. In the time of the Lords it would have been a waste of resources and energy, but in the generations to come they found solace in the arts.

At first it was merely their architecture that took a step away from the utilitarian aspects the Kirishiac had them use. Their tall crystalline spires changed from simple towers into sculpted palaces, built with rooms that had no other function than to sit and converse with others. Levels that do not need solar vents were constructed with gaping windows of glass and gilded metals. The inside of hallways and rooms began to see the designer's own imagery crafted directly into the walls instead of the basic utility alone. Soon the idea of beautification was widespread with architects and builders beginning to place a great worth on their imaginations. Rows of buildings formed into a collage of individual thoughts, and cities grew into works of art in motion.

The Kirisz see the world through a strange array of inputs coming in from all angles of their sensory array. Not truly 'seeing' or 'hearing' makes it very difficult for them to understand the beauty in other races' art. When the joy of artistic talent flowed into the next generation of Kirisz they searched for their own mediums in which to express their inner dreams and feelings. By combining light, sound, vibration and electromagnetic fields into simple objects—some small and others enormous and grand—to please the advanced sensory ring of their fellows, artists began to bloom.

What might be art to a Kirisz may be an insignificant crystal or wall of minerals and currents to another species. Just as they do not understand the beauty in a fine painting, they do not expect others to understand the beauty of 'the complex wave in motion.'

Kirisz Galactic Relations

The vast majority of the spacefaring races in the galaxy have no idea the Kirisz exist, or even that they ever did. The League of Non-Aligned Worlds has countless tales and fables concerning the forbidden planet Krish, speaking of the subterranean monsters that dwell there to destroy any interlopers. The Kirisz look at the fragmented League with a similar view as their masters once did about the lesser races—it would be too easy to meddle in their affairs, better to stay to yourself until it is time to go out and conquer.

Due to their relationship with the Vorlons, the Minbari know a great deal about the Kirisz. They are aware who they once served and wish to keep such a travesty (the Kirishiac War) from happening again. The Religious Caste wants to add them to the Armies of Light, the Warrior Caste wants their technology and the Worker Caste wants to know how they build crystals as hard as steel, yet still shape them effortlessly. The Kirisz remember the Vorlons and how it was their meddling communiqué to the Walkers that started the downfall of their masters—and as such are hesitant to trust anyone so closely affiliated with them.

The Shadows were a staunch enemy of the Kirishiac Lords when they began to strike out at growing planets, and at the time the Drakh were still very young. Over the generations the Drakh have thought themselves superior due to their close relationship with one of the only Ancient races still on this side of the rim. The Kirisz are wary of the Shadow servants, and only deal with them when it is completely necessary.

The other races have very little knowledge of the Kirisz, save for rumour they might have picked up from others in passing. The idea of these Ancient beings still roaming the galaxy is a difficult thing for some more self-important races, and many would rather choose to ignore the possibility of their existence than seeking a way to find them peaceably.

Kirisz vs. Drakh after 2261

When the Drakh evacuate Z'Ha'Dum before its destruction they initially begin to look for a new world and new allies to help them get back at the Interstellar Alliance. They remembered the Kirishiac Lords, their penchant for conquest and sought out their descendants in an effort to gain powerful tools in the war they planned ahead. The Drakh were not expecting to be remembered by the Kirisz, and did not receive a worm welcome. The Kirisz rejected all offers of alliance and enraged the easily angered Drakh. The Drakh fought back with everything they could muster and caused massive amounts of damage to several of the Kirisz cities. From that point the Kirisz would send several Honourcrafts and their one remaining Knightship after the Drakh. It is suspect that it was because of this that the Drakh went into hiding on Centauri Prime—but is purely speculation.

What is unknown is whether or not the Kirisz hunters ever find the Drakh, hiding or not.

Kirisz Technology

Taken from the reports of Drakh servant Millant Hessius

Sitting before me are the personal effects of a creature that the warriors killed yesterday. These beings, these Kirisz, have been hounding my master for months. Thankfully it seems that at least one has been dealt with. Therefore, I have been instructed to make record of the capabilities of the being. I expect this to be used as a guide to subjugate them, or to defend us against them I cannot say. Either one or the other, I do hereby explain what I have found concerning the tools and weapons of the Kirisz.

At first glance the Kirisz use a great deal of crystalline material in their manufactured items. Almost everything they create is smooth and faceted like their own flesh, and is all but unbreakable by common means. Reinforced mineral bases and molecular-bonded hardening agents are applied to every surface of these samples, and activate haphazardly when I pass a mild current through them.

The Kirisz have mastered gravitic technology to a point that baffles the mind. From the drives in their ships to the focused ability to cut through things at an atomic level with gravitic fields, I can easily say that no other race in the galaxy can boast their control over the enigmatic force. I cannot tell how their technology truly grants them such control, but I wager it has to due with the fluctuating gravity of their homeworld.

Their starships rely on gravitic drive propulsion, moving silently through even the thickest of atmospheres as if it were void. A thick gravitic shielding system forces all resisting materials aside like a plough to give the ship the easiest path in all environments. Their craft can accelerate, decelerate, pivot, turn or stop without the fear of inertia—feats that would crush our pilots in their seats. The ships themselves pack powerful weapons we have titled 'grav-cutters' that focus a thin beam of super-high gravity surrounded in a sheath of anti-gravity—basically crushing whatever it touches before pulling it away into space.

Their personal weaponry is much the same. Using bursts of gravitic shield-like energy they can sunder most materials with their handheld firearms, but must resort to much more powerful implements when dealing with a superiorly equipped foe. Crystalline grenades designed to collapse massive energy in upon itself, essentially creating tiny black holes to crush multiple targets with a massive gravitic anomaly. I nearly killed myself and four of my masters' assistants in a mishap with one of these devices and now I tread much more careful when dealing with a Kirisz hunter's possessions.

I have seen precision cutting instruments as small as a scalpel cut through a vehicle hull, and small generators lift tons of stone with grav-shunting fields. It amazes me that such technology exists in the hands of a race still born of flesh, if you can call the Kirisz flesh at all. One of my master's warriors claimed that this one even wore a personal shield that resisted our most powerful anti-personnel weaponry. It took a point defence platform three full bursts to bring it down, and even then it seemed as if the Kirisz wanted to persist.

Their tools and weaponry, what limited access I have to them, seem to run off of an external power source. My masters claim that it may come from the Kirisz themselves, but it would take a great deal of bio-electric current to manifest some of the effects their effects create. I personally have drained a dozen power cells experimenting with them, and know that I have barely just scratched the surface. I will report to my masters honestly, but I do not know what else I can say.

The Kirisz are beyond my sciences—possibly even theirs.

EQUIPMENT

'Maybe you might find something useful by sheer accident. But maybe you'll push the wrong button and blow yourself up.'
—Doctor Elizabeth Trent, Interplanetary Expeditions

General Equipment Descriptions

There are dozens of implements used in tracking, uncovering and reclaiming the lost artefacts of the First Ones. Listed here are just a few of the more useful or common items, and a few more specific tools of the trade. Also are a few items of general use that could be considered 'Ancient' by the standards of the Third Age.

CorAm Medical Collection: Only available after 2258, the Corps of Associated Minds' ever growing collection of cross-species medical information. It often comes in the form of a small tachyon transmitter and decryption/encryption device fitted with a short-range holo-projector. It has a constantly renewing databank with files on any League member race, and has extensive knowledge on Narn, Centauri and Human bodies as well. If one knew the proper decryption codes they could view whatever knowledge the CorAm had on a specific problem or symptom.

Using this device requires the knowledge of proper passwords (or a DC 25 Computer Use skill check to hack past the security protocols) will benefit from a +5 equipment bonus to all Medical skill checks.

Hessius Noble Research Text: This is the electronically preserved collection of all House Hessius 's research findings on the Ancients. The texts were originally written on paper and bound in wooden tomes in the days of Alkar's personal researchers, but now the majority of their work is downloaded onto data crystals. The data is surprisingly clear in most places, while elsewhere it is enigmatic and vague. On a successful DC 15 Knowledge (First Ones) check while reading the text, a character may reduce all of their further Knowledge skill DC numbers by 3 on the same subject.

Stasis Vault and Carryall: When an explorer finds something of worth from the past they often wish to keep it from harm as best they can. This rigid three-foot cube was designed to do just that. Made of starship grade alloys, the Carryall allows the owner to place an object up to two-and-a-half square foot object inside the vault and lock it inside (DC 35 Technical skill to open). The vault then removes all of the air and foreign particles out of the inner chamber—creating a void where no harm can come to the artefact inside. The Carryall has a DR 20 and 40 hit points.

Subsonic Particle Sweeper: Basically a 'no-touch' vacuum, the sweeper ionizes and attracts loose particles from the surface of a possible fragile object with no risk of tangible damage due to clumsy hands. The sweeper is roughly 13 inches long with a compressor in the handle to store particles within. The compressor cartridges can hold about an ounce of particulate matter before being replaced.

Tachyon-Neutrino Sensor Suite: Many First Ones leave behind powerful traces of very distinct radiation signatures when travelling from one dimension to the next. This software package added to any existing scanner system will allow it to home in on 'abnormal levels' of these signature traces. It makes instant recordings and logarithmic patterns when multiple signatures are detected, allowing researchers to look over such notes at their leisure.

Ships that use the Sensor Suite may add +2 to their Sensor rating, and also reduce opposing ships' Stealth ratings by 5. However these benefits become penalties of the same number when within a kilometre of an open jump point.

Vecris, Works of: The techno-mage Vecris left behind a massive legacy through a multitude of systems in his travels, and only the order of the techno-mages have the full collection of his work at their fingertips. The rest of the galaxy must hold tightly on to fragments here and there as they appear. A written code there, an encrypted crystal here—there is no boundary to where he may have placed his priceless bits of knowledge.

In game terms, anyone possessing even a fragment of the Works of Vecris can add a +2 equipment bonus to any Knowledge (First Ones) or Knowledge (Ancient history) skill checks. These bonuses are cumulative up to +6, so finding multiple fragments is beneficial. A complete work—as Vecris left for his techno-mage brothers and sisters—would grant a +10 bonus.

Ikarran Bio-Technological Items

Located in the ruins on Ikarra 7, some scattered about while others are locked away in hidden caches, the following are powerful Ikarran artefacts that graft to the user and grant certain benefits. These benefits last for a number of years equal to one plus the character's Constitution modifier before needing to be applied again. Listed after each entry is a DC number in parenthesis, this is the required Fortitude save that must be passed in order to survive the grafting without losing d3 Constitution ability points permanently.

There is no price or weight listing for any of the Ikarran equipment due to its extreme rarity. All items would cost several hundred thousand credits on the black market, and do not truly weigh anything due to the fact they bond with the user's body—making adjustments for the user as necessary.

Defence Gauntlet: A series of fibrous tendons and bony filaments that intertwine in and around the user's hand, the Defence Gauntlet was designed as a multi-function tool for the non-combatant Ikarrans to defend themselves against attackers. Besides augmenting the strength of the hand and forearm of the user, it also has three bio-weapon functions it can call upon—at some discomfort to the wielder.

The Gauntlet adds +4 to the user's Strength for Unarmed attacks with the respective hand. At a cost of 1d3 nonlethal damage, the thumb and forefinger can unsheathe two sharp barbs that secrete a powerful neuro-toxin (DC 14 Fortitude save or suffer initial damage of 1d6 temporary Dexterity, and secondary damage of 2d6 temporary Dexterity). The palm can be triggered by spending 1d4 points of nonlethal damage, activating a bioelectric chemical that can be used as a touch attack or thrown as a single globule, causing 3d6 electrical damage to the target either way. Lastly the heel of the hand contains a ridge of concealed spines that can be fired silently at a target up to 10 ft. away, causing 1d2 damage to the target and the wielder—but requiring the target to make Fortitude saves or suffer the effects of the neuro-toxin mentioned above. (DC 18)

Dermal Hardening Plate: A small scale-like plate with dozens of painful hooks on its underside, the Ikarran Dermal Plate attaches itself to the chest of the would-be user and begins to replicate inside of its skin. The skin becomes bumpy and thick, and looses a slight bit of its sensitivity. It does become as durable as armour, without adding a significant amount of weight.

General Equipment

Item	Cost	Weight
CorAm Medical Collection	2,000 cr.	4 lb.
Hessius Noble Research Text	1,500 cr. (average Centauri pricing)	2 lb.
Stasis Vault and Carryall	5,000 cr.	35 lb.
Subsonic Particle Sweeper	400 cr.	1 lb.
Tachyon-Neutrino Sensor Suite	20,000 cr.	—
Works of Vecris	13,000 cr. (per fragment)	1 lb.

By donning the Dermal Hardening Plate the character gains a DR 3 and one permanent point of Constitution, but suffers a –1 penalty to Initiative rolls. (DC 16)

Nerve Router: This mass of wormlike tentacles is attached at the base of the neck, just above the shoulder blades, where it invades the user's nervous system through several holes it cuts all along the spinal column. The Router actually intercepts the impulses the brain sends for pain or reflexive recoils in order to keep the user's body performing as if uninjured for much longer than it normally would—or possibly should. Routed Ikarrans were able to ignore the agony of entering a burning building to save a loved one, but would also never be aware if they were stepping onto a sharp object until they felt the slipperiness of the blood welling up beneath them. It is a mixed blessing, but some may wish to take that risk.

Player characters that attach the Nerve Router to their spine immediately fall into a nervous shutdown coma for 2d6 days while the Router invades all nerve endings. Afterwards the character is deadened to any strong nerve impulses, allowing him to stay conscious from 0 to –10 hit points. The character is unable to track how damaged he is, so all of his damage must be recorded in secret by the Games Master. Any character (including the Routed one) may pass a DC 15 Medical skill check to gauge the current level damage the character has taken by visually diagnosing the wounds suffered. (DC 18)

Respiratory Filters: This inhalant is actually thousands of tiny bi-cellular infection fighting microbes that cling to the respiratory organs of the user and mutate to create a barrier. This barrier will block out most airborne toxins or other invading particles, and also concentrates whatever primary chemical the user breaths into pockets for later use. By coughing the user ruptures several of the chemical pockets, utilizing the stored chemical to survive.

The Filters grant the user +3 on all Fortitude saves versus anything inhaled by the character. The character may also violently cough to activate the chemical pockets, causing d6 nonlethal damage to themselves, but giving the character 10 minutes of breathable atmosphere each time they do so. (DC 15)

Synaptic Lenses: The Ikarrans had figured how to eliminate impaired vision from their people with these orange eye drops. The liquid is thick and granular, comprised of cellular focusing agents and a nutrient rich medium in which they live. The eye drops are applied directly to the eye, which coats it like paint. The user's eyes are hued the same as the liquid, but the colours does not hinder vision. The focusing agents bind to the optic nerves and retinas, allowing the eye to see in several light spectrums at once. While sometimes confusing, it grants the user almost infallible vision.

Synaptic Lenses grant a +3 natural bonus to all Read Lips, Search, Sense Motive and Spot skill checks. But all Concentration skill checks are at a –2 penalty due to the constant barrage of information. (DC 12)

Kirishiac Items and Weaponry

For convenience all of the items, weapons and protective gear of the Kirisz have been compiled here. All of these items require the bioelectric currents that Kirisz produce to function properly. Someone with the correct kind of Technical skill might be able configure some kind of rigged power source and controlling mechanisms. As a note for Kirisz characters, they may only have a number of Kirishiac items functioning on their person equal or less than their Constitution score modifier.

Kirishiac equipment have no prices listed as it would cost a small fortune to purchase such items on any market. Kirisz characters do not purchase this equipment either, they instead receive d3 items plus their Charisma modifier for free at character generation.

Focus Adjustment Beam Generators: A pair of rings that the Kirisz wears around its wrists, the Generators allow the wielder to create a gravitic field between them that the user can manipulate. By steering the field with its hands, the wielder can move objects weighing up to a metric ton slowly—or smaller objects extremely rapidly. It takes a great deal of concentration to control, but a master can make it seem simple.

A single DC 14 Concentration skill check allows the wielder to move massive objects up to 10 ft. per combat round. If used as a weapon, the wielder may use a Concentration skill check as its attack roll versus a target—battering it in a random direction 3d10 ft. Living targets will also suffer 2d6 damage.

Grav-Scalpel: Using a short-ranged pinpoint beam of ultra-condensed gravity, this cylindrical crystal can sculpt its way through nearly any material with the precision of a surgeon. The Kirisz use it like humans would use a saw or utility knife. The Grav-Scalpel has a range of only two feet, and causes 1d6 damage to any object—ignoring Damage Reduction completely. The beam is so short and focused that it cannot be used effectively in combat.

Gravitic Burst Emitter: A handheld spheroid with four indentations for the Kirisz's fingers, this device is the most common personal weapon in the Kirisz armoury. It launches a bubble of super-high gravity at a target at high speeds, collapsing armour and flesh under the intense pressure. It has a slow build to its charge, making it fire less rapidly as other firearms. Its effect is substantial however, and makes up for its lacking rate of fire.

The Burst Emitter may not fire more than once in a single combat round, no matter how many attacks the wielder has. It also does not have ammunition, using the Kirisz as a power source to generate its effects.

Kirisz Weapons

Weapon	Cost	Damage	Area of Effect	Critical	Ammo	Range Increment	Size	Weight	Type
Gravitic Burst Emitter	—	4d6	—	19-20/x2	—	30 ft.	Medium	18 lb.	Energy (Gravitic)
Singularity Detonator	—	6d8	3d6 ft.	—	—	15 ft.	Small	5 lb.	Energy (Gravitic)

Personal Shunting Shield: Worn as an amulet or brooch, this crystal apparatus wreathes the wearer in a very sturdy gravitic shield akin to the ones used on some spacecraft. The shield is invisible and silent, but as strong as alloyed steel. The Kirisz use them in nearly any martial engagement, but other races who have discovered them find them difficult to use for prolonged conflicts—as they actually even keep atmosphere from circulating inside the gravity sheath! Extended use of the Shunting Shield could actually suffocate a lesser species, but the Kirisz do not seem to mind, as they can operate in a vacuum for long periods of time.

The Shield has a Damage Reduction of 8 against the first five successful attacks per combat round. It also totally protects the wearer from any sort of gaseous or radiation-based attacks. It only holds 2d20 minutes of breathable atmosphere when activated.

Singularity Detonators: Spherical devices composed of mathematically calculated crystal matrices, the Detonators are the Kirisz version of grenades. Each device releases a negatively charged gravitic pulse into a wide diameter before reversing its own polarity, pulling all of the now negatively charged matter toward a crushing synthesised singularity—a black hole. The effect is nearly instantaneous and devastating. Due to its rather unstable effects that their slow-moving bodies have difficulty avoiding, the Kirisz only use the Detonators in drastic measures.

The pulse extends in a 3d6 ft. diameter when set off. There is a brief moment before the polarity shift (when the damage is applied) when all characters in the area of effect must pass a DC 15 Reflex save or suffer full damage. If the save is passed damage is halved. Objects cannot make this save and are instantly drawn to the singularity—suffering the maximum amount of damage without applying their Damage Reduction (48!).

New Starships

The following three vessels are rare ships (unique in the case of the Ghura'kal) and are here in case Games Masters want to use them in their own campaigns. In any case, these are not common sights and should be explained as wonders to any player characters that might come in contact with them.

GGA-4 Lurker-class Exploration Cruiser

The Lurker is similar to the Earthforce Tethys Police Cutter, and could be mistaken for one at first glance. The small ship uses a fair amount of Shadow technology in concert with Earth Alliance standard measures, and was thought of us a test subject for the process. The Galactic Genesis Administration created a small number of these ships for their own private use before passing their data on to the military—who then created the advanced 'Shadow Omega' cruisers used in the last portions of Sheridan's crusade versus Clarke.

The Lurker is armed adequately, and can withstand a hostile engagement adequately if forced to do so. Unlike most ships its size, it does have the ability to create its own jump points and navigate hyperspace quite well. It has a powerful communications array and a full encryption computer built in, and utilizes a Tachyon-Neutrino Sensor Suite package as standard. The vessel was truly designed to venture out to possibly hostile research zones, scan and report back. Due to its controversial background and construction, few Lurkers have survived past 2265.

Statistics:
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 180; DV 12 (-8 size, +10 Agility); DR 11; Spd -; Acc 6; Dec 4; Sensor +4 (targeting computer, Tachyon-Neutrino Sensor Suite); Stealth 20; SQ Jump-Point, Artificial Gravity, Atmospheric Capable; Cargo 6,000 lb.; 2 Operations Managers, 2 Pilots, 5 Sensor Operators, 8 Crewman

Weapons:
One Shadowtech Energy Pulse Cannon; Boresight; Attack +0; Damage 10+3d10; Critical 20; Range 2
Two Light Pulse Cannons; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d6; Critical 20; Range 3; Rapid Fire
One Mk I Interceptor; Turret; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Ghura'kal (Eclipse Caste Warship)

Designed by the insidious Rathe Zha'lunn, the Ghura'kal is a heavy combat warship that mixes Minbari and Shadow technology in a mockery of the White Star's Vorlon/Minbari hybridization. The name *Ghura'kal* is the Dark Minbari phrase for 'blindness of the heart'—the idea that a Minbari may never hear the calling of his heart before he passes on. It is a phrase that makes even the most stalwart of Anla'shok give pause.

The Ghura'kal is more than a match for any ship, even the impressive White Star would be forced to think twice about engaging it one on one. It packs powerful weaponry and damage absorbing plating similar to the skins of the fearsome Shadow cruisers. Backed by the highly trained Eclipse Caste crew that Zha'lunn has personally trained, the Ghura'kal is a nightmare vessel capable of taking on ships well over twice its size quite easily.

Statistics:
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 600; DV 20 (-8 Size, +18 Agility); DR 20; Spd 60; Acc 4; Dec 4; Han +5; Sensor +12; Stealth 28; SQ Jump Point, Atmospheric Capable, Long-Ranged, Minbari Flight Computer, Shadow Sensors, Symbiotic Crew; Cargo 30,000 lb.; 1 Officer (Rathe Zha'lunn), 3 Pilots, 3 Sensor Operators, 6 Crewmen

Weapons:
Shadowtech Energy Beam; 1 Boresight; Attack +8 (targeting computer); Damage 200+2d100; Critical 18-20; Range 6
Four Molecular Pulsars; 4 Front; Attack +5 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 18-20; Range 8; Rapid Fire

Craft (1):
2 Flyers

Special Notes:
Symbiotic Crew: The ship's crew are semi-attached to the workings of the Ghura'kal through a living harness. The benefits of this are already reflected in the ship's statistics. For every full 20 points of damage (after DR) the ship takes subtracts one from all Initiative and To-Hit rolls on the following combat round from the distracting pain-feedback.

Kirishiac Honourcraft

The Kirisz were not physically large enough to pilot the truly enormous vessels of the Kirishiac Lords, but they did learn how to refit them down into ships that they could. Still quite large for a one-crew vessel, the Honourcraft is beautiful to behold. It is diamond-shaped with a hull of faceted crystal, dotted with the ports for their powerful weaponry and unmarred by an engine structure of any kind. The Kirisz built the Honourcraft around a powerful gravitic generator that shields, propels, steers and powers the entire vessel. It is silent and terrifying in flight, the colours of the hull shimmering like the surface of an oil spill.

A single Kirisz can telepathically link with a Honourcraft, piloting and manning several system functions at the speed of thought. Their minds are used to taking in several forms of stimuli at once, so what would be impossible for a younger race is nearly instinctual for the Kirisz.

The Kirisz would much rather escape from combat, using singularity generators and their unbelievable manoeuvrability to do so. If forced—or goaded—into conflict they can bring any one of their weapons to bear at a target at a time.

Statistics:
Huge Spacecraft; hp 200; DV 16 (-2 size, +8 agility); DR 25 (gravitic shielding); Spd 40; Acc 12; Dec 20; Han +10; Sensor +20; Stealth 20; SQ Atmospheric Capable, Long-Ranged; Cargo 1,000 lb.; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
Gravity Burst Cannon; Turret; Attack +11 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d8; Critical 17-20; Range 6; Rapid Fire, -5 DR to target on this attack
Hypergraviton Focusing Beam; Turret; Attack +9 (targeting computer); Damage 50+1d100; Critical 17-20; Range 8; -10 DR to target on this attack
Singularity Charge Emitter; Turret; Attack Special; Damage 100+2d100; Critical n/a; Range 3

Special Notes:
Singularity Charge Emitter: Firing player nominates a location within range and nominates an Initiative number. On that Initiative number a Gravitic Singularity opens on that spot and remains open for d3 combat rounds—causing its damage to any targets that cross it during that time.

Ghura'kal Mk II

In 2261-62, when the Drakh are cast about looking to find aid to get revenge on the Interstellar Alliance, they call in several of their masters' old debts—one of which is the Eclipse Caste. The Drakh give aid to Zha'lunn in return for his help in attacking others randomly in their name. At this time the Ghura'kal is refitted with newer Negative Pulsar Arrays instead of the Molecular Pulsars above. The Drakh Pulsars have the following statistics:

Negative Pulsar Array; 4 Front; Attack +7 (targeting computer); Damage 25+2d10; Critical 17-20; Range 7; Rapid Fire

NEW FEATS AND SKILLS

'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.'
—Captain Jeffrey Sinclair

Kirisz Feats

These feats are only usable by Kirisz characters, and are rare even at that. The crafting process of the Defxxs is rather thorough to allow for much variation, but as any sentient being can learn—so can the Kirisz.

Galactic Curiosity (Trait)

Your mind was filled with the teachings of your people when you were released from your crafting spire, but the thoughts that stuck in the forefront of your consciousness were those of exploration. You yearn to be out with the younger races, and it drives you to learn more about them—in person if you can have it your way…

Prerequisite: Kirisz only, Charisma 12+.

Benefit: You gain a +2 to all Diplomacy skill checks, and may purchase a new Knowledge as a class skill; Knowledge (Galactic Customs).

High-Voltage (Trait)

Your organelles responsible for generating the bioelectric currents that drive your body functions and Kirishiac equipment produce far too much energy for your common use. You have never felt the electrical fatigue some of your people have, and you will occasionally arc visibly into nearby objects if you concentrate.

Prerequisite: Kirisz only, must be taken at character creation.

Benefit: You have no limit to the number of Kirishiac items you can power at one time. Also, once per day equal to your Constitution modifier, you can focus a bioelectric discharge into any object within two feet of your body. This 'attack' causes 2d6 nonlethal damage and ignores Damage Reduction from armour.

Thickened Exoskeleton (Trait)

Your exoskeleton grew decidedly thicker in the crafting spire than most of your kind. You are thereby more resistant to physical harm than they are.

Prerequisite: Kirisz only, must be taken at character creation, Dexterity less than 12.

Benefit: Add 2 to your natural Damage Reduction.

General Feats

Bloodcrest Assassin (Centauri)

As one of the highly trained Bloodcrests of House Sorrati, you are especially adept at the unseen killing blow—especially against your own people.

Prerequisite: House Sorrati Centauri only, Sneak Attack class ability.

Benefit: +1d6 to your existing Sneak Attack damage. These dice are doubled when performing a Sneak Attack against another Centauri.

Eclipse Caste Member (Shadowsouled Minbari)

You are one of the thirteen elite members of the Shadowsouled Minbari that Rathe Zha'lunn has picked for his elite anti-Minbari unit. You have been trained extensively on how to deal with your lighter cousins, and enjoy nothing more than burying your blades deep in their bellies. There will one day be a time when you will be called to serve on the Ghura'kal—a day you have been training for since your induction into the Eclipse Caste.

Prerequisite: Shadowsouled Minbari only, Character level 5+, Contacts.

Benefit: You receive +2 on all Initiative, attack and damage rolls when targeting Minbari. If piloting or crewing a spacecraft that is targeting a Minbari (or Interstellar Alliance after 2262) vessel, these benefits apply. You may also call upon the extensive hidden resources of the Eclipse Caste once per Character level, gaining access to items that may otherwise seem impossible to normal player characters.

Hessius Scholar (Centauri)

You have been brought up in the teachings of the Hessius research teams. You are learned and curious about the dealings of the First Ones, and probably are seeking their fingerprints on the universe whenever you can.

Prerequisite: House Hessius Centauri only, Intelligence 14+.

Benefit: You are assumed to own a copy of the Hessius Noble Research Text (see the Equipment section of this book for details), and may automatically take 10 on any Knowledge (Ancient history), Knowledge (First Ones) or Technical (Ancients) skill checks in half the time.

Mindrider Descendant (Telepath)

Your family's strain of telepathic ability was augmented in the evolutionary stages of your species by the Mindriders, and some of that leftover

influence has surfaced in your genetic code. You are stronger than other telepaths of your P-rating, and have access to many talents that your telepathic peers may not. You may or may nor be aware of the nature of your special gift, and some telepath organisations would go to great lengths to experiment with your DNA.

Prerequisite: P-3 or higher, must be taken at character generation.

Benefit: Your P-rating is considered to be 2 points higher for the prerequisite purposes of telepathic feats, abilities and prestige classes.

Research Operative (General)

You have one or more corporate or governmental licenses that allow you to go places or carry items you otherwise would not be able to. Be it IPX, the GGA, CorAM or one of several others—you have friends in high places that will help you circumvent annoying searches and security detainment that may otherwise hinder your work.

Prerequisite: Character level 2+, Contacts.

Benefit: You may make a Diplomacy or Bluff (depending on the truth of the claim) skill check against the Willpower save of any target that you have communicated to about the legality of 'your assignment.' Success means they will begrudgingly agree with what you are claiming until you give them reason to check into it further.

Example: Doctor Hawthorne wants to smuggle a briefcase full of his allies' stolen goods on board Babylon 5. Zack Allen stops him, requesting a search of the case. Hawthorne claims it is a 'classified find' and that IPX has it insured against tampering. He rolls a 14 on his Bluff check, which beats Zack's 12. Zack wrinkles his brow but lets him through, until three days later when the contraband turns up in the Zocalo—when Zack can begin his hunt for the culprit!

Research Librarian (Pak'ma'ra)

You are one of several dozen 'venturing scholars' from the great libraries on Melat. With a massive bank of information at your stubby fingertips, you have access to a surprising amount of knowledge in a relatively short amount of time. By sending a quick message to homeworld, you can learn how to do nearly anything—from hotwiring a fighter cockpit to cooking roast hal-vek for twenty.

Prerequisite: Pak'ma'ra only, Scientist level 3+, Data Access.

Benefit: You gain +1 miscellaneous bonus to all Knowledge, Technical and Profession skill checks. With sufficient time and the ability to contact the libraries on Melat, you may act as if you had 3 ranks in ANY of the aforementioned skills by reading from a library manual. However, taking 10 or 20 on these 'instruction manual' skills require triple the normal time.

New Skill Uses

Appraise (Ancient worth)

Unlike the common use of the Appraise skill, it is well known that all pieces of Ancient technologies are considered priceless on the open (or even black) markets. This application is more for those in the know to see just how genuine a supposed 'Ancient' artefact really is. At a glance a schooled explorer or treasure hunter can pick up certain tell tale signs of the genuine article. This skill in tandem with a good Bluff skill can mean very good prices for priceless objects by convincing the would-be seller of their 'convincing fake.'

Anyone with at least five ranks in Technical (Ancient) gains a +2 Synergy bonus to this skill automatically.

Knowledge (Ancient history)

This is the ability to decipher the fragmented facts and fables a character might have access to in order to gain insight on the happenings of the early Ages of the galaxy. It will not provide in concrete proof of their passing, nor will it give the character anything other than legend and possible myth.

Games Masters are encouraged to roll this skill on behalf of the player character, coming up with fantastic tales and unbelievable stories depending on the result—with failure not necessarily coming up empty. Sometimes it is far more dangerous for the researcher to get his fables confused and follow the wrong path due to his mistake.

Knowledge (First Ones)

Characters with this skill are well-versed in what little facts are out there concerning the recorded First Ones—the Kirishiac Lords, Mindriders, Torvalus, Triad, Shadows, Vorlons and Walkers. This skill will help map out the factual remnants of where they had touched the galaxy but not necessarily times, dates and events. First One research is a pliant and unreliable skill, and characters that use it are probably explorers or high scholars. It takes a very open mind to admit the godlike beings ever existed at all, and it takes an even stronger one to try and understand them.

Technical (Ancient)

The most practical and dangerous skill a research scientist can get into, the experimentation of devices as those once used or created by the Ancients can unlock wonders or unleash havoc. By taking an array of tools and theories to the test with an Ancient artefact or implement the user can eventually figure out how to make the object perform functions in accordance to its design.

This skill is very subjective to its difficulty. Games Masters are encouraged to set these difficulties quite high, with long

experimentation and hours of tinkering being required to get any sort of results. Player characters should devote weeks or even months, possibly several gaming sessions, to the quest for operating the object. The *Use Alien Artefact* class ability should reduce the difficulty and the time of this skill dramatically.

Even when successful, Ancient objects often perform several functions completely unknown to the researching character.

Example: Doctor Hawthorne has been trying to activate what he believes is a powerful Torvalus stealth module. After weeks of tinkering the object comes to life, cloaking him just as he suspected! However, it also cloaked his quarters, the hallway, and half the deck he is on as well! He will have a great deal of explaining to do when Captain Lochley comes to see the good doctor about the section of her station that just vanished.

PERSONALITIES

'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.' —Earth proverb, possibly of Narn origins

Vecris

'I walk in the shadows of giants, and pray they notice me before their foot falls.'

12th Level Human Techno-Mage
Hit Points: 17
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +6/+1 base, +6/+1 melee, +7/+2 ranged
Special Qualities: FTL Attunement, Mage Focus (calligraphy writing), Organelles (+4 saves, immune to disease), Pinnace, Techno-Magery
Saves: +6 Fortitude, +5 Reflex, +12 Will
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 13, Con 14, Int 19, Wis 19, Cha 20
Skills: Appraise (Ancient worth) +6, Computer Use +18, Concentration +18, Gather Information +14, Knowledge (Ancient history) +18, Knowledge (First Ones) +22, Listen +11, Magery +26, Pilot +6, Profession (Researcher) +6, Search +9, Sense Motive +10, Spot +10, Technical (Ancient) +14 and Technical (electronics) +17
Feats: Broad Aptitude, Gravity Mastery, Invisible Spell, Mage Intensity, Multi-Tasking, Silent Spell, Skill Focus: Knowledge (First Ones), Skill Focus: Magery
Primary Aptitudes: Defence, Movement
Weak Aptitudes: Conjuration, Creation
Power Points: 86
Spells: All Defence spells plus Attract, Balance, Blink, Burst of Speed, Centre Gravity, Cone of Gravity, Floating Disc, Friction, Gravitic Bolt, Gravity Platform, Halt, Knockback, Push, Rapid Movement, Sluggishness, Telekinesis, Wall of Gravity, and Weight of Gravity.
Equipment: Staff, Ikarran Defence Gauntlet, Kirishiac Personal Shunting Shield
Pinnace: Illusion Mantle (comet)

Vecris was born and raised in the order of techno-mages on a tiny planet on the outer edge of Vorlon space. He was always very eager to learn anything he could about magic and could not seem to fail in any task that his teachers would set before him. When he was first able to test his pinnace, he bravely (or foolishly some might say) skirted too near a Vorlon listening post and was captured for questioning. The Vorlons have little love for the Shadow-tainted techno-mages, and interrogated Vecris for days. He happily answered their questions without fear or deceit, and they awarded his honesty with his life.

When he returned to the order he was consumed by a lust for knowledge—he was driven to know more of these godlike creatures that plucked him from the void as they did. He knew magic in the super-sciences flowing through his veins, but they honesty worked *miracles*. It takes a great deal to impress the senses of a techno-mage, and he was thoroughly impressed. He made it his personal goal to find all the dark places where the First Ones walked, and he pursued it with all his being.

In his travels, occasionally checking in with the order, he met dozens of Ancient races. He played games of chance—poorly, but still played nevertheless—with the Mindriders. He watched the forming of the Tri by the Triad, with no fear in his heart at all. The Kirishiac explained to him how they conquered the stars, while their Kirisz servants brought him fantastic foods and drink. He continued his adventures until finally he was offered a place in the cosmos at the side of the Walkers.

When the Walkers explained that this would be a one-way trip, he put all his things in line and sent the complete collection of his notes to his brothers and sisters in the order. He supposedly left a farewell note to his apprentices—whose names have been lost to time—and then docked his pinnace inside of one of the Walkers' Traveller ships, which vanished into the dimensional tides never to be heard from again. (see *The Techno-Mages Fact Book* for details on Techno-Mages and their abilities.)

'Abraham Evercall'; Marcel Biggiotti

'Our prison of flesh has windows in which our minds can wander out from. One day we will throw those windows wide and never return to the cages of the mundanes.'

9th Level Telepath (P10)
Hit Points: 16
Initiative: +4 (+4 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.

DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +6/+1 base, +5/+0 melee, +10/+5 ranged
Special Qualities: Communication, Danger Sense, Jamming, Locate Mind, Maintain Concentration, Surface Scan
Saves: +4 Fortitude, +7 Reflex, +10 Will
Abilities: Str 9, Dex 18, Con 13, Int 16, Wis 19, Cha 16
Skills: Appraise (Ancient worth) +3, Computer Use +8, Concentration +10, Diplomacy +8, Hide +10, Intimidate +6, Jump +4, Knowledge (First Ones) +14, Knowledge (telepathy) +15, Listen +11, Move Silently +6, Sense Motive +10, Spot +10, Technical (Ancient) +10 and Telepathy +10
Feats: Adaptive Mind, Contact, Data Access, Defensive Block, Far Telepathy, Meditation, Research Operative (Psi Corps Elite Teams)
Equipment: Auricon EF-7 PPG, Needler (Tetrazyne darts and Sleeper darts), Reinforced Officers clothes (DR 3)

Marcel Biggiotti, a fifth generation telepath from Sicily, joined the Psi Corps at the ripe age of eight. A strong telepath since birth, Marcel never had to work very hard growing up. It was only a matter of steering the right people into the right influences, and then enjoying the fruits of the labour. After joining the Corps, his training became the only passion worth building on—and his relationship within the organisation.

After a few years of diligent service to the corporate sector Marcel was offered a few 'under the radar' operations that he performed without fail or error. His subordinates claimed he was the image of discretion and his superiors made note of his excellence. In short order he was soon organising his own black ops missions, eventually becoming one of the Psi Corps' best 'go to' men for operations no one was to know about. Then it happened, he too fell off the official map. Marcel Biggiotti had not been on an official mission or action for so long that he no longer appeared on lower echelon directives. His office was no longer called for meetings. His pay cheques became numbers in a phantom account. Biggiotti was, for all purposes, a casualty of the war against the mundane.

Then he landed the most intriguing research mission he had ever heard of. He was to train a handful of black psi-ops like him and take them into the field in search of the key to permanently projecting oneself as thought. He was informed that a race of elder beings called 'Mindriders' learned how to exit their bodies as pure telepathic energy, and the Corps wanted that ability for themselves. Imagine assassins that never use their own bodies to do their bloody work, or spies that hop from mind to mind in search of the proper information. The Psi Corps would be able to go anywhere, anytime—and even the alien governments would have to fear what they could do.

Marcel adopted his new name of 'Abraham Evercall', and began using his black ops teams to steal or uncover information on the First Ones and their transcendence. When Clarke began dealing with the Shadows, it was Evercall who informed true loyalists that the president was making deals that the Corps did not want to follow. It was Evercall who informed Bester about the frozen telepaths the Shadows planned on using. Finally, it was Evercall who would eventually plan several extraneous 'Remember Byron' terrorist bombings in order to keep tensions high and hopefully bring the Vorlon-touched Lyta Alexander into their possession. Evercall has his black-gloved fingers in many pies throughout the galaxy; some would say he might have agendas of his own beyond what the Corps is aware of. That is yet to be seen.

Rathe Zha'lunn, Drutoi of the Eclipse Caste

'We will be the fingers that snuff out the candles of Light.'

12th Level Shadowsouled Minbari Officer (fleet)
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +4 (+2 Dex, +2 Shadowsouled)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: +12/+7/+2 base, +17/+12/+7 melee, +14/+9/+4 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Elite (fleet), Branch Specialisation (fleet), Rallying Call, Regenerate 1 hp/hour, Shadow Implants*, Telepathic Bane, Way of Command
Saves: +10 Fortitude, +6 Reflex, +11 Will
Abilities: Str 21, Dex 14, Con 15, Int 16, Wis 16, Cha 13
Skills: Bluff +15, Computer Use +10, Concentration +6, Diplomacy +4, Disguise +12, Gather Information +8, Hide +12, Intimidate +16, Jump +10, Knowledge (First Ones) +12, Listen +12, Move Silently +13, Pilot +12, Sense Motive +8, Spot +10, and Technical (Ancient) +10
Feats: Contacts (Drakh), Eclipse Caste Member, Sixth Sense, Spacecraft Proficiency, Two-Weapon Fighting, Weapon Focus (Black Blade), Weapon Specialisation (Black Blade), Vehicle Combat, Vehicle Dodge
Equipment: Darkshard armour, Grahl'shul (Ancient Black Blade), Sha'an PPG, Venom Grenades, Changeling Net, the warship *Ghura'kal*
* Rathe's *Shadow Implants* enhance his ability to withstand physical damage granting him a natural Damage Reduction of 3. They also inhibit his physical aging, extending his Maximum Age to roughly 1,500 years.

The sinister Rathe Zha'lunn is a patient and devious conniver with plots within plots streaming from his villainous mind. Ever since his *spawning* in 2183 he has been a self-serving survivor. It is said that he strangled one of his crib mates when he was still in swaddling clothes, and murdered the others by the time he was twelve. Inheriting his parents' wealth of knowledge and resources—and their direct ties to the slumbering Shadows—Rathe soon became enamoured with the image if the dark progenitors.

He grew up in back alleys and dusty ruins, paying undesirables to do his bidding while he schemed from

behind closed doors. His skill as a puppeteer became honed to a fine edge over the decades, able to cut through the galaxy from entire systems away. He was sated with the ability to steer so many and to plan so far ahead to the future unerringly. Then fate struck a blow to his plans. The Earth-Minbari War came to his front door.

A small moon base where he was stockpiling illegal and devastating weapons for an upcoming raid on a Proxima colony became a war zone when both Minbari and Earther ground forces landed on his backwater staging point. In seven days and six nights of fighting they had all but destroyed all of Rathe's hard work, so he took it upon himself to end the skirmish. Rathe unleashed a horrible blood coagulant into the drinking water supplies of both armies, waited for the troops to begin their agonizing death throes and sent a dozen of his most trusted and lethal Shadowsouled assassins into the camps to murder them all. When it was all said and done, over three hundred soldiers on both sides were bled or poisoned to death and Rathe was nearly satisfied.

It was then, walking amongst the hundreds of butchered corpses he first felt like a god amongst mortals. It was a rush he never wanted to give up, and so he created the Eclipse Caste from his fellows—the twelve loyalists standing in the bloody fields with him at that time. He pledged to them they would one day crush their foolish kin and all of their allies like the insects they truly were. He pledged to make the Eclipse as gods themselves in the dark places of the galaxy, until he could find the science or technology to make it so in flesh and blood.

Then there will be vengeance and a reckoning. The Light cannot be rid of its Shadow—ever. (for more details on Shadowsouled Minbari, see *The Minbari Federation Fact Book.*)

Ha'ta'zan Kok'r, the Last Ikarran

'All the technology in the world, and no one worthy to share it with.'

20th Level Ikarran Scientist
Hit Points: 33
Initiative: +0
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: +10/+5 base, +12/+7 melee, +14/+9 ranged
Special Qualities: Genetic Alterations*, Peripheral Studies (Knowledge: Bio-Science, Medical, Technical: electronics), Primary Area of Study (Technical: genetics), Use Alien Artefact
Saves: +16 Fortitude, +6 Reflex, +16 Will
Abilities: Str 14 (18), Dex 10, Con 24, Int 26, Wis 19, Cha 12
Skills: Appraise +8, Appraise (Ancient worth) +10, Balance +3, Bluff +10, Climb +4, Computer Use +16, Concentration +12, Diplomacy +8, Gather Information +8, Hide +12, Intimidate +8, Jump +8, Knowledge (Bio-Science) +28, Listen +12, Medical +18, Profession (Geneticist) +10, Sense Motive +8, Spot +10, Survival +8, Technical (electronics) +16 and Technical (genetics) +28
Feats: Alien Anatomy, Data Access, Great Fortitude, Improved Recovery, Sixth Sense, Skill Focus (computer use), Toughness
Equipment: Defence Gauntlet, Dermal Hardening Plate, Integral Organic Scanner, Integral Organic Data Storage and Decryption, Nerve Router, Respiratory Filters, Synaptic Lenses
* Ha'ta'zan has performed countless genetic alterations to himself in order to survive the hundreds of years as he has done. He is for all purposes immune to natural disease, poisons and aging.

Like all of his people Ha'ta'zan was raised a xenophobic bigot with an intense fear/hatred of the other races that often attacked and raided his planet. He was an entry level chemist when the word began to spread about the powerful Bio-Warriors. He knew they were created to protect the Ikarrans from the un-pure and unclean species, but it came as a shock to everyone when they turned on the highly hybridised (genetically speaking) Ikarran race.

When the attacks started in the rural areas, his peers began to sneer and mock the outlands—claiming that they must have been 'lying down with the enemy' and 'deserving what they were getting.' When the attacks began to draw closer they scoffed at the idea of their own purity being in question. When the first noble laboratory fell to the relentless assault they cried out and prayed to their Torvalus 'gods' who had forsaken them decades before.

That is when the cowardice hidden deep within Ha'ta'zan came bubbling coldly to the surface. He grabbed a chemical cryogenic agent and pumped himself full of survivability before leaping into the cold storage freezers. When the freezer ran out of coolant days, weeks or months later he began to venture out into the laboratory to find survivors. It was obvious, their inventions were too well made and he was not sure how long he could survive with them out in the wilds. He chose instead to seal himself up in the lab and go about this problem the way a scientist should—he would invent a cure to this disease.

The problems came at him one at a time, stealing his attention away from the task. He began to dehydrate, so he genetically vented his skin to absorb moisture directly. When his food ran out he created self-replicating fat cells to live off of indefinitely. When the warriors would occasionally return he would defend as best he could before retreating back into the freezers—the only place they seemed not to know to look. He continued his work as best he can, occasionally running to other parts of the lab complex for supplies or a change of surroundings.

If only he could make a companion to ease the boredom of immortality.

The Caretaker of Sigma 957

'Do you have time for a story?'

?th Level Dimensional Telepath (P15)
Hit Points: 150
Initiative: +8 (+4 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 60 ft.
DV: 20 (+10 Reflex)
Attacks: +20/+15/+10/+5 base
Special Qualities: Super-Telepath*, Dimensional Construct**
Saves: +20 Fortitude, +10 Reflex, +25 Will
Abilities: Str 22, Dex 18, Con 30, Int 30, Wis 30, Cha 24
Skills: The Caretaker has access to the single largest bank of data, experiences, and knowledge telepathically. If it wishes to perform any action requiring a skill check it should automatically be considered to have passed it. Anyone engaging in a contested skill check with the Caretaker will lose automatically.
Feats: n/a
Equipment: Walker Database of Sigma 957
* The Caretaker is a telepath of unimaginable power. It is considered to have access to all Telepathic abilities and Feats.
** As a construct crafted from the energies of several dimensions the Caretaker can withstand tremendous damage before seeming affected. For all general purposes, it has a Damage Reduction of 15 and regenerates 20 hit points per combat round. If forced to attack physically (which it abhors), the Caretaker inflicts 3d10 energy damage at a 50 ft. range.

Borne into creation from a thousand parts taken from a score of dimensions, the Caretaker has 'lived' nearly as long as the database on Sigma 957 has existed. The Walkers created it from the best parts of the best places they had been to fabricate the perfect warden for their prison of information. The result was the androgynous Caretaker—who only asked a single question.

'How may I serve?'

The Walkers instructed the being to watch over the database and make sure it functioned, as they would be occasionally stopping in to upload new information into it periodically. They granted it the ability to use the database as it saw fit, but specifically could not allow others to pillage the files for their use without specific consent by the Walkers.

On several occasions, especially when the Narn still explored the forbidden planet, the Caretaker has had to discourage data-raiders from the base. Using his potentially deadly telepathic powers and endless guile, it is a formidable foe to have. The Walkers were happy it became so self-sufficient and remained so loyal. So loyal in fact that the Walkers neglected to tell the Caretaker when the last of them left the galaxy—possibly for the last time—in 2261.

The Caretaker learned quickly about this though its telepathic travels and eavesdropping, and had to come to the realisation that it may never be visited by them again. Even a dimensional construct can go mad from loneliness, so the Caretaker looks upon his position from a new angle in recent years.

As long as the information is given freely to visitors, rather than stolen by raiders, it would be alright. At least, of course, until the Walkers come back to tell him otherwise.

Azarra Chaklan, Commodore of the 'Unsanctioned Salvage Union'

'Stand down and prepare for boarding. Comply within ten seconds or I will carve a hole in your hull, let in a little hard vacuum, then I will call back in a few minutes and ask again. We will keep repeating that until I get the answer I want—or none at all.'

6th Level Drazi Agent/5th Level Raider
Hit Points: 28
Initiative: +9 (+3 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative, +2 Drazi)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: +9/+4 base, +12/+7 melee, +12/+7 ranged
Special Qualities: Born to Fly, Pinpoint Shooting, Safe Distance, Scales DR 1, Security Systems, Skill Mastery (Appraise, Bluff, Sense Motive), Sneak Attack +1d6
Saves: +6 Fortitude, +11 Reflex, +4 Will
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 17, Con 16, Int 16, Wis 13, Cha 12
Skills: Appraise +13, Bluff +14, Climb +8, Computer Use +10, Diplomacy +8, Gather Information +10, Hide +8, Intimidate +15, Jump +8, Listen +7, Profession (Black Marketer) +10, Sense Motive +11, Spot +10 and Technical (electronics) +9
Feats: Fire Control, Improved Unarmed Combat, Independently Wealthy, Spacecraft Proficiency, Weapon Prof. (spacecraft weapons)
Equipment: Auricon EF-PR PPG Rifle, Masterworked Coutari, Multi-Part PPG (hidden in vest pockets at all times), the slightly modified Sunhawk Drazi warship the *Gildhawk*

Azarra has only ever known piracy and freebooting all his life. His father was a bloody-handed hijacker and his mother a government spy for the Drazi Freehold. He could hold a PPG before he could walk, and knew how to fly a Star Snake light fighter before he could biologically reproduce. The thrill and the rush of sailing on the void, target in sight, and carving him up for scrap was far better than anything schooling or military service could ever give him. When his mother was executed for treason—a trumped up charge to cover her blackmailing several planetary governors—Azarra killed his father and took over the family business.

In ten short years he had a sizable fortune, several starships and enough loyal privateers in his employ that he needed to find a base to call home. He found an off-limits system filled with creepy ancient devices and dead planets, which was perfect for his new pirate bases to thrive. He invested a great deal into developing the area with a few other raider captains, and soon the Shipyards of Mitoc were home to a large den of raiders.

Several authorities have sent patrols to the system. They are either bribed away quickly, or are never heard from again. Azarra is a bloodthirsty pirate who enjoys precision kills over the massive conflicts some others find themselves in. Lately he has taken well to spies and terrorism, buying surplus explosive devices from League worlds and smuggling them to targets—demanding hefty ransoms to avoid public displays of his gumption. One stubborn Brakiri merchant lost several hundred thousand credits worth of fuel oils by denying Azarra's cut, when a plasma core folded in upon itself seconds after the merchant sent the refusal.

Azarra is cunning and devious. He will not give up his empire easily or quietly, and in 2266—when he cuts a deal with the insidious Drakh—he becomes a major thorn in the side of the Interstellar Alliance.

Abrckxxs, High Prelate of the Kirisz

'I believe I met a human a long time ago. I feel no need to meet another.'

20th Level Kirisz Diplomat (P10)
Hit Points: 34
Initiative: -2 (-2 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +10/+5 base, +17/+12 melee, +8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities: Telepathy, Solar Fuelled, Natural Resistances, Improved Diplomacy
Saves: +13 Fortitude, +4 Reflex, +16 Will
Abilities: Str 25, Dex 6, Con 25, Int 16, Wis 18, Cha 14
Skills: Appraise +18, Climb +15, Computer Use +10, Diplomacy +22, Gather Information +16, Intimidate +17, Knowledge (First Ones) +22, Knowledge (Ancient history) +24, Listen +17, Pilot +12, Sense Motive +21, Spot +16, Technical (gravitic) +18 and Telepathy +20
Feats: Adaptive Scan, Contacts x10, High-Voltage, Resist Scan, Spacecraft Proficiency, Thickened Exoskeleton, Toughness x2
Equipment: Anything available to the Kirisz Undercity, a salvaged Kirishiac Knightship stored in the Prelate Spire.

Abrckxxs, the eldest of the Kirisz, has been alive for several thousand years—since the end of the Kirishiac War. He served as a pilot in the war, and watched as the Walkers stole the moon from his planet's orbit. He watched as the planet began to fall apart around his people. He watched as the Kirishiac Lords left them behind after the surrender.

It was only natural to him to take command and rebuild for their eventual return. He oversaw the building of the undercity, and he designed the massive gravitic shields that protected the Kirisz while the planet tried to right itself. As their society began to take shape once more, it was through his directions that the crafting cycles took hold. Abrckxxs is the sole reason why the Kirisz did not fade into nothingness when weaker races would have.

He upholds the ideals of his masters; trying to create a utopia for them should they come back from the beyond. His views on outsiders remain sceptical. They were the spawn of those who caused the Kirishiac Lords so much trouble in his younger days, and cannot be trusted. The Prelate Council agreed with his views, only sending the occasional pilgrim or hunter into the void to stay abreast of the galaxy. Until the day some old faces returned from a very long time ago.

The Drakh appeared in late 2261 to ask the Kirisz for their allegiance against the agents of the Vorlons. When the Kirisz denied them aid nor allegiance, the Drakh bombed Krish for hours—causing massive damage to the cities and the protective shields before leaving to find solace elsewhere. During the bombing, Abrckxxs is fatally wounded and gives one final command to his Prelates, who are shocked to see the eternal one's time drawing to a close.

He ordered the Kirisz to build, to build and wage a war in his name. The Drakh and their allies would pay dearly, and all those who stand in the way be damned.

BLOOD DIMMED TIDE

INTRODUCTION

The galaxy has known its share of war. From the distant legends of ancient wars between races that strode between the stars when humanity was still mastering fire to the conquering marches of the Centauri in their prime to the bloody slaughter and curious end to the war between Earth and Minbar, war is the common language of the galaxy, the thread that binds the races together even as it destroys them.

War was what the Babylon Project was envisioned to stop, the ceaseless and senseless warring that drenched the void with blood and threatened to destroy not merely cities or countries or armies, but entire races of intelligent beings. Every race has its own memories of war, whether it be wars fought amongst itself, like Earth's great wars of the 20th Century, awesome in their horror, or wars fought against a race born light years distant, struggles taking place on the battlefield of hyperspace from the ramparts of high orbit. Of all these memories of war, however, perhaps none is so fresh, so clear, shared by so many, as the Dilgar War of 2230 to 2232.

In the early 23rd Century, the Dilgar, a belligerent race by nature, discovered that the star their homeworld orbited was about to go nova. Desperate to find a new home for their people, they began an aggressive expansionist campaign, cutting a swath of blood and fear through many of the people of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. The Dilgar did not merely conquer, however. They destroyed, they annihilated, they slaughtered.

The Dilgar eradicated entire planetary populations, unleashing biogenic weapons and enormous mass-drivers upon civilian targets, claiming more and more bloody territory as their own. As their brutal advance continued, they were careful not to stir the anger of the major interstellar powers, such as the Centauri, the Minbari or, of course, the Vorlons, but they paid little attention to the human newcomers.

The Dilgar advance brought them closer and closer to Earth, and the Earth Alliance knew if the aliens were not stopped, Earth itself would soon be directly in their path. Massive funds and manpower were diverted into EarthForce, beefing up humanity's military might to deal with the oncoming threat. Armed and ready, mankind entered its first major interstellar conflict.

The Dilgar were unprepared for the entry of EarthForce into the ongoing war, an error that became an advantage for EarthForce – an advantage humanity never ceased pressing. EarthForce's sudden involvement in the war won the appreciation and respect of many members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds Races who had stood all but helpless in the face of the Dilgar advance now had a potent and fresh ally on their side. EarthForce began to slow the tide of the Dilgar onslaught, finally turning them back and forcing them, light-minute by light-minute, back to their homeworld. Along the way, the atrocities committed by the Dilgar, until then little but rumours, if even that, were uncovered and chronicled as fact. There was no mercy for the Dilgar, no quarter given, until the aggressors were confined again to their own homeworld. Imprisoned on the planet that had birthed their race, the Dilgar could only await the inevitable. Within a year, their sun went nova, blasting the planet clean of all life and forever consigning the Dilgar race to the history books.

The Dilgar are gone … or so it is believed.

In *Blood-Dimmed Tide*, the Player Characters are in a race with various factions to find one of the last remnants of the Dilgar – a great war cruiser known as the *Cataclysm*. Each faction has its own agenda and its own means of operating, but all of them pose a danger to the Player Characters. Unless the characters act quickly and keep one step ahead of their enemies, the still unhealed wounds of the Dilgar War will be ripped open again.

Blood-Dimmed Tide is intended for a group of four to six Player Characters of 4th to 5th level. At least one of the Player Characters is assumed to know Mallory. This need not be a close bond, only enough for Mallory to know that the Player Character is a person of good conscience. It would be best if the Player Character were human, with a background in EarthForce, but Games Masters should feel free to write Mallory into the campaign in whatever way works best for the continuing storyline. This Player Character should also live on or spend the majority of his time on Babylon 5. The Player Character will know that Mallory is from Earth, that he served with distinction in both the Dilgar War and the war against the Minbari, and that a great deal of his life has been occupied searching for missing elements of the Dilgar military. As for the remainder of the Player Characters, virtually any character race or character class is appropriate, though as parts of this scenario involve dancing on the ragged edge of lawbreaking (IPX *can* argue convincingly that the hyperspace coordinates are their intellectual property, after all), some Player Characters may be inappropriate. At least one of the Player Characters should be skilled in Computer Use.

Though *Blood-Dimmed Tide* is officially set in 2258, it can easily be altered to take place during any year in which

Babylon 5 is open and in operation. Much of the action in this scenario takes place aboard Babylon 5, and though it is not necessary to own the *Babylon 5 Station Guide*, it would certainly prove helpful to the Games Master.

BACKGROUND

'Exploring the past to create a better future.' - Corporate motto of Interplanetary Expeditions

In 2232, in the closing days of the Dilgar War, a Dilgar war cruiser known as the *Cataclysm* barely survived a battle with three Earth Alliance Nova Dreadnoughts, obliterating one, sending another spinning powerless through space and wounding the third badly before limping away into hyperspace, escaping the EarthForce ships sent to destroy her.

After the Dilgar were forced back to their planet at last, their entire remaining fleet was assembled in orbit by the victors and destroyed, but the *Cataclysm* was not among them. A search for the ship combed star system after star system, but no sign of the Dilgar was found. Most people presume the vessel was too badly damaged when it entered hyperspaceto survive and that it came apart under the stress of the jump. Most people are wrong.

Aside from the desire to hunt down and obliterate the last of the Dilgar before they could rise to threaten other races again, the *Cataclysm* was sought for another, more mundane purpose. Her cargo hold was thought to contain something of tremendous value, though what it may have been remains a topic of contention. Some believe it was a weapon, others a lethal virus, while still others posit that it was wealth and riches stripped from conquered worlds. The only evidence for this comes from a cryptic communication by the *Cataclysm*'s captain to the Dilgar home world just before the her battle with EarthForce began. The message read: 'We know what can save us. We bring it home.'

Aboard the *Telemachus*, one of the EarthForce Nova Dreadnoughts sent to destroy the *Cataclysm*, a young communications officer named Sean Mallory intercepted and decoded the message. Knowing the threat the Dilgar still posed to the galaxy at large, Mallory immediately brought the message to his captain, only to watch in despair hours later as, after fending off the EarthForce attack, the *Cataclysm* slipped away into hyperspace, battered but functional.

For the last 26 years, Sean Mallory, now retired from his position in EarthForce where he had risen to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, has been obsessed with the *Cataclysm*. He has never accepted the theory that the mighty ship broke up in hyperspace due to the stress of jumping – he is certain the vessel is still out there somewhere, and he is certain it still poses a threat to the peace of the galaxy.

Since retiring from EarthForce after the Battle of the Line, Mallory has been free to pursue the *Cataclysm* relentlessly. It seemed like a fool's errand. The *Cataclysm* had long since been written off, consigned to the dust of history of the Dilgar who built it, but Mallory remained convinced it was out there, and that the cargo it carried, whatever that cryptic message might have meant, remained a danger to the peace of the galaxy. He was right, of course, but not in the way he believes.

Mallory is hardly a fool. He knew that finding a single ship somewhere in the galaxy, after it had slipped away into hyperspace, made looking for a particular grain of sand on a beach seem like child's play, but something made him unable to give up the search. He embarked on a quixotic search, delving through reams of seemingly random scanner data, searching for anomalous signals in hyperspace or anywhere the Dilgar may have hidden a base but, after years of searching, could still find no clear evidence of the *Cataclysm*'s fate. In desperation, he realised he needed to cast a wider net.

By this point, in 2256, the *Cataclysm* and its cryptic message has all but faded from common memory, subsumed into the general sense of loathing encompassing everything Dilgar. However, the story that the ship had been carrying a cargo of immense value is one that never truly died, and though a hundred stories give a dozen theories as to what was lurking in the cargo hold of the war cruiser, the story that remains most prevalent and popular is of a hold full of ancient alien artefacts, weapons of the kind of power no race today can produce. Mallory, for his part, has never claimed to know the true nature of the cargo, but is not above playing on the greeds and desires of others if it could bring him the *Cataclysm*.

Mallory gathered his research together, gilding supposition with implied evidence to give it a brighter sheen of credibility, and approached Interplanetary Expeditions, a large and powerful corporation whose sole interest was the harvesting of ancient technology from dead civilisations. Mallory presenteda powerful case to them that the *Cataclysm* had been carrying a cargo of mighty weapons that were old when humanity was new. The evidence was thin, to be sure, but it was enough to intrigue the IPX directors he met with, and an alliance was formed.

IPX decided to mount an expedition to find the *Cataclysm*, even going so far as to hire Mallory, whose knowledge of the incident was unsurpassed, to lead the team. Mallory's new corporate partner was able to bring vast resources to bear on the project, but finding the *Cataclysm* was still only a vague hope. Suspicious by nature, Mallory began his own investigation into IPX concurrent with the search for the *Cataclysm*, and

he did not like what he saw. Using all the expertise gleaned during his years in communication and the research skills he acquired looking for the *Cataclysm*, in conjunction with the access he enjoyed as an IPX expedition leader, he discovered that the hypothetical weapon aboard the *Cataclysm* was coveted by IPX not to destroy it, but to master it, manufacture it and sell it. He also found enough clues to suspect that IPX perhaps knew things about the *Cataclysm* he did not, and even had an inkling of what that cargo might be. While he was unable to find any hard evidence, he found enough intimations and circumstantial evidence to make him certain of IPX's ulterior motives, including internal memoranda regarding contacts from the Home Guard and what EarthForce could do with a weapon the Dilgar felt could win the war for them there in its last days. He considered resigning immediately, but knew that would do no good. IPX already knew almost everything he did, and with the resources available to the corporation, they were perfectly capable of continuing the search without him. He decided to remain where he was for the time being, determined to find a way to keep the *Cataclysm*'s cargo out of IPX hands, if indeed the ship was ever discovered.

Then, after more than a year and a half of searching, the first evidence of the missing cruiser was discovered. Floating in hyperspace not far from Babylon 5 was a piece of hull plating less than a metre square, its composition and colour consistent with a Dilgar war cruiser. On a leap of faith, Mallory ordered the vessel to drop out of hyperspace.

Mallory's team found themselves in an asteroid field in the middle of unclaimed space near the Sh'Lassan Empire – raider territory, far from any star. Despite the danger of remaining, Mallory ordered his vessel to resume sensor sweeps, starting a hunt that lasted for two weeks. After a fortnight with no sign of the *Cataclysm* and no sign of raiders, the IPX vessel found both at once – sensor readings coming from a large, nearby asteroid consistent with a Dilgar vessel and matching those of the hull plating perfectly, and the sensor pings of 14 incoming raider ships. Knowing that to stay another moment would be suicide, Mallory ordered the ship back into hyperspace and fled for Earth.

Mallory contacted IPX to tell them of the find, but all the questions fired at him by the corporation's directors concerned readings and indications consistent with weaponry. As with so many things, there was nothing in the exchange he could put his finger on, precisely, but the behaviour of the directors raised his hackles and made him certain there was no other option than to destroy the *Cataclysm*.

With only an hour to go in the last hyperspace leg of the trip home, Mallory partially erased the coordinates of the *Cataclysm* from the research vessel's computer, replacing one set of the coordinates with group of random numbers. Pocketing the only remaining copy of the true coordinates, he gladhanded his way through a debriefing with IPX directors, a false smile plastered on his face, and as soon as he could, he fled IPX headquarters. Knowing that IPX would figure out his deception before long and almost certainly come after him, he memorised the correct half of the coordinates he had given IPX and placed the other half of the coordinates in a package before mailing it to (Player Character) on Babylon 5 before boarding a tramp ship and heading there himself. Unfortunately, he made one mistake – he paid for the postage fee with his identicard. Once IPX realised what he had done, they were able to follow.

PART ONE – WITH A WHISPER IT BEGINS

Blood-Dimmed Tide begins four days after Mallory posted the package containing the coordinates to the Player Character. As so many things do, it begins as something that seems small, with a simple BabCom message.

Though Earth is only 36 hours of standard hyperspace travel away from Babylon 5, the ship Mallory is taking to get there, the *Galloping Star*, is not following the quickest possible path. A trading vessel, it has several stops to make along the way, increasing its total travel time from 36 hours to 87.

Message in the Dark

At the start of the scenario, the Player Characters are assumed to be on Babylon 5, pursuing whatever interests or enterprises occupy their time when not involved in an adventure. When the Player Character known to Mallory returns to his quarters, he notices a message waiting for him on his BabCom terminal. Once the Player Character chooses to play the message, the Games Master may read the following:

The familiar colours of the BabCom terminal fade into a static-filled, slightly distorted picture, and after a moment, you recognise the face of Sean Mallory. His face is drawn, sporting several days' growth of beard, and the circles beneath his eyes suggest he has shaved more recently than he has slept. Behind him is dull grey bulkhead, offering no clues as to his location. Looking directly into the camera, he takes a few deep breaths and speaks.

'Hello. It's been a long time, I know. I've got some things to tell you, but I can't talk long here, and I can't say a lot of things out loud, not over a communication to a BabCom terminal, and certainly not on this ship – I think someone's on board looking for me. I used some old communications tricks to make sure that once this message is played on your end, it vanishes like it never was, and I don't think there's any way it can ever be found or traced to you.

I'm on my way to you now, aboard a bucket of rust called the Galloping Star, but I won't be there for another day at least. Look, I sent you a package before I left Earth. It is very, very

important that you get it as soon as you can – there are people who will be after it. I checked the delivery number before calling you, and it was received in the post office there on the station tonight. Get it, then steer clear of your quarters until the Galloping Star docks. Meet me in the Jump Point in the Central Corridor. Don't open the package, and for God's sake don't let it out of your sight!'

As Mallory finishes speaking, he looks around furtively for a moment, then the message ends.

The Player Character may receive this message at any time the Games Master desires, though it should be after the Babylon 5 Post Office closes for the day – which should not be difficult, considering their hours of operation. If any of the Player Characters wish to check for the estimated arrival time of Mallory's ship, the *Galloping Star*, it is simple enough to do so through any BabCom terminal. The *Galloping Star* is expected to dock with Babylon 5 at 18:25 the next day.

What happens next will depend largely upon the Player Characters and their proclivities and skills. As Mallory said, there are indeed people after the package he sent, as it took IPX less than a day to figure out what he had done. Alise Torona, an agent in the employ of IPX, is already on the station, well aware that the package Mallory took time to mail before fleeing Earth is sitting in the station's post office. Rather than risk the potential legal complications of breaking into the Post Office, however, Torona is content to watch and wait until the Player Character comes to claim the package. She has the Player Character's name gleaned from the files of the Earth Alliance postal service.

The Player Characters, on the other hand, may not be patient enough to wait until morning, and may attempt to break into the Post Office to make certain they get their hands on the package before anyone else does. This is an extremely risky course of action, for though security at the Post Office is not airtight, it is nonetheless formidable, particularly for characters at the level of the Player Characters. If the Player Characters do not attempt to break in to the Post Office, they may occupy their time however they like until the next day.

A Package of Troubles

Whether the Player Characters seek to break in to the Post Office in the dead of night, or whether they wait until morning, they will almost certainly be going there at some point, unless they simply ignore Mallory's call. Though the Post Office is closed after 17:00, the deck it is on, Deck 1 of Blue Sector, is always open to civilians – with the exception of the area containing the Quartermaster's Office, which is always restricted.

The Post Office

When it is closed, the Post Office is off limits to everybody. Not even Security Chief Michael Garibaldi may enter without just cause. Responding to an attempted break-in, of course, is just cause. However, the point is that even if one of the Player Characters is a security officer, he may not enter the Post Office when it is closed.

1. Main Entry. This is the main public entry to the Post Office. During hours of operation, the doors stand open, but at night, they are locked and monitored by a security system designed to emit a silent alarm if compromised. Bypassing the lock requires a DC 20 Technical (electronics) skill check roll, as well as 20 minutes of time. Bypassing the security system likewise requires a DC 20 Technical (electronics) skill check roll and 20 minutes of time. Games Masters should bear in mind that the door to the Post Office is on a main corridor of Blue Sector, very close to the sector's security station. Patrols of security officers will pass by this area roughly every 30 minutes. If the Player Characters trip the alarm on their way in, security will respond in force in two rounds (1d3+1 security officers).

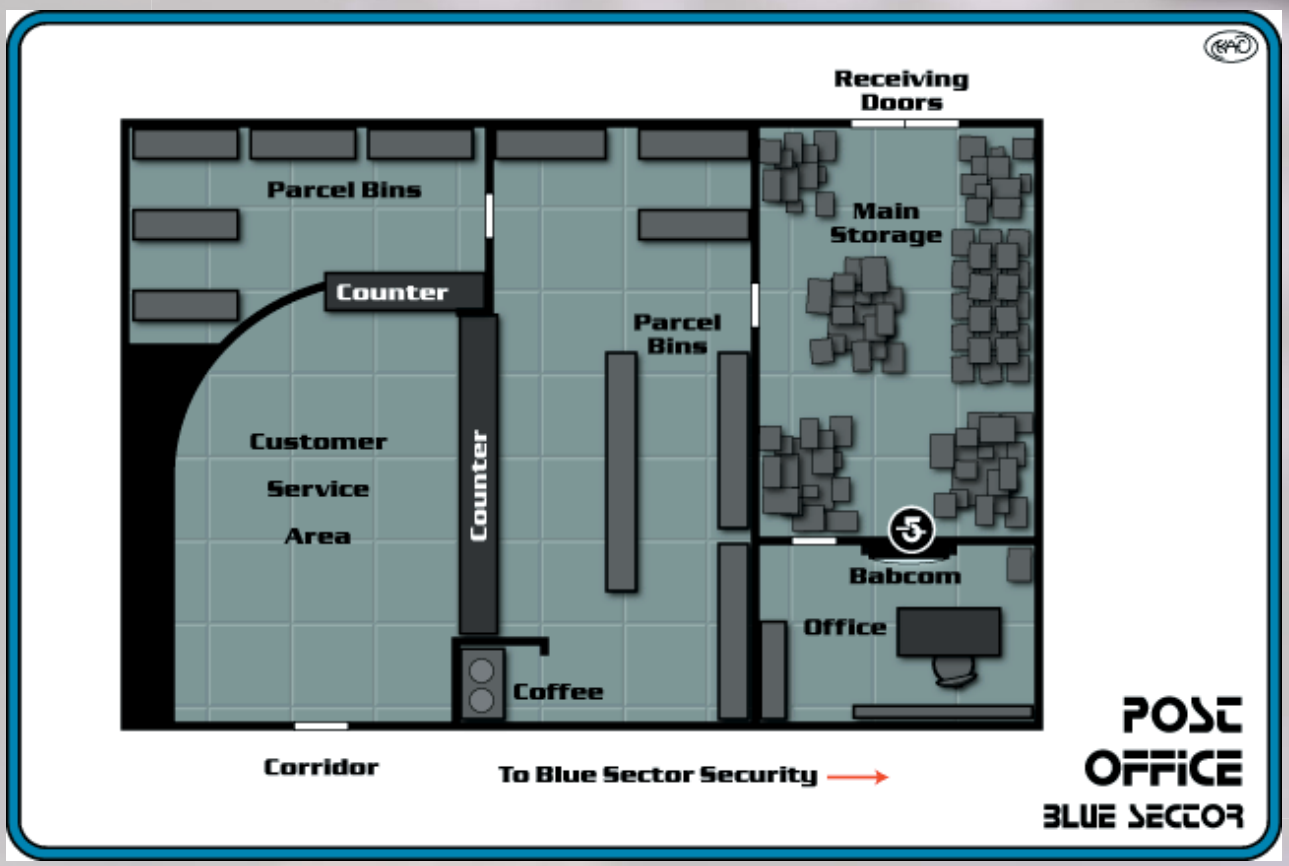
Security Officer

3rd Level Human Soldier; hp 15; Init +1; Spd 30 ft.; DV 14; Atk: +5 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Co-ordinated Unit +1; Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0; Str 15, Dex 13, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 11
Notable Skills: Acrobatics +7, Athletics +8, Intimidate +6, Investigate +1, Knowledge (Babylon 5) +6, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +1
Feats: Armour Familiarity, Brawler, Dodge, Drazi Tackle, Fluency (Human), Great Fortitude, Point Blank Shot, Weapon Proficiency (close combat, grenade, pistol and rifle)
Standard Equipment: EarthForce wrist link, padded armour (DR 2), shock stick (+5, 1d8+2 nonlethal dam, 1-h), W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., six shots, AP 1, Automatic)

2. Parcel Bins. These bins contain parcels that have already been sorted by the postal workers. The package sent by Mallory is not among them, though if the Player Characters search them all, it will take 15 minutes and a Notice skill check roll (DC 10) to realise it is not there.

3. Storage Access. This door is considerably less intimidating than the front door of the Post Office. It has no security system attached to it, and the lock is only of average quality, meaning it can be bypassed in only 2d4 rounds with a Technical (electronics) skill check roll at DC 15.

4. Main Storage. The storage area is a picture of contained chaos. It is the drop-off point for new packages and other mail coming into the station, and though it is arranged in such a way that no doubt makes perfect sense to the postal workers, it is nearly incomprehensible to all other life forms. If the Player Characters have broken in to the Post Office, they are faced with either searching



through the boxes one by one (a task that will take approximately two hours) or attempting to decipher the system. Deciphering the system requires ten minutes spent studying the layout and an Intelligence check (DC 15).

5. The Package. This is the actual location of Mallory's package inside the Post Office.

6. Receiving Doors. These are the doors through which all incoming mail travels. They open into a corridor running through a restricted area of the Sector, and are impossible to reach from the other side without appropriate security credentials. Like the Post Office's front door, they are equipped with a good quality lock and a silent alarm. Bypassing the lock requires a DC 20 Technical (electronics) skill check roll, as well as 20 minutes of time. Bypassing the security system likewise requires a DC 20 Technical (electronics) skill check roll and 20 minutes of time.

7. Postmaster's Office. This cluttered room is the office of the Babylon 5 post master. It is a cluttered, disheveled place marked by old coffee cups, a file-covered desk and a small BabCom unit on the wall. The lock on this door can be defeated easily, requiring only one round and a DC 10 Technical (electronics) skill check to open.

If the Player Characters do attempt to break in to the Post Office to find the package and manage to do so without attracting the unwelcome attention of station security, they will enjoy one advantage over waiting until the morning – they will not immediately be identified by Torona. However, considering the difficulty of breaking in and getting away, compared to the much safer option of waiting until morning, *Blood-Dimmed Tide* assumes the Player Characters will choose to wait.

Mail Call

Claiming a package from the Post Office is easy for those willing to wait in line. The queue for the Post Office usually begins to form around 07:00 on days the Post Office is open, and average waiting time in the queue once the doors open is generally about 30 minutes. Claiming a package requires only a valid identicard matching the addressee on the package.

IPX Agent Torona will arrive at 07:30 the next morning, joining the queue to wait for the Player Character. She will wait throughout the day. If the Player Character never comes to claim the package, she (or a male IPX employee, depending upon the gender of the Player Character) will return the following morning with a false identicard to claim the package herself.

When the Player Character does arrive to claim Mallory's package, Torona will begin to trail him. She is exceptionally good at her job, but Games Masters should still allow a Notice skill check on the part of the Player Charactersto realise he is being followed. If the Player Characters take any action against Torona, such as turning back on her to confront her, she will attempt to simply fade away into the press of people on the station. If unable to do so, her reaction will depend upon where in the station the confrontation takes place. In a crowded, well-patrolled area like Red Sector or the Garden, she will not resort to violence, but if pressed, will tell the Player Character to hand over the package, telling them that as long as he holds it, he is in receipt of stolen property. In a place like Downbelow or Brown Sector, on the other hand, Torona has a much freer hand. *Blood-Dimmed Tide* assumes the Player Character is not willing to hand the package over on her say-so.

Unless confronted by the Player Character in receipt of the package, Torona will do nothing more than follow him for the rest of the day. She knows that someone is on board the *Galloping Star* with Mallory, but wants to be certain Mallory is completely out of the picture before she does anything against the recipient of Mallory's package. Further, she wants to observe the Player Character, to see what, if anything, he does with the package in his possession. If, on the other hand, the Player Character simply drops the package off in his quarters and goes merrily about his business of the day, she has no compunctions against breaking in and making off with the package while he is out. The same holds true if the Player Character places the package in one of the station's storage lockers.

The Player Character may occupy his time however he wishes for most of the day, as the *Galloping Star* will not dock until the evening and Torona has no plans to move against him just yet.

If the Player Character chooses to open the package right away, in contravention of Mallory's request, the Games Master should consult the section under Truth Lies Within.

Rumours and Worries

The *Galloping Star* is due to dock with Babylon 5 at 18:25 this evening, and *Blood-Dimmed Tide* presumes the Player Characters intend to keep their meeting with Mallory at the Jump Point bar in the Central Corridor. It has been a busy day for ships docking Babylon 5, and the Central Corridor is packed with people.

The Central Corridor is a wide accessway that runs around the entire circumference of Babylon 5 between Blue and Red Sectors. It is a 24 hour hub of activity with several small traders and cafes situated along its walls to take advantage of the large amount of pedestrian traffic that constantly streams through. Access points throughout its length allow easy travel between locations within Red and Blue Sectors and the constant stream of visitors going to and from customs to other parts of the station are the main targets for the traders who ply their business here. Security retains a high presence in the Central Corridor as thieving from traders and even muggings are not unknown.

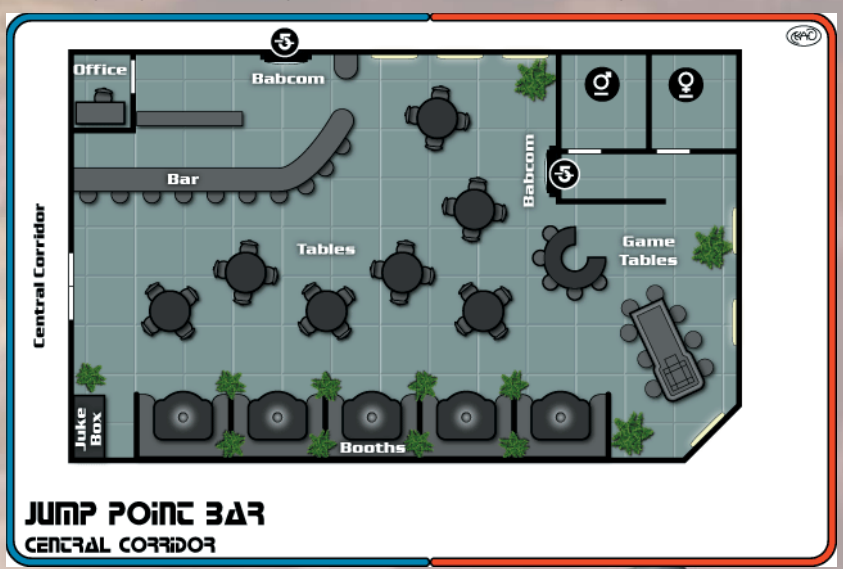
Using the Central Corridor to travel between locations situated in Blue and Red Sectors on foot will reduce travel times to 15 minutes, rather than 20. The Central Corridor is 18 metres wide and stretches for 1.2 kilometres.

The Jump Point is doing a brisk business this evening. Popular with freighter captains, cargo crews and tourists alike, the Jump Point is the first of many bars most people will see on Babylon 5. It offers a variety of moderate quality drinks at inflated prices, as the owner, Rento Jullard (Centauri Male Trader 3) gladly takes advantage of both his bar's location and the slothfulness of his customers.

When the Player Characters enter the Jump Point, the Games Master may read the following to the players.

The Jump Point is crowded tonight, though this is no change from the Central Corridor outside. Behind the bar, a male Centauri with a short crest of hair shows you a toothy grin as you walk inside. Most of the patrons inside the bar seem to be human, though there is a table with three Brakiri seated near the back of the bar and a booth with two Centauri. Two of the bar's six booths and one of its tables remain open.

The Player Characters may sit anywhere they like in the Jump Point, but in the final analysis, they are wasting their time, as Mallory never shows. Shortly after leaving his message for them the previous evening, he was murdered



aboard the *Galloping Star*. Of course, they have no way of knowing this yet.

The *Galloping Star* does not actually arrive at the station until 19:10, nearly an hour late. As more time ticks by without any sign of Mallory, the Player Characters will likely become concerned. They may continue to wait as long as they like, of course – at least until the Jump Point closes at 01:00. It is far more probable that they will go in search of him before then.

The most likely place for the Player Characters to begin looking for Mallory is in customs, which is where they will first hear something of his fate. The death of a single human aboard a trader ship is hardly the kind of thing to become the buzz of the station, but what Mallory said in his final moments is.

Mallory's murder was accomplished not with a PPG blast or even with a silent blade from behind. He was slain by the introduction of cyanide into his bloodstream by an agent in the employ of IPX who boarded the *Galloping Star* at Proxima. This agent, Duncan Ibanez, is a licensed medical doctor travelling to Babylon 5 under cover of personal business, and though he was quite deliberately nowhere nearby when Mallory breathed his last, he did make himself available immediately afterward, at the request of the ship's captain, to examine the body. He ruled the death a heart attack.

Before he died, however, Mallory was able to gasp out a few final words, words overheard by several of the other passengers who had come to the aid of the collapsing old man. As death rose up to take him, Mallory was filled with the fear that the Player Character to whom he sent the package would meet a similar fate, and that this was his last chance to warn people of what he feared was happening. Try as he did, however, he was unable to force out enough words to convey the message. The best he could manage was 'Dilgar … *Cataclysm* is real … ancient weapons … don't let them start it again.'

A Spark in the Brush

Though a quarter century has elapsed since the Dilgar sun went nova, wiping the last of the race from the heavens, the name of the Dilgar is still a talisman of fear and anger throughout much of the galaxy. Races with nothing else in common are united in their loathing of the Dilgar, and Mallory's mention of the race, along with the war cruiser *Cataclysm*, commanded by the hated Warmaster Nha'Dush, was more than enough to catch the attention of everyone with him when he died. Moments after the *Galloping Star* docked, they were carrying those words out into the station.

The *Galloping Star* itself will only remain in dock for 40 minutes before leaving again on the first leg of its trip back to Earth. Duncan Ibanez is among those who debarked the ship to remain on Babylon 5. Mallory's body will not be removed, but will remain on board for transport back to Earth. As Mallory's death happened away from the station and was ruled to be of natural causes, it is not a matter for Babylon 5's security forces.

If the Player Characters proceed to the customs area within 30 minutes of the Galloping Star's docking time, they will have a 20% chance of overhearing some of the ship's passengers talking about the human who died the night before. If they stop to ask questions, none of the passengers will know Mallory's name, but they will be certain to mention that he spoke of the Dilgar with his dying breath. If the Player Characters go straight to customs, they will see no sign of Mallory anywhere. If they wish, they can ask one of the attending security guards if he has come onto the station. The security guard can confirm for them that Mallory died while on board the ship, and that his body is being returned to Earth.

If the *Galloping Star* has not yet left port, and the Player Characters can identify themselves to the ship's captain Tobias Grange (Human Male Trader 4) as friends of Mallory Grange will allow them to come aboard to view the body if one of them can make a simple Diplomacy skill check roll (DC 10).

Within an hour of the *Galloping Star* docking with Babylon 5, rumours will begin to circulate on the station about the last words spoken by Mallory. These rumours will only have just gotten started, and will not yet be widespread, though they will travel faster amongst the station's alien population than amongst the humans. Unless the Player Characters go out of their way to investigate, they will likely not hear anything for the rest of the night, but they will notice a growing sense of anxiety on the station, a brittleness to the air and a guardedness to the inhabitants.

Truth Lies Within

Following swift on the heels of the discovery of Mallory's death is probably the most likely time the Player Characters will choose to open the package Mallory sent, thus its inclusion here. Obviously, however, the Player Characters may choose to open the package at any time after it comes into their possession.

Inside the package is a single sheet of paper bearing a handwritten note, along with an older model hand computer that has obviously seen a lot of use.

This handwritten note is enclosed in Mallory's package, along with a hand computer.

Dear (Player Character),

I hope you don't ever read this. If you do, it's either because you're ignoring me telling you not to open the package, or because I got killed somewhere between sending this and making it to the station. Either way, I'm not happy about it.

Here it is in a nutshell – I found it. The Cataclysm exists, and I know where it is. Take a look at the coordinates on the hand computer in this package, and you'll know half of the story.

I made a deal with the devil though, and I should have known it at the time. You know the stories about the Cataclysm, I'm sure. That it was carrying a cargo of something the captain thought could win the war for the Dilgar. I managed to convince IPX to help find it, telling them about the evidence I'd found that this cargo was technology left behind by one of the old races, a weapon of some kind.

I fought the Dilgar for a year and a half. I know how cruel they were, and I know that any weapon they were that impressed by is the kind of thing that shouldn't exist. Turns out my new partners didn't feel the same way. I can't give you much of anything in the way of hard evidence; what little I could find I couldn't take with me, but I know they wanted to figure out how the weapon works, figure out how to make it and then sell it. So I gave them a corrupted set of data about where the Cataclysm is and sent the real information to you.

If I'm dead, though, you have a problem. I didn't want all the coordinates to be together anywhere, so you only have half the data needed to find the Cataclysm. I have the other half, the real half of what I gave IPX, memorised. But if I'm dead, the only people in this galaxy with the other half of the coordinates are IPX. You'll need to get them if you're going to get to the Cataclysm first.

Please, this is more than an old man's crazy obsession. I have a very bad feeling about where this might go if IPX gets the ship first, and I don't want to see the galaxy head down that road again. Make sure it doesn't happen. Some of these people are real bad apples, so keep your head down. Don't think I'm just being paranoid when I say you shouldn't trust anyone. Don't go to security. These people have got connections everywhere and even if you deal with honest people, someone somewhere up the chain of command will get wind of it – and believe me, not all of them are honest. Plus, as much as I hate to say this, you're in receipt of stolen property. I was right to take the coordinates from them, but I had no legal right.

If you don't see me, go to the Dark Star in Red Sector after 21:00 pretty much any night and look for Sammy Cobb. He can get you equipment, transportation, a safe house or whatever else you need, and can probably get you inside IPX to get the rest of the coordinates. He's a little shady, but he owes me big and doesn't have a chain of command he'll have to report to, so he'll be trustworthy.

-Sean

Any Player Character with a military background, or with one or more ranks in Knowledge (history) will know of the *Cataclysm* – that it was an infamous Dilgar war cruiser that vanished without a trace near the end of the Dilgar War. If the Player Characters heard anything from the other passengers aboard the *Galloping Star*, of course, they may already have put two and two together to realise Mallory had some knowledge of the *Cataclysm*.

Mallory's warning to the Player Characters about going to anyone with this information is exactly true. Though the highest ranking officers on the station would have nothing to do with what Mallory fears is happening, the revelation of the discovery of the Cataclysm by IPX, the death of Mallory and the existence of the package he sent would be cause for an immediate investigation, and news of these happenings on Babylon 5 would race quickly through EarthForce's chain of command to the ears of those who intend to buy the Dilgar weapon, men and women of the Home Guard who have dreams of what could be done with something so powerful the Dilgar felt it could change the course of the war.

Last Chance

Once the *Galloping Star* has docked and Torona has met with Ibanez, she knows it is time to wrap up the one huge remaining loose end – the Player Characters. As the Player Characters leave the customs area, she will sidle up beside them, walking casually. The moment any of the Player Characters take note of her, she will speak.

The woman walking next to you looks to be in her mid-40s, but her face is so bland and unremarkable it is hard to guess. Striding with a cool, confident walk, she glances at you once before speaking.

'You got something there that belongs to me, you know. A set of numbers – you know what I mean. Now, I don't know what you've been told, but there's no big trouble coming, no apocalypse on the horizon, no reason for you to bother yourself by holding on to stolen property. So don't start something, don't shout for security. That stuff is just going to make more trouble for you. Just hand those numbers over to me now and you can go on with your lives. If you don't, well, that's your choice, but you should remember this station can be a very dangerous place.'

Presumably, the Player Characters refuse to hand over the package. Torona gives them a sour look, shrugs, and turns away into the crowd. If the Player Characters wish, they may certainly try to follow her as she heads off into Red Sector.

Pawns in Play

Once the Player Characters refuse to hand over the package, Torona decides a demonstration is in order. She prefers to avoid engaging in direct conflict herself when it can be avoided, and she believes that in this case, there is no reason for her to risk exposing who she is – let alone risk being injured. All she truly wants is the package, and she intends to get it through staging what looks like a simple mugging. Although there have been muggings on the Central Corridor before, these were

always crimes perpetrated against a single individual. An attack on a group, such as the Player Characters, requires a bit more privacy.

Once Torona is sure Mallory is dead, she will set up an ambush for the Player Characters. Having followed them to the Central Corridor and the Jump Point, she knows the path they took to get there, and assumes they will be using it again. Once the Player Characters are away from the crowded, security-heavy Central Corridor and customs area, they will be accosted by three Drazi goons she hired for the occasion. The Drazi will surround the Player Characters as best they can and demand all valuables.

Drazi Hired Goon (3)

2nd Level Drazi Lurker; hp 12; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; DV 11; Atk: +4 close combat or +1 ranged; SQ Short Fuse, Survivor's Luck 1/day; Fort +5, Ref +0, Will –1; Str 16, Dex 10, Con 14, Int 8, Wis 8, Cha 11
Notable Skills: Appraise +1, Athletics +8 (+6), Intimidate +5, Intrigue +1 (+3 when gathering information), Investigate +1, Knowledge (Downbelow) +3, Knowledge (Drazi) +3, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +1, Stealth +2 (+0), Subterfuge +1
Feats: Brawler, Dense Scales, Fluency (Drazi & Human), Toughness, Weapon Proficiency (close combat & pistol)
Standard Equipment: Club (+4, 1d6+3 dam, 1-h), padded armour (DR 4, –2 ACP, inc. scales)

In truth, Torona is not sure whether these Drazi will be a match for the Player Characters or not, and that in itself is half the reason for the ambush – to give her the opportunity to judge the skills and abilities of the people she is dealing with. By now, she has run a complete background check run on each of the Player Characters, and she knows their names, what they do and where they live. Now she wants to find out how they fight, and how attached they are to the package Mallory sent them.

Assuming the Player Characters defeat the Drazi and question one of them, they will find the Drazi actually know very little, though they have no problem telling the people who just beat them up what knowledge they have. They were told the Player Characters were carrying a lot of money, and that the human female with the hidden face who hired them in the Happy Daze bar in Downbelow was going to split it with them, but beyond that they know nothing. The Player Characters may either let them go or summon security to arrest them for assault and attempted robbery.

The Player Characters may wish to visit the Happy Daze in Downbelow in search of 'the human female with the hidden face' the Drazi are talking about, but Torona will certainly not be there, nor will anyone have a clue they can offer, as no one else remembers seeing her.

Going to Ground

The trouble with staging the attack by the Drazi, from Torona's perspective, is that by making sure she was nowhere nearby when the attempted mugging took place, she has lost the trail of the Player Characters. She will attempt to pick them up again at their quarters, detailing off enough people that every Player Character's quarters is under surveillance. She would prefer to simply use security for her own purposes, to tell them that the Player Characters are in receipt of stolen information that is the property of IPX, but she is under strict orders not to do so. IPX understands perfectly well how sensitive the issue of the Dilgar is to many of the alien races, and would prefer not to bring to light anything that might stir up a fuss until after the *Cataclysm* is safely retrieved for study. Thus, Torona has little left to do but wait and follow, until such time as, armed with better knowledge of the Player Characters' capabilities, she can make her move.

Obviously, it would be wisest for the Player Characters to steer clear of their quarters, as Mallory warned them to do. *Blood-Dimmed Tide* assumes they follow Mallory's advice and seek out Sammy Cobb at the Dark Star.

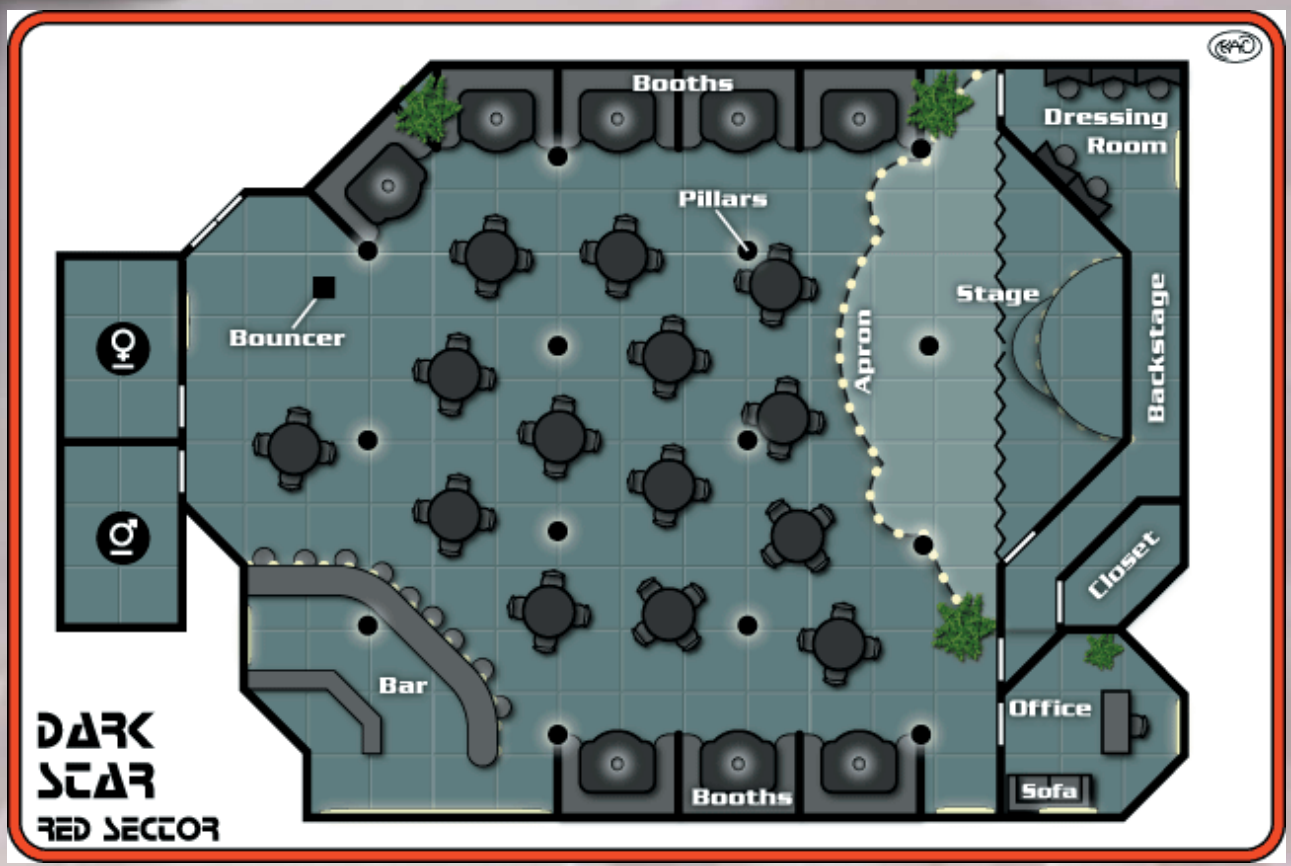
Dark Dealings in Dark Star

The Dark Star has gained a poor reputation as a sleazy dance bar, though this reputation is largely undeserved and tells more of people's preconceptions than of the Dark Star's true nature. Specialising in Human and Centauri exotic dancers, the Dark Star also supports a thriving poker scene and many gamblers soon find their way to the tables during their visit to Babylon 5. Cheating is not tolerated in the Dark Star and, while brawls are uncommon, every regular is willing to help oust newcomers who push their luck just a little too far. Interference with the dancing girls is also strongly discouraged by regular patrons.

The bar is also known for being a place where the more powerful criminal bosses of the station come to discuss business, as the Dark Star is considered neutral territory no matter what disputes or grudges they have between each other. This does not stop them from bringing bodyguards, however, and new arrivals to the station are advised to watch who they speak to when in the bar. A frequent visitor to the Dark Star is Centauri Ambassador Londo Mollari, who enjoys watching the exotic dancers and is a keen poker player.

The Games Master may read or summarise the following for the players:

A bizarre landscape of flashing, coloured lights and thumping music, the Dark Star is a smoky cave, filled with a kind of desperate energy. On the stage, two Centauri dancers contort and cavort in time with the music, under the careful scrutiny of some two score patrons scattered about the bar. A monster of a man nearly seven feet tall with a head shaved smooth looks



you over critically as you pass inside, then turns his attention back to the crowd. Waitresses wearing almost as little as the dancers angle smoothly between the tables, trays filled with drinks balanced above their heads. As you look around, you wonder if Sammy Cobb really is here, and how you can find him.

Obviously, the best way to find Sammy Cobb is to ask. The bouncer, the bartenders and the waitresses can all direct the Player Characters to a booth on the far side of the club, where a slender man in a blue suit sits across the table from two larger men, who might as well be wearing signs reading 'bodyguard.' Alternatively, any character with Knowledge (local – Babylon 5) can identify Cobb on his own with a successful skill check against DC 15. Another skill check against the same DC will reveal that Cobb is one of a number of crime bosses on Babylon 5 that commonly spend their nights at the Dark Star. Primarily interested in smuggling people and weapons, Cobb has contacts at every level and in all sectors of the station. He is always careful to keep a screen between himself and any illicit dealings, and has twice beaten charges filed against him in the Babylon 5 courts. Obviously, this information comes only from a successful Knowledge (local – Babylon 5) skill check; none of the employees in the Dark Star will volunteer this when pointing out Cobb.

The man identified as Cobb looks up at you as you approach, twirling a slender cigar between his fingers. He studies you detachedly for a moment before leaning back in his seat and asking simply 'You're (Player Character name)?' When you tell him you are he looks at the two men sitting across from him and nods once. They stand up and move to the side while Cobb gestures towards the seat they just left. 'Been expecting you. Damn shame about Mallory. He sent me a message last night, saying I might be seeing you if something happened to him, but he didn't go into much detail. Just that you'd need a safe place to stay, which I got for you, a ship, which I'm getting for you, demolition charges, which are on the ship, a way to get into a place you shouldn't be, which we'll discuss, and other things you'll tell me about. That, and that you got corporate trouble. Don't let the letterhead fool you, the only difference between corporations and gangsters is that they got a business license and play for bigger stakes. Anyway, like I'm sure he told you, I owe him for saving my life once on a nasty little rock that … well, that's a long story and I care a lot more about yours. So, why don't you spill it after I show you to your new digs? Can't promise it's the lap of luxury, 'cause it's not, but it is safe. Ready?' He slides out of the booth, slips the cigar into his mouth and looks at you expectantly.

Cobb actually knows more than he is letting on. He knew all about Mallory's work on the *Cataclysm* – it was during one of Mallory's expeditions in search of it that the two

men met, and he had heard that Mallory had joined forces with IPX. Considering Mallory had spoken of his possible death mere hours before he died, and the rumours that have reached his ears regarding a dying man's whispered warnings of the Dilgar, the *Cataclysm* and new war, it was not hard for Cobb to put most of the picture together. The only items of importance Cobb does not know is who exactly IPX has sent after the Player Characters and that the Player Characters hold half of the coordinates to the *Cataclysm* while IPX holds the other half.

The Player Characters may want to discuss things a bit more with Cobb before following him to their 'new digs,' but he is uncomfortable continuing the discussion in the Dark Star, despite the fact that criminal bosses commonly come here to discuss business. It is precisely because of the clientele that he is uncomfortable, and he fears that someone of a shady nature who overhears more of the discussion will end up selling or otherwise using that information, a fact he will explain if pressed. His hesitancy has nothing to do with a planned betrayal of the Player Characters. That will come later.

Walking in Rumour

Cobb leads the Player Characters out of the Dark Star, his two bodyguards trailing behind. They movethrough Red Sector until they reaches the Core Shuttle.

By this time, four hours or more after the *Galloping Star* docked and the news of Mallory's last words reached the station, the rumours have grown more prevalent and more outlandish. The story of the *Cataclysm* is one most people, whatever their race, have heard at least once in their life, but the fact is that there are literally dozens of stories about the *Cataclysm* – what happened to it, what it was carrying, when it disappeared. The fact that there are so many stories about a race and a ship still feared and hated throughout much of the galaxy tends to lend even the most outlandish rumour a sheen of legitimacy, depending on the preconceptions of the listener. As any long-time observer of Babylon 5 knows, there is no shortage of preconceptions amongst the people aboard.

The *Cataclysm* and its relation to the dead man on the *Galloping Star* is increasingly becoming the talk of the station, particularly among the alien populations. As the Player Characters travel, the Games Master may wish to allow them to overhear some of the rumours being discussed by people they pass by. The sidebar contains a partial list of the rumours circulating on the station on this night.

Cobb, his bodyguards and the Player Characters ride the Core Shuttle all the way back to Brown Sector before debarking and boarding a lift for the outer decks of the sector.

Rumours

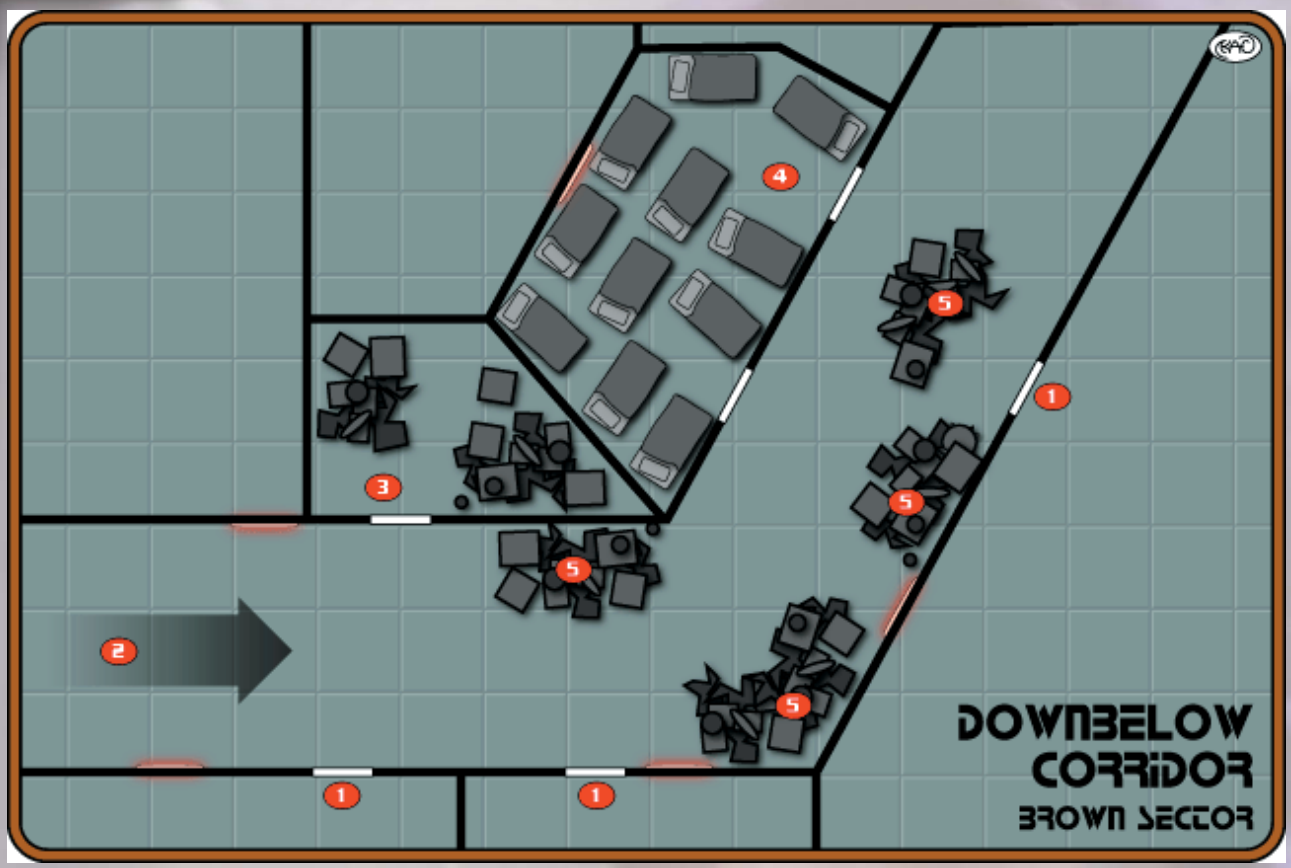
This is a partial list of the rumours circulating on Babylon 5 the night after the Galloping Star docks. Games Masters may pick rumours from this list, or may add their own.

- **There is still a Dilgar colony hidden somewhere in space.**
- **The *Cataclysm* is still operational, and has been raiding the edges of known space for years.**
- **The humans have found the *Cataclysm*.**
- **The *Cataclysm* was carrying an alien plague the Dilgar intended to use as a weapon against the home worlds of their enemies.**
- **The Dilgar actually escaped the destruction of their planet and are returning with the help of the humans.**
- **The humans have found the *Cataclysm*, which was carrying a cargo of riches looted from planets in the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, and wish to keep it secret so they might seize the cargo.**
- **The *Cataclysm* was carrying an ancient alien weapon the Dilgar unearthed, a weapon that can destroy worlds.**
- **The Brakiri and Markab Ambassadors, along with Narn Ambassador G'Kar, have called an emergency meeting of the Babylon 5 Advisory Council for the next morning.**
- **The man aboard the *Galloping Star* was killed by a Dilgar weapon.**
- **The *Cataclysm*'s cargo will be sold off to the highest bidder**.

Down to Downbelow

By the time the Player Characters arrive in Brown Sector with Cobb, they will probably surmise that the safehouse he is taking them to is located in Downbelow. Characters who have never had the dubious pleasure of visiting this place are in for a surprise, as even by comparison to the impoverished and industrial areas of Brown Sector, Downbelow is a vision of squalour. The corridors are cluttered with debris and sleeping people wrapped in rags, the air itself heavy with smoke and the stink of thousands of unwashed people packed together in this desolate place.

Many, both Human and alien, come to Babylon 5 hoping for a new start and a new life among the stars but, for most, their dreams fail to come to reality. Trapped on the station, they are forced to take part time jobs for low pay and when these dry up, they are ejected out of their rented quarters.



With no money remaining to return to their homeworlds, they are forced to become lurkers in the undeveloped parts of the station known as Downbelow, sleeping rough and scavenging for food just to survive. The strongest and most intelligent lurkers can make a good living in Downbelow, however, and there are several illegal brothels, drug emporiums, bars and other diversions. In addition, the extortion rackets that plague the smaller traders of Brown and Red Sectors from time to time are usually run by criminal gangs based in Downbelow.

As the Player Characters enter Downbelow, one of Cobb's bodyguards takes up a position in front of his boss, while the other closes in behind the characters, both looking around alertly for any sign of trouble. Trouble comes quickly.

Torona reasoned that Downbelow was the obvious place for the Player Characters to try to hide, and sent two of the eight IPX private security guards on the station to Downbelow, dressed as Lurkers and stripped of every form of identification to take up positions just outside of Downbelow. Though they are only supposed to follow and report back, after seeing the Player Characters, they move in for the kill.

IPX Private Security Officer

3rd Level Human Soldier; hp 15; Init +1; Spd 30 ft.; DV 14; Atk: +5 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Co-ordinated Unit +1; Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0; Str 15, Dex 13, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 11

Notable Skills: Acrobatics +7, Athletics +8, Computer Use +2, Intimidate +6, Investigate +1, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +3

Feats: Armour Familiarity, Brawler, Dodge, Drazi Tackle, Fluency (Human), Great Fortitude, Point Blank Shot, Weapon Proficiency (close combat, grenade, pistol and rifle)

Standard Equipment: W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., 6 shots, AP 1, Automatic)

The two security guards attack from behind when the Player Characters are in one of Downbelow's corridors. Cobb will immediately take cover, though his bodyguards will return fire.

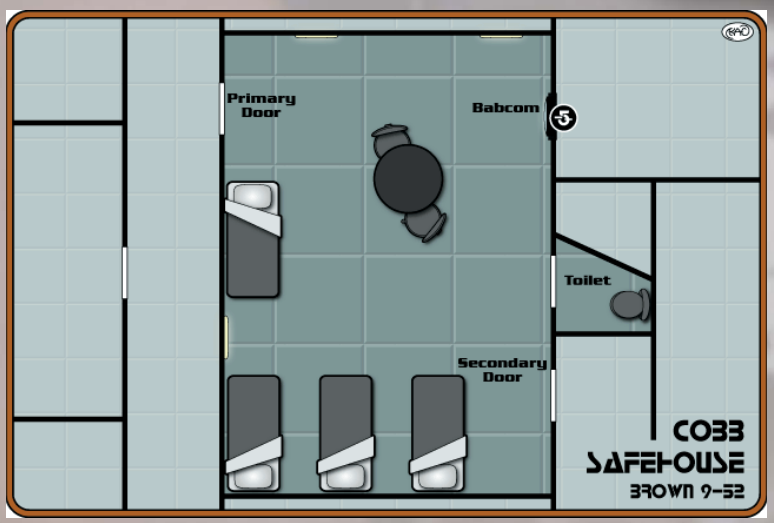
1. Sealed Door. Whether through disuse, vandalism or shoddy construction, this door is sealed shut and will not open.

2. Direction of Attack. This spot indicates the place and direction from which the attack comes. The IPX Security guards will attack when the lead bodyguard reaches the angle in the corridor.

3. Unused Room. Full of rotting trash (which will provide cover), this room is little more than a closet.

4. Storage Room. This room was originally intended to be a storage facility, but has been converted into sleeping quarters. At night, there will be 1d10+10 Lurkers sleeping in here. If one of the combatants enters, they will attempt to flee through the other door.

5. Trash. These areas denote piles of rubbish in the hallway that may be used as cover.



If the Player Characters do not have guns of any kind, they will likely be sitting most of this fight out.

Cobb's Bodyguards (2)

4th Level Human Lurker; hp 16; Init +5; Spd 30 ft.; DV 13; Atk: +4 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Multi-Skilled (Acrobatics), Survivor's Luck one/day; Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0; Str 13, Dex 12, Con 15, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 12
Notable Skills: Acrobatics +3, Appraise +3, Athletics +3, Bluff +8, Intimidate +8, Intrigue +8 (+12 when gathering information), Knowledge (Downbelow) +11, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +2, Stealth +5, Subterfuge +7
Feats: Blind Fight, Brawler, Endurance, Fluency (Human), Improved Initiative, Toughness, Weapon Proficiency (close combat and pistol)
Standard Equipment: Club (+4, 1d6+1 dam, 1-h), W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., six shots, AP 1, Automatic)

Once the fight is over, Cobb's bodyguards (if alive) strip the IPX men of their weapons and search them fruitlessly for any identification, before leaving them where they fell in the corridor.

Cobb takes the Player Characters down to Deck 52 and along a half-finished hallway choked with garbage. One of the bodyguards pushes aside a stack of crates and presses a card to the wall behind them, causing a section of wall to pop open. Cobb walks in ahead of the Player Characters as the lights come on, revealing a room about five metres by seven metres, with a hatchway door in the far wall. The ceiling is barely more than two metres, however, giving the entire room a hunched, subterranean feel.

'Here we go,' Cobb says as he beckons you inside. 'You got cots, water, power, you even got BabCom in here. Come on and close that door and let's get down to brass tacks.'

As you enter the safe house, Cobb takes a seat at the single, rickety table and looks at you appraisingly. 'All right, here we are now. I've got you a safe place to bunk, even if it cost me burning one of my safe houses to do it – can't have a safe house someone who's not my employee knows about, after all. I've got a ship on the way here for you to use. And I've got questions. Like I said, I owe Mallory big, so I'll help where I can, pro bono, but I have to know how. Tell me about your corp trouble. I know it's IPX, that they got something you need to take away, and that's high stakes right there, but let me know what you need from them.'

How much the Player Characters are willing to share with Cobb will help determine how the scenario proceeds from here. As mentioned earlier, the only items of importance Cobb does not know is who exactly IPX has sent after the Player Characters and that the Player Characters hold half of the coordinates to the *Cataclysm* while IPX holds the other half. The Player Characters obviously cannot provide him any information about IPX's agents, but they can tell him about the coordinates. Cobb is exceptionally good at reading people's motives, and if he can get the Player Characters talking, will attempt to use the knowledge he has to lead them to divulging what he does not know. *Blood-Dimmed Tide* assumes the Player Characters tell him about the coordinates, but the adventure is easily modified to accommodate more secretive Player Characters.

Once the Player Characters are finished explaining their situation to Cobb, he will take his leave of them for the night, promising to return in the morning with more information. He has no problem if the Player Characters want to go explore Downbelow, though he would not suggest it for the unarmed. He will, however, leave them a key to the lock pad on the door, so they might come and go as they wish. If the Player Characters investigate the room, they will find it as sparse as it seemed at first glance. The hatch on the wall opposite the door leads to a tiny, makeshift toilet. On the wall near that hatch is a secondary entry and exit point, though it is concealed as part of the wall (Notice skill check roll DC 20 to find it). This doorway leads to a series of small, trash-strewn rooms that eventually open on another hallway. In case any of

the Player Characters were injured in the recent battle, there are three first aid kits on a shelf beneath the BabCom unit.

If the Player Characters remain in the safe house, they may make use of the BabCom terminal in the room to do some research on IPX or any other topic on their mind.

Researching the *Cataclysm*

Searching the StellarCom network for past stories on the fate of the *Cataclysm* is not a difficult task, though it is unlikely to bear any new information. The story of the ship is retold in news articles of the time in only the most general tones – a Dilgar war cruiser that was wounded in battle with elements of EarthForce fled into hyperspace, where it was presumed destroyed. If one of the Player Characters makes a Computer Use skill check (DC 20), the Games Master may allow him an additional piece of information uncovered from some dusty corner of the network, such as the final intercepted message of the ship's captain or an old research paper listing the different kinds of cargo rumoured to be aboard the *Cataclysm*.

Researching IPX

Searching BabCom for information on IPX will yield a great deal of information, most of it in no way germane to the Player Characters' predicament – merely news articles and press releases about various successful IPX expeditions. Through BabCom, the Player Characters will be able to learn that IPX is currently renting a number of the zero-g laboratories in Grey Sector, and has a small managerial office in Red Sector. A successful Computer Use skill check against a DC of 20 will allow the Player Characters to pull up a roster of all IPX employees on Babylon 5, a list that does not include Torona or Ibanez.

Additional information no doubt could be found on IPX's computer network, but all IPX computers on the station are isolated from BabCom.

PART TWO - IN FEAR, IT GROWS

By the next day, the rumours about the *Cataclysm* and its mysterious cargo have spread the length and breadth of the station, mostly because of the inflammatory nature of the rumours, but also because Torona, anxious to reacquire the Player Characters' trail, has been planting more rumours in hopes of flushing them. In particular, she has spread the word that someone hiding on the station knows the location of the *Cataclysm*, a story that is almost but not quite true. Nonetheless, it is rapidly gaining currency in the station's alien population, particularly among those who believe the Humans have the *Cataclysm* and intend to use it for some evil purpose. During a particularly divisive and acrimonious meeting of the Babylon 5 Advisory Council in the morning, the story Torona started is brought up by Narn Ambassador G'Kar, who pounds on the table and demands, to the approbation of the ambassadors from the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, that Commander Sinclair reveal what the Humans are up to with the Dilgar ship, and explain why this information was kept from the remainder of the Council. Sinclair, for his part, has no knowledge of the *Cataclysm*, but is quickly growing weary of the rumours flying about the station.

Downbelow, to a large degree, is insulated from the rumours and innuendo taking place above. When a person's greatest concern is finding a way to eat each day, after all, there is little reason to worry about a ship that vanished at the end of a war that was finished a quarter century ago.

Morning Delivery

Around 06:00 in the morning, someone comes to see the Player Characters, who presumably are still in the safe house. The door lock clicks and the door swings open, revealing a short, well-groomed man with dark hair and a thin moustache. He is carrying a case in one hand.

'Morning,' the newcomer says flatly, nodding as he enters the room. 'My name's Max, and I work for Mr. Cobb. He sent me here to tell you what he's found out, and see if I can help put you on your way.' He takes a seat and lays a leather briefcase down on top of the table.

Max Vantane is essentially Cobb's second in command, and has a fair amount of information to give the Player Characters, though they may already know some of it. The most important topics for conversation are listed below. If the Games Master feels the Player Characters need a bit more of hint on one subject, he may have Vantane provide additional information as needed.

IPX

IPX is the first subject Vantane broaches, though most of what he has to tell the Player Characters is information they already have, if they spent time researching the corporation on BabCom.

'Lots of IPX presence on this station, once you start looking for it. They got about half the labs back in Grey Sector rented out, plus a small chunk of office space in Red Sector. All their computers are isolated, which means you can't get in from the outside, and what you're looking for could be in any of those places. If I were you, and I wanted to do some B&E, I'd go for Red Sector first. Those labs back in Grey are like little fortresses. Not that Red will be too easy either, but at least it's only one place to look, and it's got gravity. We couldn't get you blueprints of the place, but we can put you in touch with someone who can make a key for you.'

Torona

One of the most important bits of information Vantane has to give the Player Characters is the name of the IPX agent hunting them – Alise Torona, the woman responsible for the two attacks they suffered the day before.

'Unfortunately, it looks like the name is about all I have to give you. No official bio info, no residence on the station, which makes me think she's probably using a false identicard to keep her presence secret. I can tell you a little bit of her rep, though. She's a bulldog. She'll keep after you until she gets whatever it is she wants. And I can tell you she's been sniffing around Downbelow since last night. Not too hard to guess the two guys last night were from her, and that she's figured you're behind them not coming back, so you might want to think about a way to get her out of the picture. Just a thought.'

The Cataclysm

If asked about the Cataclysm, all Vantane can say is that talk about it is all over the station. The name of the Dilgar ship has reopened wounds that never healed from that terrible war, and the rumours that the Humans are somehow involved with the ship has sparked fury in half the aliens aboard. The new rumour, that there are Humans aboard Babylon 5 who know where the ship is and intend to salvage and use the cargo it was carrying, has only made matters worse, and there are even reports of groups of aliens such as Drazi searching for those Humans. Vantane believes, quite rightly, that if nothing is done, violence borne of those old wounds will erupt on the station within days.

Weapons

This subject comes up whether the Player Characters mention it or not. After answering the questions put to him, Vantane will open his briefcase and pull out one multi-part PPG pistol for each Player Character who does not have a firearm.

'The boss wouldn't want me to do this – he figures guns will just get you into more trouble than you're in already, but I think that with the mess you're in, you shouldn't be limited to clubs and harsh language. Keep them hidden, though, and don't pull them if you don't have to.

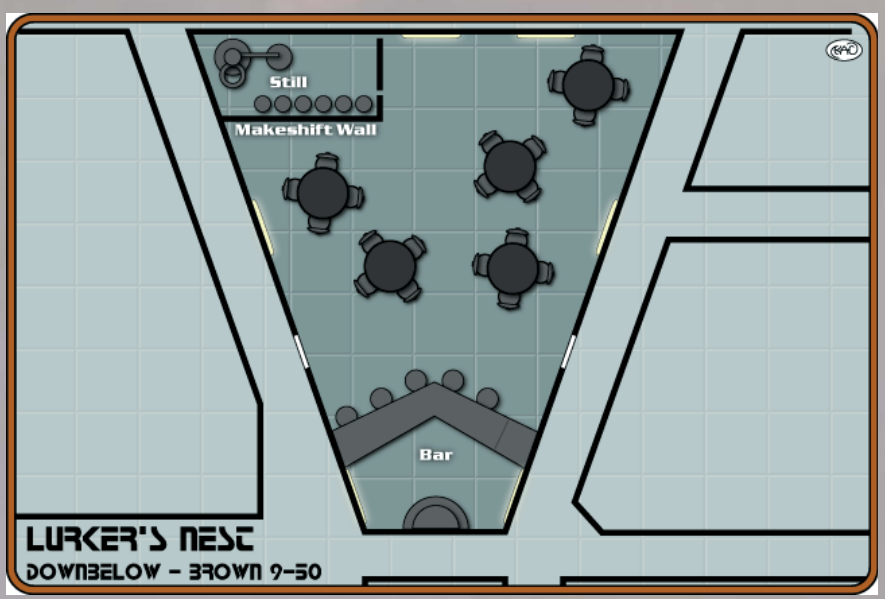
Points of Divergence

At this point, the Player Characters have several wildly different options available to them. As finding the other half of the coordinates is (except for survival) their highest priority at the moment, there are two main ways they may try to achieve that. The first is by going after Torona; the second is by trying to gain access to one of IPX's facilities on the station. It is difficult to say which is the riskier route.

Torona

Torona is not standing still. She and Ibanez both are combing Downbelow searching for the Player Characters, squeezing contacts, paying informants and hunting for information. She is already aware the Player Characters are hiding out in a safe house somewhere below Deck 50, and by mid-afternoon, the two agents will have successfully tracked the Player Characters right to their doorstep. She is currently patrolling Downbelow in the company of two IPX private security guards, all three of them dressed as Lurkers.

If the Player Characters decide to go after Torona, they have several options available. Without a photograph to know what she looks like, it would be difficult to go out hunting for her in Downbelow, unless of course the Player Characters had already confronted her while she was following them the day before. However, the Player Characters may certainly choose a public spot somewhere in Downbelow and let their presence be known, waiting for her to come to them – which she certainly will, though not alone. If the Player Characters are making a target of themselves, she will know it is because they are looking for her, and will come with a vanguard of four IPX private security guards (if there are more than twice that many Player Characters, she will supplement her ranks with hired thugs from Downbelow). Torona has no particular interest in killing the Player Characters per se, all she really wants is the package, and if she confronts them like this, will offer to let them walk away if they simply leave the package behind.



A third means of dealing with Torona is to try to trick her into a meeting. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to ask Vantane or Cobb to contact her about 'selling out' the Player Characters, then leading her into an ambush. Not being an utter fool, however, Torona will insist that the Player Characters be turned over to her at a time and place of her choosing – in this case, a bar called the Lurker's Nest in Brown 9 – 50 at 19:00 that evening. If the Player Characters go through Cobb's gang to set this up, Torona's terms will be agreed to. She will, unsurprisingly, seed the bar with her own people, including at least four IPX private security guards. Torona herself will hang back until after the agreed meeting time, in case the meeting begins with bloodshed, as so many do. Again, all Torona really wants is the package. Cobb will not provide the Player Characters with backup for this, however – they will be on their own.

While going directly for Torona carries less risk of involving the authorities than an attempt at breaking into an IPX facility on the station, the trouble with it is she is not carrying the other half of the coordinates on her. However, she does have her identicard on her person, and if taken captive, can be convinced to provide the Player Characters with information – she assumes that after a failure so monumental as one that would result in her capture, she is out of a job anyway. She can tell the Player Characters that the coordinates they are looking for are on one of the computers in the back office of IPX's Red Sector facility, as well as provide them with password access to the computer. If the fight becomes hopeless, and she sees no way to escape, Torona will surrender.

IPX Facility

Ultimately, to get the other half of the coordinates to the Cataclysm, the Player Characters are going to have to gain entry to one of IPX's facilities on the station. If they took action against Torona first, and were able to capture her, they will have a distinct advantage from the knowledge (and identicards) she can give them.

Ultimately, going after one of the facilities in Grey Sector is foolish, not only because of the security there, but because each of the laboratories in use by IPX is wholly separate from the others, and breaking into one after another would be all but impossible.

If the Player Characters choose to go after the Red Sector facility before doing anything else, Vantane will offer to direct them to a man in Downbelow whose stock in trade is false identicards, a man named Julius Berendt in Red Sector. He will give the Player Characters directions on how to get there and tell them Berendt commonly charges about 3,000 credits for a false identicard. If the Player Characters do not have the money, he shrugs and tells them he'll make sure it is taken care of … then pauses a beat and makes sure they understand that it will be a loan, not a gift.

Once the Player Characters have asked all they wish of Vantane, he will stand up to leave. As he does so, he will inform them the ship Mallory requested for them will arrive at the station this evening, and that they should come back to the safe house to make the final arrangements.

All Access Pass

If the Player Characters choose to go see Berendt, they will have to ascend back out of Downbelow and take the Core Shuttle to Red Sector, before descending again into Downbelow in search of Berendt. As they travel through the station, they will hear occasion snatches of conversation about the Cataclysm and, presuming the Player Characters are all or mostly human, will receive sidelong, distrustful glances from aliens they pass on their journey.

If the Player Characters have not dealt with Torona and Ibanez before attempting to leave Downbelow, there is a 10% chance one of the two operatives will spot them. As for the rest of the journey, so long as the Player Characters remember to keep the weapons Vantane gave them hidden, it should proceed with no problems, despite the dark looks cast their way by some of the aliens they pass by.

Reaching Downbelow in Red Sector is as easy as it is in Brown – requiring only the willingness to go there. Successfully following Vantane's directions to meet Julius Berendt in Red 9 – 40, on the other hand, is more difficult. As with the rest of Downbelow, the section in Red Sector is a maze of choked hallways and breached bulkheads, and following Vantane's directions will require an Intelligence check (DC 15). Of course, if all the Player Characters fail, they can hire a Lurker child to show them the way for only five credits.

Berendt's shop is known throughout much of Babylon 5's criminal community as Santa's Workshop, both for the quality of Berendt's work and his physical appearance – overweight and bearded. His shop is tucked away in the back of a dead-end corridor, difficult to notice until one is only a metre or two away. Behind an unmarked door is a small, bare room with two Drazi sitting and looking bored at a rickety old table. A wire mesh door that looks like a scavenged bit of catwalk from Brown Sector stands at the far side of the room. Behind it is a man who could only be Berendt.

Berendt raises gruff and unfriendly to an art form, a quirk to his personality some suspect is just another way to put more distance between himself and the jolly man for whom his shop is nicknamed. He can afford to be unfriendly – he makes some of the best false identicards on the station.

The Player Characters will have to tell Berendt exactly what they need the identicards for; otherwise he cannot encode the proper clearances on it.

'All right,' Berendt says sourly after you tell him what you need. 'I can do that for you. Since

you're with Cobb, I can even do it right now. It'll take about an hour, and it'll run you 2,500 credits. In advance.' He holds his hand out expectantly.

After you pay him, he slips the money into a pocket in the filthy smock tied around his great belly. 'Good. I'll get right on it. You can wait over there with Bhulk and Jrak,' he gestures toward the two Drazi. 'They can always use a good sparring partner.'

Despite the evil chuckle, an hour elapses with the Drazi taking no particular interest in you. With a rap on the mesh door, Berendt summons you back over to him. 'Here it is. Just remember, this thing will only work once. Next time someone checks the system, they'll see there was an unauthorised access, and this card becomes useless. Trash it when you're done.'

Office Space

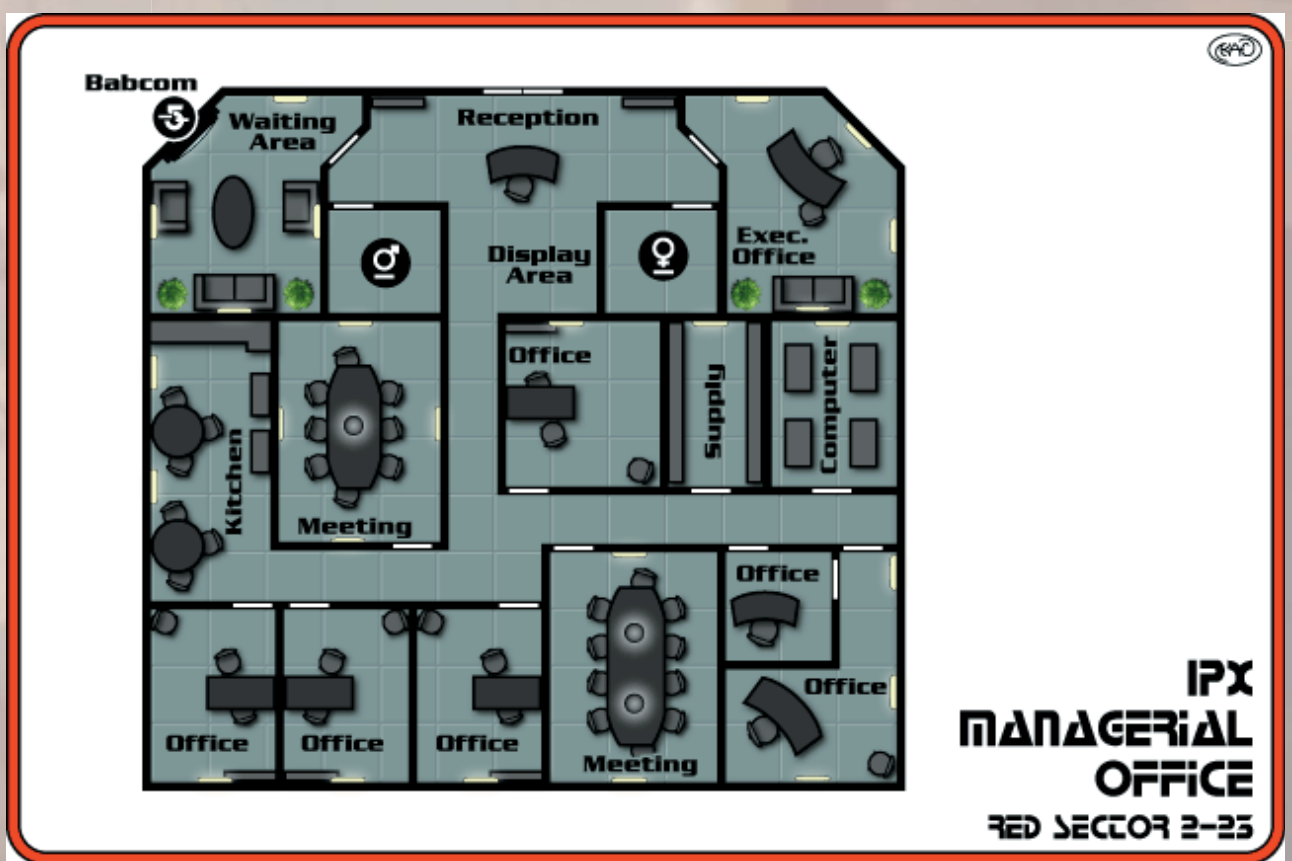
The Red Sector managerial office of IPX is located on Red 2 – 23, one of the sector's several commercial decks. The tiny sign on the door reads only 'IPX' – there is no indication of hours of operation. In fact, the actual office keeps relatively normal office hours, opening at 09:00 and closing at 17:00 every weekday. Presumably, unless the Player Characters intend to bluff their way through, they come when they can be sure the office is closed.

If the Player Characters have come here without an identicard from Torona or Berendt (or another purveyor of false identicards), they will have to break in to the office. Bypassing the lock requires a DC 20 Technical (electronics) skill check roll, as well as 20 minutes of time. Bypassing the security system likewise requires a DC 20 Technical (electronics) skill check roll and 20 minutes of time. Failure on either roll will summon 1d4 security officers, who will arrive in 2d6 minutes – long after the Player Characters will have fled, certainly, but effectively ruining their chances of breaking in this night.

1. Lobby. This large but rather nondescript lobby contains a long receptionist's console positioned strategically in front of the double doors leading into the remainder of the office area. When the office is open, there is always one private security guard present.

2. Office. Each area marked as '2' is an office.

3. Computer Room. The small network of isolated computers in the IPX office is administered from a server in this room, making it the best place for the Player Characters to attempt to find the second half of Mallory's coordinates. If the Player Characters were able to learn the passwords to access the system from Torona, they may log on to the system with no problems, though it will take a Computer Use skill



check roll (DC 15) and one minute to find the right file containing the coordinates. If the Player Characters have to hack the system, they will have to break through an average security system to do so (see the *Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game* core rulebook).

4. Supply Closet. This supply closet is, for the most part, exactly like every other office supply closet in the Earth Alliance, containing paper, pens, coffee filters and so forth. On the back wall of the closet, however, is a locked cupboard (electronic lock, DC 20 to bypass) containing:

W&G Model 10 PPG Pistol (12)
Auricon EF-PR PPG Rifle (12)
Flak Jacket (12)

5. Boardroom/Meeting Room. These two areas are furnished with long tables for hosting business meetings.

6. Kitchen. This small kitchen area contains a water faucet, coffee service and two vending machines. When the office is closed, the sole security guard can usually be found in here, sleeping through his shift. If the Player Characters start making noise while inside the offices, the Games Master should roll the guard's Notice skill to see if he wakes up.

IPX Private Security Officer
3rd Level Human Soldier; hp 15; Init +1; Spd 30 ft.; DV 14; Atk: +5 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Co-ordinated Unit +1; Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0; Str 15, Dex 13, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 11
Notable Skills: Acrobatics +7, Athletics +8, Computer Use +2, Intimidate +6, Investigate +1, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +3
Feats: Armour Familiarity, Brawler, Dodge, Drazi Tackle, Fluency (Human), Great Fortitude, Point Blank Shot, Weapon Proficiency (close combat, grenade, pistol and rifle)
Standard Equipment: W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., 6 shots, AP 1, Automatic)

7. Men's Toilet

8. Women's Toilet

9. Waiting Area. Featuring a few chairs, a couch and a BabCom terminal, this is the waiting area for the office.

PART THREE – IN SILENCE, IT ENDS

With Mallory's second set of coordinates well in hand after the successful infiltration of IPX's offices in Red Sector, all that remains to the Player Characters is to put them to use. Of course, that is not as easy as it seems. By putting the two sets of coordinates together, Player Characters can see that Mallory was directing them to a spot in unclaimed space near the Sh'Lassan Empire, hence the ship that Mallory requested of Cobb.

Turncoat

Before the Player Characters set out after IPX, Vantane instructed them to return to the safe house when they were finished, so final arrangements could be made for them to meet the ship Cobb is bringing in. When they arrive at the location of the safe house, they will find Cobb, Vantane and four of Cobb's bodyguards waiting inside. Cobb, who was sitting at the table, stands up smiling when the Player Characters enter.

'You made it,' he grins. 'Figured you would. I'd love to see the faces on those corp idiots when they figure out what's happened.

'Your ship is standing by in hyperspace, by the way, waiting for my signal to come and get you. But before you go, there's something I've got to tell you. When I first met you in the Dark Star, I thought three things. I thought that if IPX was so hot to get something, it's got to be worth a lot of money. Then I thought that it would be worth just as much money if I had it. Then I thought that while I may owe Mallory, he's dead, and I don't actually owe you squat. So, thanks for doing the grunt work for me. Sure am glad I didn't give you guns.'

With that, Cobb, Vantane and his bodyguards pull their weapons and dive for cover behind the table and cots in the room. Outside in the hallway, two more of Cobb's men converge, one from each direction.

This fight, while dangerous, is not quite so lethal as the Player Characters might think at first. Out of the total of six bodyguards, only four are actually working for Cobb – the other two are firmly in the pocket of Vantane, who knew this firefight was coming and thought it might be the perfect time to stage his own coup. For the first two rounds of the firefight, Vantane and his two men (one in the room, one in the hall) will deliberately miss the Player Characters. If, after that time, it does not seem as if Cobb is certain to win the battle, they will direct their fire against Cobb and his men. Caught in the crossfire, it is all but certain Cobb will be killed. Once Cobb himself is dead, Vantane will call out to everyone to cease fire. The bodyguards will fall in line right away.

Cobb's Bodyguards (4)
4th Level Human Lurker; hp 16; Init +5; Spd 30 ft.; DV 13; Atk: +4 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Multi-Skilled (Acrobatics), Survivor's Luck 1/day; Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0; Str 13, Dex 12, Con 15, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 12
Notable Skills: Acrobatics +3, Appraise +3, Athletics +3, Bluff +8, Intimidate +8, Intrigue +8 (+12 when gathering information),

Knowledge (Downbelow) +11, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +2, Stealth +5, Subterfuge +7
Feats: Blind Fight, Brawler, Endurance, Fluency (Human), Improved Initiative, Toughness, Weapon Proficiency (close combat and pistol)
Standard Equipment: Club (+4, 1d6+1 dam, 1-h), W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., 6 shots, AP 1, Automatic)

Vantane's Bodyguards (2)
4th Level Human Lurker; hp 16; Init +5; Spd 30 ft.; DV 13; Atk: +4 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Multi-Skilled (Acrobatics), Survivor's Luck 1/day; Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0; Str 13, Dex 12, Con 15, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 12
Notable Skills: Acrobatics +3, Appraise +3, Athletics +3, Bluff +8, Intimidate +8, Intrigue +8 (+12 when gathering information), Knowledge (Downbelow) +11, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +2, Stealth +5, Subterfuge +7
Feats: Blind Fight, Brawler, Endurance, Fluency (Human), Improved Initiative, Toughness, Weapon Proficiency (close combat and pistol)
Standard Equipment: Club (+4, 1d6+1 dam, 1-h), W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., 6 shots, AP 1, Automatic)

Vantane the Usurper

As the whine of the last PPG shot fades, Vantane stands up slowly from behind cover, his hands raised slightly.

'Hold your fire,' he calls, holstering his PPG. 'I trust that little coup did not escape your notice? Cobb was your enemy, I'm not. He's dead, and now I'm in charge, so let's not ruin our friendship.'

Vantane will help the survivors of the battle to their feet, grinning slightly and brushing the dust from his clothes. He will bend over Cobb's body and retrieve a cigar case from the dead man's coat, open it and light one. If any of the bodyguards are badly injured, he will send them away to seek medical treatment.

'All right, my friends, here's the deal. You want that ship Cobb had called for, and I'm going to deliver it for you. He may have had delusions of grandeur about ancient treasures and so forth, but honestly, there's quite enough to keep me busy on this station without worrying about chasing ghost stories. The ship is yours to use for the next month, free of charge. In fact, as a bonus, I'll forget about the debt from paying Berendt. I don't know if I should thank you or Cobbs' greed, but either way things turned out for the best. Now, that ship should be docking in about 20 minutes. It's called the Ebon Sea, and you should probably get going. Whatever you find out there, good luck. Oh, one more thing. Captain Hood is a good woman – so long as you keep her off her Free Mars soapbox – but try to keep from putting her in danger. She's a valuable asset to have.'

If the Player Characters have any more questions for Vantane, he will be glad to spend the next five minutes or so talking to them, but as he just staged a violent coup of one of Babylon 5's criminal gangs, he does have things to do. If asked about why he sided against Cobb, he will insist he was siding with himself, that he has had his eye on the top job for a while and this merely presented the right opportunity for him. No matter how the Player Characters ask, he will assure them he has no interest whatsoever in the *Cataclysm*, and that he will remain true to his word with them.

Of course, considering what they just saw him do, they may take his assurance with a grain of salt.

The *Ebon Sea*

True to Vantane's word, 20 minutes later the *Ebon Sea* docks with Babylon 5 at Dock 47. Sitting there in its dock, it looks just like any other civilian trading vessel, save that it has a few more particle gun scores on its hide than most. The hatch is flung open, and a plump woman in a dirty flight suit is leaning against the side.

As you approach, the woman looks you over appraisingly, and it is hard to tell what thoughts she is having behind the smear of engine grease on her face. 'You my cargo?' she asks after a moment. When you tell her you are, she gives you a suspicious look. 'Then what's the password?'

After letting you dangle for a moment, she barks a quick laugh. 'Just fooling around. I'm Captain Jenny Hood. Come aboard and get your gear stowed so we can blow this place. Welcome to the Ebon Sea.'

Only a few minutes after boarding, you can feel the hum of the ship's engines as it lifts free of the docking bay and heads out of the station. Once the ship is free of the docking portal, Captain Hood slows its acceleration and turns to look at you. 'So, it may be my ship, but right now I'm just a taxi driver. Where are we heading?'

When the Player Characters show Hood the coordinates they need to reach, she whistles once between her teeth and start making the preparations. If the Player Characters ask about that region of space, she can tell them that it is unclaimed territory that is often used as a base of operations for raiders. There are no stars nearby, but there is a great deal of debris, primarily an expansive asteroid field that contains no significant amounts of valuable minerals, meaning no one but raiders ever go there.

After making the necessary preparations and jumping into hyperspace, Hood engages the ship's automatic systems and gets up to work on some routine maintenance. She tells the Player Characters to make themselves comfortable, as the trip will take about 24 hours.

Captain Jennifer Hood
3rd level Human Trader hp 9; Init +2; Spd 30 ft.; DV 13; Atk: +2 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Cultural Diversity, Investment, Trader's Knowledge, Master Trader +1; Fort

+1, Ref +3, Will +5; Str 10, Dex 14, Con 11, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 14
Notable Skills: Appraise +7, Bluff +7, Computer Use +6, Intrigue +6, Operations (piloting) +6, Pilot +6, Sense Motive +9, Subterfuge +6 and Stealth +4.
Feats: Skill Focus (Sense Motive), Weapon Proficiency (pistol)
Standard Equipment: Club (+4, 1d6+1 dam, 1-h), Flight Suit, W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., 6 shots, AP 1, Automatic)

Turncoat Reprise

If the Player Characters suspect Vantane might not be quite as magnanimous as he presented himself to be, they are right. Taking over as the leader of a smuggling gang on Babylon 5 is an expensive venture, requiring the renewal of alliances, dozens of bribes and raises for the underlings. The Player Characters just so happened to present Vantane with a marvelous way to raise all the money he might need to establish himself.

Once the Player Characters left Downbelow, Vantane immediately puts out messages to both Torona and Ibanez (assuming both are still in play, of course), offering them a way to find what they were looking for. Needless to say, he receives a quick response. Though he does not have the full set of coordinates to offer for sale, he is able to offer them a means of tracking the *Ebon Sea*, which is very nearly as good. Within an hour of the *Ebon Sea* leaving the station, an IPX vessel carrying Ibanez and/or Torona, as well as two private IPX security guards, leaves Babylon 5 in pursuit.

Robbers in the Graveyard

After 25 hours aboard the *Ebon Sea*, the ship emerges from hyperspace in a desolate expanse of space. The Player Characters are able to see a vast ribbon of asteroids stretching away out of sight in either direction, but no sign of a star or planet anywhere nearby. Captain Hood begins accelerating toward the asteroids, setting course for a bright dot on the navigation display that shows the location Mallory died protecting. She informs the Player Characters it will take another hour or so to actually reach the destination – the presence of so many asteroids forces her to come out of hyperspace short of the target.

After half an hour of sailing smoothly through the great gulfs between the asteroids, however, a warning light begins to flash on the *Ebon Sea*'s instrument panel, and Hood curses under her breath as a pair of Delta-V raiders sweep into view.

'Figures they'd be right here,' she grumbles. 'Look, if any of you have experience on a weapons system, I'd be grateful. If not, just stay out of my way and hold on to something.'

The Lonely Tomb

After dispensing with the two raider ships, the Player Characters have smooth sailing to the target coordinates, which turn out to be a huge asteroid the size of a small moon. A vast crevasse creases one side of the asteroid, creating a chasm nearly a kilometre deep. As Captain Hood brings the *Ebon Sea* in for a closer look, the Player Characters can see the dull angles of something deep within the crevasse, something that definitely is not part of the asteroid itself.

Though the approach is difficult, Hood can bring the Ebon Sea down into the chasm. In the twin glares of the ship's searchlights, you can make out a scene of terrible destruction. No doubt the thing you are seeing was once a ship, but judging from what you can remember of the configuration of Dilgar war cruisers, about half of this one seems to be missing. Nevertheless, there is no doubt in your mind that this is it, the thing for which Mallory searched for two decades. The Cataclysm lies beneath you.

'Well, we came all this way,' Hood says, setting the Ebon Sea down gently in the slight gravity of the asteroid. 'Might as well take a look. There are space suits hanging aft.'

Unless any of the Player Characters have an objection, Hood will don a space suit and come with them as they leave the ship.

The asteroid's chasm is a jagged cut of sharp rocks, running for kilometres in both directions. It is possible to walk on the asteroid's surface, as it is large enough to generate a gravitational field of 0.1g. Actually stepping out onto the asteroid, however, is like stepping into a nightmare. Dozens of Dilgar bodies, preserved in the vacuum of space, some wearing space suits, others not, lie scattered across the landscape. Many of them clearly died long before they could don a space suit, their bodies mangled with horrible wounds. The others may have been less lucky, surviving whatever catastrophe befell the ship long enough to put on a space suit and suffocate when the suit's power and air supply ran out. There seems to have been an effort made to arrange some of the bodies, but clearly the workload only continued to grow while those still alive to carry it out dwindled, and many of the bodies lie seemingly at random around the shattered ship.

If the Player Characters examine the *Cataclysm* more closely, they will see that a large portion of it is indeed missing, seemingly torn away from the rest of the hull. If one of the Player Characters has Knowledge (engineering) or a similar skill, he may roll against a DC 15 to determine that whatever caused the damage to the ship was not a weapon impact, but rather something literally tearing its way out of the ship from the inside. Judging by the size of the hole, and the empty space inside the hull, it is not hard to guess that whatever that thing was, it had been stored inside the *Cataclysm*'s cargo bay.

Entering the *Cataclysm* is difficult. With a successful Athletics skill check (DC 15), a character can climb into and out of the vast hole in the ship's cargo bay, but the bay itself is utterly empty and all hatches leading out of it are sealed tight and must be cut open in order for a character to proceed. The hatches and bulkheads in the ship all have Damage Reduction 10 and 50 hit points. It is also possible to enter a few cabins through the ship's main entry hatch, which hangs open, but again, the Player Characters will quickly run into sealed hatches that cannot be opened without cutting. If any of the Player Characters wish to scavenge the ship and nearby bodies, they can find a small number of trinkets and artefacts worth 6,000 credits to a collector of Dilgar items – a hobby which, by the way, is considered a vile pastime throughout most of the galaxy.

More importantly, if the Player Characters examine the bodies of the Dilgar lying on the ground outside, they will find that one of them is lying next to a book. However, the writing inside is in Dilgar, so unless one of the Player Characters speaks it, or has an appropriate translation program on a hand computer, it is indecipherable for now. The Player Characters might think to check Mallory's hand computer, but he has no such program – during the course of his research on the *Cataclysm*, he learned to read, write and speak Dilgar. However, it is assumed that eventually the Player Characters will manage to translate it.

Log of Warmaster Nha'Dush

First Entry: We are marooned. When the vessel in our hold came to life and burst free, it not only destroyed my ship, it destroyed us all. All power was lost immediately, and we tumbled out of hyperspace to crash into this desolate place. None of the ship's systems will function, and the engineers claim they cannot repair them. Thus, I record my last log entries here, on this gift of my mate. The men continue to work, though we all know we are doomed here.

Second Entry: It has been three days. We mark our time by our oxygen reserves, and there is little time left, as there are so few of us left. I dream of the ship that destroyed mine. I see it in my sleep, a mass of darkness and spines, like something dredged up from the sea. I dream of it, and thousands like it, darkening the skies of the worlds of our enemies, and this thought gives me some satisfaction.

Third Entry: There are only four of us remaining. I see it even when awake now, that thing we found and took aboard, that thing we thought was our salvation become our damnation. I become convinced there are more of them, scattered everywhere, waiting. It gives me pleasure to know our enemies will not taste victory for long, for in my dreams I see what it coming. I am grateful that, though we die, the light of our sun's nova will drive the shadows back from claiming our proud race.

The Final Meeting

After the Player Characters have been on the surface of the asteroid for approximately 30 minutes, the Games Master should have all the Player Characters make Notice skill checks to notice movement nearby. Slipping up on them, intending to take them by surprise, are the two IPX private security guards, as well as Ibanez and/or Torona.

It is possible for the Player Characters to prevent this from escalating immediately into violence, so long as it is Torona and not Ibanez slipping up on them. A successful Diplomacy skill check (DC 20), combined with a quick explanation that the *Cataclysm* is a hollow shell, with not so much as a bolt or screw inside its cargo hold, will convince Torona to come down cautiously and see for herself. When she realises the Player Characters are telling the truth, that there is no prize here, no great weapon to bring back to her employers, she will consider the matter closed – after all, she has no desire to risk her life in a firefight on some nameless asteroid over a wrecked ship and a bunch of dead Dilgar. In case the Player Characters ask, she cannot read Dilgar, but if she finds out about the log, she will want to take it with her, a demand that is likely to lead to a firefight if the Player Characters refuse.

Ibanez, on the other hand, is not to be dissuaded. He will attack the Player Characters no matter what they might say.

IPX Private Security Officer
3rd Level Human Soldier; hp 15; Init +1; Spd 30 ft.; DV 14; Atk: +5 close combat or +4 ranged; SQ Co-ordinated Unit +1; Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +0; Str 15, Dex 13, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 9, Cha 11
Notable Skills: Acrobatics +7, Athletics +8, Computer Use +2, Intimidate +6, Investigate +1, Knowledge (Human) +2, Notice +3
Feats: Armour Familiarity, Brawler, Dodge, Drazi Tackle, Fluency (Human), Great Fortitude, Point Blank Shot, Weapon Proficiency (close combat, grenade, pistol and rifle)
Standard Equipment: W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., 6 shots, AP 1, Automatic)

Conclusion

Once the confrontation with the IPX agents is resolved, one way or another, there is little for the Player Characters to do other than leave the asteroid and its macabre scene behind, perhaps with the feeling that it is best Mallory died before finding out the goal he sought for so long turned out to be as empty as the *Cataclysm* itself.

Interplanetary Expeditions

It is safe to say that, after the events of *Blood-Dimmed Tide*, no Player Character should ever seek employment at IPX. If Torona came to the asteroid after the Player Characters, however, and was able to see for herself there was nothing in the *Cataclysm*, the IPX directors will essentially forget the incident ever happened. On the other hand, if there is no report back to IPX from either of their agents, the corporation may take a particular interest

in the Player Characters from that point forward, making for a particularly vexing and dangerous enemy the Games Master can use time and again during his campaign.

IPX is exceptionally good at covering its tracks, however. If the Player Characters think to expose the corporation for any wrongdoing, they will discover they cannot find any evidence of it anywhere. There is no record of people such as Torona or Ibanez working for IPX, no paper trail to indicate that anything Mallory discovered was more than an old man's paranoia,

The Rumours and the Races

Before long, with nothing new coming along to exacerbate the situation, the rumours aboard Babylon 5 about the *Cataclysm* and its infamous cargo will fall away as the station and its inhabitants move on to the inevitable next crisis. Slowly, life aboard the station will return to normal, though this will happen much faster if the Player Characters reveal the location of the *Cataclysm*.

The *Cataclysm*

The Player Characters may choose to keep the location of the *Cataclysm* secret, or they may reveal it to the public. If they do reveal it, they would be wise to do so anonymously, so as to avoid the many questions about how they found it.

Once knowledge of the *Cataclysm*'s resting place becomes known, several governments of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, as well as the Earth Alliance, will launch salvage missions to the asteroid belt, intent on extracting the ship's corpse and dissecting it piece by piece.

Max Vantane

Figuring out how the IPX agents were able to follow them to the asteroid will probably not be too difficult for the Player Characters – they must have been tipped by either Captain Hood or Vantane himself, and Vantane had much more to gain and a much greater opportunity to do so.

Of course, if the Player Characters confront him over it, he will deny it. As far as he is concerned, the issue is closed. He received his money for selling the Player Characters out, and has no more interest in the matter. He will willingly deal with the Player Characters in the future if they come to him for anything, but will not offer them a discount.

From this point on, Max Vantane can be found in the Dark Star virtually every night, any time after 21:30.

The *Ebon Sea* and Captain Hood

One issue in which Vantane does keep his word is that the *Ebon Sea* is at the Player Characters' discretion for the next month. Wherever they need to go, Captain Hood can take them. She will remain on friendly terms with them afterward, and it is always valuable to know a good smuggler.

The Warmaster's Log

As *Blood-Dimmed Tide* is written to take place in 2258, none of the Player Characters (with the exception of Rangers) are likely to have any idea, even after it is translated, of what the log truly means, that the *Cataclysm* found a shadow fighter vessel and tried to bring it home, only to be destroyed when the vessel 'awoke.' The discovery of this log could have far-reaching ramifications within the campaign, depending on what the Player Characters do with it.

Of course, if the Games Master sets *Blood-Dimmed Tide* after the Shadow War, the log will be little more than a historical curiosity.

NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

This chapter lists and provides complete statistics for the major Non-Player Characters who make an appearance in *Blood-Dimmed Tide*.

Alise Torona

4th Level Human Agent/2nd Level Soldier
Hit Points: 19
Initiative: +7 (+3 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 17 (+4 class, +3 Dex)
Attacks: +6 close combat or +8 ranged
Special Qualities: Combat Training, Coordinated Unit +1, Master of the Craft (Bluff), Multi-Skilled, Opportunism, Skill Mastery
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +7, Will +3
Abilities: Str 13, Dex 16, Con 11, Int 14, Wis 14, Cha 10
Skills: Acrobatics +8, Appraise +7, Athletics +6, Bluff +11, Computer Use +8, Intrigue +6, Investigate +8, Knowledge (law) +7, Notice +8, Sense Motive +10, Subterfuge +8 and Stealth +8.
Feats: Alertness, Improved Initiative, Sixth Sense, Skill Focus (Sense Motive)
Standard Equipment: W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., six shots, AP 1, Automatic)

A slender woman in her mid-40s, Torona has a face that is forgotten within moments, an asset that has served her well as an operative of IPX. She served one tour of duty with EarthForce before the war with the Minbari, dropping out because the rigid lifestyle and poor pay held no appeal for her. Instead, she turned to the private sector, hiring on as a private security officer with IPX, where her intellect and natural flair for backstabbing politics earned her a quick trip up the chain of command.

Torona is a mercenary at heart. She works for IPX because they pay her, not for any other reason. She will not violate her contract by selling out to a competitor, however, as she sees that as bad for business down the line.

Duncan Ibanez

4th Level Human Agent/2nd Level Scientist
Hit Points: 19
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 14 (+3 class, +1 Dex)
Attacks: +6 close combat or +5 ranged
Special Qualities: Mental Agility, Primary Area of Study (Medical), Peripheral Studies (Knowledge – archaeology), Master of the Craft (Sense Motive), Multi-Skilled, Opportunism, Skill Mastery
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +5, Will +5
Abilities: Str 14, Dex 12, Con 16, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 12
Skills: Acrobatics +8, Appraise +7, Athletics +6, Bluff +6, Computer Use +8, Intrigue +6, Investigate +8, Knowledge (archaeology) +7, Medical +10, Notice +6, Sense Motive +10, Subterfuge +4, Stealth +5, Technical (electronics) +8.
Feats: Contact, Skill Focus (Medical)
Standard Equipment: W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., six shots, AP 1, Automatic)

In contrast to Alise Torona, Duncan Ibanez is a true believer. An ardent member of the Home Guard, he is passionate about the seemingly irreconcilable goals of gathering alien artefacts and ensuring humanity's primacy in the galaxy.

Trained as a doctor, Ibanez quickly learned he did not have what it took to practice medicine after seeing a disease brought aboard an Earth Alliance space station by a visiting alien wipe out most of the human population. Renouncing his Hippocratic oath as something he would not apply to aliens, he threw himself into the Home Guard, which eventually led to his employment by IPX.

A medium-height man with a thick build, Ibanez is utterly bald, a fact he tries to hide by wearing a hat or a hairpiece at all times.

Samuel 'Sammy' Cobb

5th Level Human Soldier
Hit Points: 20
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 16 (+4 class, +2 Dex)
Attacks: +8 close combat or +7 ranged (+8 PPG Pistol)
Special Qualities: Combat Training, Coordinated Unit +1, To the Limit
Saves: Fort +7, Ref +5, Will +13
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 14, Wis 11, Cha 15
Skills: Athletics +10, Intimidate +12, Knowledge (Babylon 5) +10, Notice +6, Sense Motive +5, Stealth +6 and Technical (electronics) +6
Feats: Blind-Fight, Brawler, Combat Expertise, Great Fortitude, Weapon Focus (PPG Pistol)
Standard Equipment: W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., six shots, AP 1, Automatic), Club (+4, 1d6+3 dam, 1-h)

Many people come to Babylon 5 unsure what they want or what to expect. Sammy Cobb is not one of those men. He came to the station to be a criminal, and it is something he has excelled at. Cobb cut his teeth on crime in one colony after another throughout his youth, building up a network of connections that allowed him to become one of the premier smugglers about the space station. Recently, however, he has begun to have broader and larger ambitions, and is seeking a way to supplant the other criminal bosses of Babylon 5, a goal that will take, at the least, a great deal of money.

Maximilian Vantane

4th Level Human Lurker
Hit Points: 16
Initiative: +5 (+1 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13 (+2 class, +1 Dex)
Attacks: +4 close combat or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: Multi-Skilled (Computer Use), Survivor's Luck 1/day **Saves:** Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +3
Abilities: Str 13, Dex 12, Con 15, Int 15, Wis 12, Cha 14
Skills: Appraise +3, Athletics +3, Bluff +8, Intimidate +8, Intrigue +8 (+12 when gathering information), Knowledge (Downbelow) +11, Notice +6, Stealth +5, Subterfuge +4
Feats: Blind Fight, Brawler, Endurance, Fluency (Human), Improved Initiative, Toughness, Weapon Proficiency (close combat and pistol)
Standard Equipment: W&G Model 10 PPG (+4, 2d6 dam, 19–20 crit, 50 ft., 6 shots, AP 1, Automatic), Club (+4, 1d6+3 dam, 1-h)

Sammy Cobb's second in command, Max Vantane has become more ambitious right along with his boss. He has observed Cobb's recent angling for a truly big score, often at the expense of the small transactions that form the cornerstone of the business, and has begun to consider quite seriously how the organisation would run with him at the helm instead of Sammy.

INTO THE CRUCIBLE

Welcome to *Into the Crucible*, a campaign for the Babylon 5 RPG! This campaign is designed to operate throughout Babylon 5's second season, covering events both large and small. As a storm gathers on the horizon, the people aboard the 'last, best hope for peace' struggle against all sorts of challenges. With this book, your players can take part in side scenarios tied into the individual episodes, or major events leading to a final showdown aboard a doomed ship behind enemy lines.

Season Two of Babylon 5 was dominated by what the Narns call the 'War of Retribution,' which the rest of the Galaxy knew simply as the Narn-Centauri War. This period often threw the station in chaos. Narn and Centauri agents were everywhere, spying on each other. Peace efforts were attempted, stalled, and begun again. War material and refugees were funnelled through the station, sometimes leading to retaliation from the other side. Through it all, other beings were at work behind the scenes, watching and advising…and sometimes, when the moment was right, taking direct action.

This book is set amidst the events leading up to the Narn-Centauri War. The players, based on Babylon 5, will eventually find themselves involved in the war one way or another. Yet even as they make their way through the various scenarios presented herein, they will discover that they aren't simply participating in a few unconnected missions. The events that occur take the form of a season-long story arc, culminating in a final battle deep within contested space. In the end, they learn that the Narn-Centauri War is not, in fact, the true conflict…the greatest threat is still to come.

PREPARATION

To run this campaign, the Games Master must possess the *Babylon 5 Main Rulebook* and the *Player's Handbook*. The *Earth Alliance Fact Book*, *Minbari Fact Book*, *Coming of Shadows*, *Point of No Return*, and *Techno-Mage Fact Book* are also recommended. A thorough knowledge of the events that occurred in the Babylon 5 show will also be quite helpful, although reminders will be placed throughout this text as necessary to link in with events on the show. Since the players will be operating 'behind the scenes' of the events depicted on television, this may not be as critical to them as it is to the Games Master.

Although this book is the second in a series of campaign products, following on the heels of *Fiery Trial*, the players do not need to have played in that campaign to enjoy this one. If they have, they may recognise certain characters and events that are referenced elsewhere in this book. Some may seem like old friends. Others will be new to them. A group that didn't play *Fiery Trial* can still enjoy this campaign, as it is designed to stand alone.

Whenever a potential action the players might take will come into conflict with the B5 main arc itself, a 'DANGER!' notice will be given to that effect, along with suggestions for how it might be avoided. Note that this will only be of interest or concern if the Games Master is running a 'canon campaign' as defined in Chapter 9 of the *Babylon 5 Main Rulebook*. In many cases, the players may not even be aware that they are affecting the core arc. The Games Master should take appropriate steps to ensure the integrity of Babylon 5's storyline is not disrupted, though these alterations may not necessarily be visible to the players. When applicable, suggestions will be given for potential solutions, although the Games Master should feel free to create his own as necessary. However, simply saying 'You can't do that because it didn't happen in the show that way!' is not a viable option. Often, the best solution is to avoid allowing the situation to occur in the first place, and the key to that is preparation.

Text that appears in a shaded box within the course of a module is intended for the players. You can read this material aloud, or paraphrase it as necessary. Sidebars contain privileged Games Master information, instructions, danger notices, alternative rules, optional encounters, and the like. Information on encounters is provided directly within the module text, although significant non-player characters and powerful enemies will be described more fully in the Appendices.

Encounter Levels

This campaign is intended for a party of four to six 3rd-level characters, which is approximately where a group that played *Fiery Trial* will begin this campaign. If fewer players participate, the Games Master might wish to run an initial mini-scenario to provide them some additional experience. Some suggestions for starting activities are provided with the first module. Alternately, the Games Master may simply provide the players with characters that begin at the required amount of experience, or simply adjust some of the encounters to fit the group as it currently stands.

In general, the completion of a module and all associated side scenarios will result in the acquisition of at most one level for each character. This in and of itself will not prepare them for the next module in the series. A suggested level will be provided for each module, and if the group has not yet achieved that much experience, the Games Master should strongly consider running a side scenario or two first. Some suggestions for these alternatives will be provided as sidebars or, in some cases, several extra pages of text.

RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN

This campaign may be viewed by some as just a series of modules laid end to end, but it is more than that. The events that happen in one module directly affect what happens in the next, and certain non-player characters and other events may happen between scenarios differently depending on how, or if, the previous module was completed. While every effort has been taken to provide options that cover such situations, it is impossible to predict the actions of every single group of players, so sometimes the Games Master may need to make alterations to the events set forth in the text. Above all, be flexible. Changes can be made, but be aware of their effect on the overall arc. When the time comes to proceed to the final scenario, you do not want to find yourself unable to find a logical manner to get the players to that right place at the right time. Your players are going to know if your conclusion is too contrived, and anything of that nature will spoil the grand finale.

Running a Story Arc

The campaign is made up of several modules that together make up an entire story arc. The modules should be run in the order shown, and in each module new things are learned that build up to the story's ultimate conclusion. Be careful not to reveal more information than a given module specifies, or the discoveries that await the party in the next game will be spoiled. Players like to talk and guess and speculate amongst themselves, and listening to these comments and questions is part of the fun of being a Games Master. Just remember, confirm or deny nothing. Simply smile and nod and look mysterious. Pretend to be a Vorlon if you want to really enjoy yourself—answer questions in terse, obtuse, short sentences that mean nothing to anyone until after the fact. Examples of Vorlon-speak are scattered throughout this book, and can be taken as hints or suggestions.

In this product, modules are presented as chapters. In between each one, you will find suggestions for events and activities that can occupy the players before the next part of the story arc unfolds. The Games Master can use these as desired, in whole or in part, or substitute activities of his own. A skilled Games Master might also be running an entirely separate story arc or two alongside *Fiery Trial II*, as alluded to in Chapter 9 of the *Babylon 5 Main Rulebook*. Since the characters will likely need to achieve another level of experience between modules, a secondary arc provides a perfect opportunity to do this.

Some Games Masters might wish to incorporate elements of a secondary or tertiary arc directly into the events of *Into the Crucible*. For example, a group that finds itself operating as mercenaries or pirates might involve some or all of its members in side quests during trips to the various alien worlds explored herein. The ending scenario will then take on an even greater significance if the players have allied themselves with one side or the other. While no rules can be written specifically addressing such situations, we have attempted to provide hints and suggestions for additional scenario options whenever possible. Some of these will suggest additional story arcs in and of themselves.

Non-Player Characters and Alien Lifeforms

Generally, there are two types of enemies the players will encounter during play: non-player characters and hostile alien creatures. On Babylon 5 and in other civilised areas, virtually every encounter will be with a non-player character of some sort—including intelligent people who also happen to be aliens. Those modules set on other planets and the like could feature any number of bizarre monstrosities intent on killing and eating the players, and some of these will have even more fiendish ideas in mind.

Non-player character descriptions include the skills and abilities that are relevant to the encounter in question. For non-player characters who appear only in a single encounter, no further details will be required. The Games Master may, however, occasionally need to give a non-player character a more active role, depending on player actions. For example, a duty officer with whom the party must interact may be intended to appear only as a source of information, but if the players convinced him somehow to join their group for a time, further information might be needed. In these cases, the Games Master should extrapolate likely skills and abilities for the non-player character based on his or her profession and experience. Suggestions and hints on how to play such characters will also be provided as necessary.

Virtually every alien creature encountered by the players in this campaign will be of a type never before seen. To preserve the integrity of module text, the complete description of the alien beast will appear as a Xenobiology File sidebar. Individual statistics for the encounter itself will be placed within the encounter description.

Difficulty Levels

There are no Difficulty Levels listed in this book. Instead, each module is designed to accommodate players of a specific level, as noted in the introductory text. Some players may find the encounters more or less difficult depending on their combination of classes, helpful non-player characters, and equipment. The Games Master may always adjust encounters by making slight modifications, such as the addition of skills or equipment if the party is having an easy time of things. Just remember that any added weapons or items will fall into the players' hands in the end!

Experience Points and Mini-Scenarios

At the end of each module, a suggested amount of experience points (XP) is provided. This is by no means a hard-and-fast, precise amount that must be given, although it is recommended that each character receive at least that much in order to advance towards the next module. The completion of certain tasks, rescuing of victims, the discovery of hidden clues, and other actions may also provide a party with bonus XP, as noted within

the text. The Games Master can also provide other bonuses at his discretion, or reduce the amount if not all goals of the module were met. If the module is completely botched, few if any points should be awarded, and an additional side scenario may need to be run to make up the difference.

In certain instances, side plots are provided as for specific individuals who match certain racial or social connection criteria. In these cases, XP awards apply only to that player. The Games Master should, however, ensure that each participant in the campaign undertakes approximately the same number of such modules if they wish. This avoids the appearance of favouritism, which can ruin the game for the disgruntled player. Suggestions for a few side modules are found throughout this book.

THE STORY ARC

This campaign is designed to begin as a bridge between Season 2 and Season 3 of the series. A group that has already been through Season 1 will probably already be aware that something important is building on the horizon, and may well already be involved in these events. *Into the Crucible* puts them deeper into the coming conflict, but towards what end? The players may not even be aware that they are pawns being moved about on the galactic chessboard until late in the campaign, if at all. Even if they do, which side is manipulating them? Who can they really trust? What secrets are their allies keeping from them? These are the kind of unanswered questions that will make a properly run Babylon 5 campaign the stuff of legends.

Module One: Any Sufficiently Advanced Technology

After a few events on Babylon 5—mini-scenarios that tie in with Season 2's early episodes—a gaunt, stony-faced woman named Theresa Cross approaches the players. Ms. Cross is actually an IPX agent, although she doesn't announce this right away. IPX is always interested in acquiring alien technologies and other scientific research materials, and to this end they employ a complex network of employees, assistants, and unwitting dupes who don't realise they're even associated with such a huge company.

During the course of *Fiery Trial*, an IPX agent named Roland Anderson employed the players and built them into a cohesive team capable of carrying out clandestine missions that couldn't be traced back to IPX. Sadly, a traitor killed him at the end of that campaign. If the players were part of those events, Theresa Cross will simply be his replacement. If they didn't, she'll recruit the group because of their reputation and abilities, as well as recommendations from sources she won't name.

Theresa has learned that a Techno-mage left his staff somewhere on the station (just after the events of 'The Geometry of Shadows'). The staff is shot through with advanced technology that would mean a great deal to Ms. Cross's employers. Meanwhile, the staff has been found by a petty crimelord in Downbelow who sets up an auction to sell it for a huge profit. The players must proceed to the auction and retrieve the staff, if they can—but there, the staff's owner shows up looking for it! Will the players fight the powerful Techno-mage or work alongside him? And if they get the staff, what will they do with it? They could give it back, turn it over to Cross, sell it on the black market…or keep it themselves and try to figure out how it works, if they dare.

Module Two: Dark Secrets

More side scenarios ensue, followed by the next module in the series. Theresa Cross returns, offering the players a mission of utmost importance. She believes that President Santiago didn't die accidentally, and can prove it if only she can gain access to the wreckage of EarthForce One, which was scattered across the surface of Io after the ship exploded. According to her, the government has deliberately ignored or hidden away pieces of the wreckage because those in power are involved in a huge conspiracy.

This leads the players to visit Io (as described in the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*) where they eventually track down the wreckage and escape after a confrontation with agents allied to President Clark. Will they turn over the information to Ms. Cross? Will they also pass it along to the station commander, or keep it to themselves? And if they do hand it over, will anybody believe them? Will anyone WANT to believe them?

Module Three: Requiem for the Dilgar

A mysterious man appears on the station with no past or memories. Theresa Cross asks the players to keep an eye on him, and report anything unusual to her directly. Eventually, it is learned that he's a Dilgar deep cover agent! The Dilgar race, supposedly destroyed years ago, was thought to be extinct with the passing of Deathwalker the previous year. Needless to say, his presence is an unwelcome surprise.

It turns out there's a hidden outpost of Dilgar still out there in a secret location within League space, one that was cut off during the Dilgar War thirty years ago. Their agent claims they only want peace, so the players are sent to find out if these people have really changed, or if something else is going on. Unfortunately, they're followed by those who still seek to destroy all traces of the Dilgar race. Can the Dilgar earn the trust and aid of the players? Where will they go if they escape destruction at the hands of their enemies? And is their sudden reappearance a harbinger of something more sinister?

Module Four: Comes an Ending

Theresa Cross hooks the up with a Narn who wishes to rescue his 'family'—actually a group of ranger trainees—from a hidden outpost in Quadrant 14. He claims he has family members in a small underground colony as yet not discovered by the Republic. Thanks to Theresa Cross, the Narn and his allies have in their possession a small Centauri ship

and the secret codes needed to get them past the sentries. But as the players move into the system, a tremendous space battle erupts nearby. Their ship is called to help with the fighting, forcing them to move to the colony in an ordinary shuttle, not even knowing if their transport back to Babylon 5 will be waiting for them when they finish their original mission.

Worse still, the colony isn't exactly in good shape. An alien creature has broken into the tunnels through the geothermal vents, pitting the survivors against each other—and against the players. Can they defeat the beast, rescue the rangers, and escape Quadrant 14 with their lives?

A Few Final Words Before Getting Underway

Within the synopsis above, it is assumed that the various party members all have some good reason to work together, and have in fact been doing so for some time. A close-knit group isn't required, but is highly recommended. A group with both Centauri and Narn members, for example, will have a tough time getting through Season Two without descending into civil war!

If the players participated in *Fiery Trial*, getting them involved in *Into the Crucible* is a simple matter. Roland Anderson's replacement, Theresa Cross, simply appears and announces that she's taking over his duties. On the other hand, if the group hasn't already been associated with IPX, she states that she's heard of the group's abilities and they meet her criteria for a special mission. She'll also hint that she may have future work for them if they do well the first time. Considering the money she's offering, as well as the potential for further employment, she shouldn't have too much trouble convincing a group to take on her tasks.

In *Fiery Trial*, a great deal of effort was spent providing the means to get a group of players together to jump into the campaign. This time around, it's assumed that the group already exists, and its members have been associating with each other for at least several months, if not longer. If not, you should consider running a side module or two by way of introduction. Several suggestions are provided at the start of Module One.

So let's get started!

Module One: Any Sufficiently Advanced Technology

Roland Anderson was a fool.

He might've been brilliant, with a real plan for the future that might even have worked. He took this rag-tag group and moulded it into exactly what we needed, when we needed it. He planted the seeds, and the fruit is growing nicely indeed. But he was still a fool.

What could have possessed him to risk himself in such a manner? Why would he go to that dreary planet? Did he feel he couldn't trust his own followers? Or was he so starry-eyed with the possibility of ultimate success that he had to be there to see the results himself?

No matter. He still perished, and the tools he built are still in place. I will use them now, as he would have, but they won't know the truth. They won't know who I really am, or what I want from them. If they knew, they might not obey, and I need obedience above all. They can be left to think they have independence, and a hand in their own destiny. They do not. They will serve, willingly or not. Yet they will not serve the masters Anderson trained them to serve. Instead, they will serve me.

Already the enemy is moving. They have agents everywhere, even in this place, this space station built on an ideal that I can appreciate even as I doubt its chances of survival. I must be careful. None must know my true nature. The day will come when the seeds planted by Roland Anderson germinate into weapons even he could never have expected. And I will be there to use those weapons.

I won't make the same mistake he did…

Background for the Games Master

Module Summary

- The players receive a visit from Theresa Cross and Alison Fernandez
- Cross sends the group on a treasure hunt for a lost Techno-mage artefact
- The players discover the artefact (a staff) is in the hands of Frankie the Rat, a crimelord on Brown Seven
- Frankie tries to auction off the staff, but is betrayed by Tolona, his second-in-command, who delivers a fake staff and moves to sell the real one to one of the other buyers
- Alwyn, a powerful Techno-mage, appears and tries to recover the staff
- A four-way showdown occurs between the players, Alwyn, Tolona, and the buyer

Names and Places of Importance

- Theresa Cross: The players' new contact within IPX
- Alison Fernandez: An old friend of the players from *Fiery Trial*
- Carvin: The dead female Centauri Techno-mage who once owned the staff
- Alwyn: Carvin's still-living master, who shows up looking for her staff
- Brown Seven: Level of Downbelow where most Techno-mages stayed while on Babylon 5
- Frankie the Rat: Crimelord who controls Brown Seven
- Kateen: Drazi aide of Frankie who watches over the Courtyard

- Fat Robert: Kateen's aide and a powerful unarmed fighter
- Kanim Hu: One of the bidders at the staff auction
- Tolona: Centauri aide of Frankie's who betrays him to sell the staff on his own
- Rory Garvan: Auction buyer who makes a secret deal to buy the staff directly from Tolona

Theresa Cross, IPX's replacement for Roland Anderson, has come to the station to rebuild her company's ties with the group Anderson set up during *Fiery Trial*. She has brought with her one other player from that book, Alison Fernandez, who will initially meet with the group to renew their old acquaintance. (Note: If the players didn't participate in *Fiery Trial*, Alison will instead explain that she's been observing and investigating them and believes they'll be interested in a business proposal. This, of course, was done at Theresa's insistence. In the event that Alison perished during the events of *Fiery Trial*, use a different non-player character with similar statistics.)

Alison Fernandez: Alison has held many jobs in her life, but the one she is most fond of is her stint as an aide to Ambassador Sullivan of the Earth Alliance during the post-Minbari War reparation discussions. She discovered then that she had a real flair for diplomacy, but unfortunately, in her early days she was not quite as good at it as she is now. In her attempts to please everyone, she made a few enemies, and one of these (she is not quite sure which, despite repeated attempts to find out) arranged to have her accused of taking bribes. IPX, however, saw her potential value and gave her a job on Babylon 5.

Alison is from Buenos Aires, but speaks English like someone from the American Midwest. She also speaks Spanish fluently, though she considers it her second language. When she becomes highly emotional (or in the heat of passion), she will interject Spanish words or phrases into her speech patterns (e.g., *Madre de Dios!*).

Like other major non-player characters, full statistics for Alison can be found in the Appendices at the end of this book.

IPX, which undertakes a variety of alien technology research efforts, has been aware of the race known as the Shadows for several years now. The experts at IPX don't know exactly what the Shadows are up to, but it can't be good. IPX knows that the Shadows are ancient and very powerful, and their appearance could be a harbinger of doom for Earth and its neighbours. On the other hand, Shadow technology could be a powerful advantage if it could be located, studied, and put to use within the Alliance. IPX has been actively hunting for such technology, which is why Roland Anderson helped train the players during *Fiery Trial*, and indeed the players were very helpful to his cause during that particular campaign. Theresa Cross has come to continue Anderson's work.

What no one but Theresa knows, however, is that she has her own agenda. Something is going on within the upper echelons of IPX, and this has her quite worried. People she has known for years are being transferred or forcibly retired, to be replaced by individuals she knows aren't qualified for the job. Furthermore, those who question these moves meet the same fate. Unwilling to take any risks for herself, she is playing the part of the model employee while she investigates further. None of this matters during Module One, but comes into play later in the campaign.

In the meantime, Theresa has come to the station because she's learned, through her own sources, that a Techno-mage staff was left behind somewhere on Babylon 5 after the events of 'The Geometry of Shadows.' This staff belonged to one of the mages, Carvin, who died unexpectedly at the end of that episode when she had to enter a decoy ship. That vessel was then destroyed by Shadow agents, leading the Shadows to believe their former thralls were now all dead. (See *The Techno-Mage Fact Book* for complete details.) The rest of the mages fled to a secret hiding place, but Alwyn, Carvin's master, didn't forget her sacrifice. It's believed that he's on his way back to the station to recover the lost staff, and Theresa wants to acquire it first. If she can get her hands on it, she'll deliver it not to IPX for careful study. After all, the Techno-mages were created by the Shadows, so any insight on their derivative technology could be useful. Of course, she'll also take a look at it herself first, just to make sure it isn't dangerous.

Naturally, Theresa can't search the station herself, so she brings in Alison Fernandez and hires the group to look for her. Meanwhile, she remains in her cabin, available for further questioning by players if the need arises.

Additional Module Information

This module can, like most of those in this book, be played as a standalone scenario. However, it is best used as part of the ongoing story arc that unfolds throughout these pages. The module is an introductory one, with a variety of options that can carry the tale in many directions over several weeks of game time. While many of the remaining modules that comprise *Into the Crucible* have carefully scripted timelines, that is not the case here. Indeed, the Games Master can choose to bring in Theresa Cross at virtually any time, either immediately (if he wants to get right down to business) or after a few short scenarios intended to introduce players to the game. Some suggestions for possibilities are provided hereafter.

Throughout this book, it's assumed that the players have some sort of regular meeting place on Babylon 5, or another area they frequent regularly. In *Fiery Trial*, this was the Nova Nine Pub, a faithful rendition of an actual British pub located in the Zocalo. Box text and other background material in this book will refer to the Nova Nine as the standard meeting spot for the players. If they have some other headquarters, replace that location in the text as necessary.

Suggested Level for This Module: 4-6 3rd level characters

BEFORE THE MODULE

If the players have just concluded *Fiery Trial* or another scenario that occurs near the end of Season One, they may need a bridge to this module. After all, immediately jumping from one major event into another may seem too sudden. A short side scenario or two will be just what the doctor ordered.

The short scenarios hereafter, like others in this book, fill not only this niche but also link to the episodes of Season Two. Depending on the depth of the campaign, the Games Master can run any or all of them before proceeding with Encounter One for 'Any Sufficiently Advanced Technology.'

Link #1 to 'Points of Departure'

In this episode, the rogue Minbari cruiser *Trigati* appears at Babylon 5. The cruiser's arrival coincides with the assignment of John Sheridan as commander of the station. The commander and crew of the *Trigati* refused to order the Grey Council's orders to surrender at the conclusion of the Earth-Minbari War, and instead mutinied and vanished. Now they have returned, intending to regain their honour at any cost. During the events that follow, the *Trigati*'s commander kills himself and the ship attempts to provoke a military battle, in the hopes of blaming the hated Sheridan 'Star-Killer' for renewed hostilities. When the ruse fails, the *Trigati* and all its fighters self-destruct.

What nobody knows is that the commander of the *Trigati*, Kalain, was not the only member of that ship's crew to come to Babylon 5. Not every *Trigati* crewman saw the wisdom of perishing without striking a single blow against the hated enemy. Keeping his true goals secret even from Kalain, a Minbari assassin named Manai accompanied his commander to the station, posing as his shuttle pilot. Now, seeing the failure of Kalain's foolhardy mission, he intends to carry out a secondary goal—that of slaying Commander Sheridan!

After the destruction of the *Trigati*, the shuttle that brought him to Babylon 5 is identified and discovered to be empty. Naturally, the vessel is considered Minbari property, so Minbari are asked to claim it. Any Minbari players who are part of the ambassadorial corps could be assigned to check out the ship. A player associated with Station Security could also be sent to participate in this examination. During the investigation, an examination of the shuttle's automatic logs reveals, on a successful Computer Use (DC 15) check, that two people were aboard the vessel. Players who cannot read Minbari suffer a –5 penalty to this check. The names of the passengers aren't available in the logs, although it's obvious that one of them was Kalain. So who was the other one? No Minbari deaths, other than Kalain's, have been reported aboard the station since the *Trigati* incident. What happened to the pilot?

The next logical step is to check the video logs of the shuttle bay, as well as the customs records of individuals entering Babylon 5 through that port. The image won't be of much help (at first), and the Minbari gave the false name 'Litoin' at the entry station. He arrived carrying a bag identified as a Minbari diplomatic pouch, and was permitted entry without search. Since his arrival, nothing has been seen of him, and no one by that name arranged for quarters or made any purchases.

If the players haven't already become involved, this information is enough to cause Security some alarm. (Note: Mr. Garibaldi is unavailable during this scenario due to his injury at the end of Season One. Players interfacing with Security either deal with Garibaldi's aide, or with Zack Allen.) Security doesn't trust the Minbari, who are obviously keeping secrets and have a known grudge against Sheridan. Upon learning that one of the *Trigati*'s crew is unaccounted for, they launch a search for the missing 'Litoin.' Assuming the players have any connections at all with Security, they'll be asked to help look for him. A human or Minbari player is ideal for this role, but not necessary.

At Security's direction, the players are given access to the security logs and an image of Manai from the cameras. Unless the players are high-level Minbari, they won't have any reason to recognise him. However, if they think to show the image to the Minbari ambassadorial staff, Hedronn will be able to positively identify Manai. (Delenn is also unavailable at present as she's still entrapped within her chrysalis.) If the players aren't Minbari, they will need to make a Diplomacy check (DC 16) to actually confer with Hedronn. Otherwise, they are forced to deal with Trenav, a low-level Minbari who doesn't have time to trifle with such unimportant matters. Trenav will stall and stymie all attempts to bypass him unless the players pull rank or get Garibaldi's aide or Zack Allen directly involved—and neither of them will be too happy about this interruption of their regular duties.

If the players don't go directly to the Minbari to ask for identification, or have trouble with Trenav, they can use a diplomatic contact to identify Manai. The contact must have some way to access Minbari personnel files. Manai's status as an assassin can't be learned directly in this manner unless the diplomatic contact is himself connected with Minbari assassins in some way. Manai is listed in the *Trigati*'s crew manifest as a 'special operations specialist,' but no other information can be located—which in and of itself will be curious.

If the name 'Manai' is spoken in the presence of Lennier or Hedronn, they will immediately identify him as a known assassin. If the players report the fact that the man arrived on Babylon 5 under an assumed name, or that he was a 'special operations specialist,' to Security, Zack Allen will drop the name to one of those two Minbari and thus learn the truth. Should Allen or anyone else in security discover that the assassin is loose, he'll discern immediately that Sheridan is the likely target and set up an ambush for

Manai. He orders everyone involved to keep quiet about the fact that Manai has been identified, and arranges a public appearance by Sheridan at the Zen Garden in the hopes of drawing out the assassin. The players are asked to lurk in the area as backup for Security.

Sheridan wears a flak jacket under his uniform, but otherwise trusts his security men (most of whom are in plain clothes) to keep him safe. Sharpshooters and observers cover the area, and scanning teams keep an eye out for weapon signatures. However, when Manai entered the station, he carried a 'diplomatic pouch' containing a holdout fusion rifle (see sidebar). He now seeks to slay Sheridan from a distance using this weapon.

Minbari Holdout Fusion Rifle: This item is similar to a Sha'nar fusion rifle (see the *Minbari Fact Book*), but is designed for use by assassins. Like the Sha'nar, it can be broken down for easy transport within a briefcase or diplomatic bag, and can't be identified by scanners in this state. The small power cell provides enough energy for three normal shots or one rapid-fire shot. Installing a new power cell is a standard action. The holdout rifle otherwise possesses the stats of a Sha'nar fusion rifle except it costs 750 credits more and weighs only 4 lbs. Possession of one aboard Babylon 5 is illegal, and the weapon is normally available only as an extremely rare item on the black market, or to Minbari assassins or snipers.

Since he's an excellent assassin, Manai scouts the area in advance and discovers a spot along the outer edge of the Zen Garden where he can't be seen by security. Since he doesn't care about surviving his attack on Sheridan, he doesn't bother to set up an escape route. The chances of the players spotting him depend entirely on their actions during the preparation for Sheridan's speech, which will be given to a group of 'schoolteachers.' Depending on their nature, the players could volunteer to play the part of these teachers, or they might be in the audience, or reporters, or any other position they feel is appropriate.

The speech is given to a group of 6 'teachers' being recognized for their skilled work with children on the station. Ostensibly, it is also a chance for Sheridan to show his humanitarian side—this is his first real opportunity to appear to the rest of the station in a non-military aspect since his arrival on Babylon 5. Thus, there are several reporters in the area, as well as Zack Allen—because if someone high up in Security didn't show up, the assassin would surely be suspicious of a trap. Four other security troops, in plain clothes, are also present as a small 'audience.' The players can take the place of any of these, or could come up with another plan of their choosing.

At some point during the speech, Manai will make his move, emerging from cover to take aim at Sheridan. Prior to this, they can only discover his presence with a Search check opposed by Manai's formidable Hide skill—note that he has Skill Mastery with this skill, so he can take 10 if he wishes. Should they notice him early, hiding within the bushes along the edge of the Zen Gardens, they can expose the attempt right away. However, in his anger, Manai will then duel with the players directly, and he can be a deadly foe.

Should this not come to pass, Manai will wait with extreme patience until the moment is right, whereupon he steps out of the bushes and moves into position. Regardless of where they are, the players receive a Spot check (DC 25) to notice him as he first begins to move, and a second Spot check (DC 15) to see him as he gets into the right location for the perfect shot. A player can also become aware of him on either occasion with a Listen check opposed by Manai's Move Silently check. Again, note that he has Skill Mastery in this skill.

DANGER: If the players don't act quickly to halt the assassin, damage from Manai's attack could seriously injure or even kill Captain Sheridan!

Anyone who makes the first Spot or Listen check receives a surprise action—only actual players have this opportunity, not any non-player guards. Manai's action in the second round, while the players have the DC 15 Spot chance, is to take aim at Sheridan. Again, only the players have a chance to do something to stop him—draw a weapon, attack, yell out a warning, or whatever. If they don't warn Sheridan, Manai will take an aimed shot with a +2d6 sneak attack bonus—potentially enough to kill the Commander in a single blast!

Manai ignores anything the players do and fires on Sheridan after one round of aiming. If they cry out a warning, he fires without aiming, fearing the target will duck out of sight behind the podium where the speech is taking place. If he hits Sheridan, Manai moves forward to assure himself of the kill with a coup de grace, after which he kills himself with his fighting knife. If he misses, Manai takes any action he can to get another shot, including ignoring all guards and giving up whatever attacks of opportunity his motion provokes. Only if he has no way to attack Sheridan will he engage the players or any other guards. If desired, the Games Master may rule that on the second round after taking his shot (if any), Sheridan drops to the ground to be covered by Zack Allen, and the other guards in the area mow Manai down.

Manai

9th Level Minbari Agent
Hit Points: 24
Initiative: +4 (+4 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 20 (+10 Reflex)
Attacks: +6/+1 melee or +10/+5 ranged
Special Qualities: Security Systems, Sneak Attack +2d6, Skill Mastery (Hide, Move Silently)
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +10, Will +4
Abilities: Str 11, Dex 18, Con 12, Int 14, Wis 13, Cha 12

Skills: Balance +16, Bluff +13, Concentration +13, Escape Artist +16, Hide +16, Move Silently +16, Pilot +16, Spot +13
Feats: Weapon Focus (fusion rifle), Point Blank Shot, Precise Shot, Far Shot
Equipment: Holdout fusion rifle with 2 power packs, fighting knife, identicard with false 'Litoin' persona (forged by someone with a Forgery roll of 25)

Manai is a fanatical assassin bent on making John Sheridan pay for his 'crime' against the Minbari warrior caste during the Earth-Minbari War. His desperation has made him blind to the possibility that Sheridan's 'public relations' event could be a trap.

If the Games Master wishes to prolong this encounter, or set up Manai as a potential recurring enemy, there are several potential outcomes that don't involve his death. Although he has no escape route planned, he may still attempt to flee if the opportunity presents itself and the hated Sheridan hasn't been killed. He also has a high Escape Artist skill and might free himself from manacles or from prison. A Minbari sympathiser might also let him out of the brig, or he might escape after being handed over to the Minbari for prosecution. The Games Master might also have him take 'poison' that doesn't actually kill him, but only fakes his death for a short period.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 300 (150 if Sheridan is critically wounded, or Manai escapes)

Link #2 to 'Points of Departure'

The destruction of the *Trigati* left thousands of kilos of debris floating in space near Babylon 5, including the wreckage of two dozen imploded Nial-class fighters. Naturally, all that debris presents a hazard to navigation, so the new station commander orders it cleaned up as quickly as possible before some hapless freighter winds up holed by a floating chunk of metal. He also takes steps to ensure all reasonably intact pieces are collected for return to the Minbari.

A Sharlin cruiser normally carries a complement of 24 such fighters, as well as two spares that normally don't take flight in combat operations. When parts of a 25th fighter are recovered from the wreckage, station records reveal that 26 Nials were actually in space during the attempted 'attack' by the *Trigati*. So what happened to that last fighter?

This scenario can be played from several points of view, depending on player classes and alignments. If the players are affiliated with Security or EarthForce, they'll be sent on an official mission to locate and recover the missing fighter. If they have any connections with the Minbari, they'll be asked to recover the fighter for the honour of the Federation. They could also have an affiliation with another race, who'll want to 'acquire' the Nial in order to study its advanced technology. Finally, criminal elements will want to get their hands on the fighter so they can sell the thing for a huge windfall. Official missions won't result in pay, but do increase the group's prestige. Unofficial ones offer up to 5,000 credits for the successful (and secret) delivery of a useful piece of Minbari technology.

Regardless of the means, the players will need to first examine the detailed records of the 'battle' that resulted in the *Trigati* complement's mass suicide. If the players are working through legal channels, getting a look at the recordings and scans is no trouble at all. If not, they need to make a Computer Use check (DC 15) to find enough publicly available scans to locate the required information.

The scans show that twenty-five of the fighters in the 'battle' exploded into tiny bits, but the missing one split in two. The first part, which contained the cockpit and top section with all the electronics, was recovered. The second half, made up of nearly all the fighter's propulsion and weapon systems, sailed off into space and was captured by Epsilon 3's gravity. Depending on how the players acquired the information about the missing fighter, they'll need to come up with some way to calculate its trajectory and locate the wreckage. There are several potential methods, all requiring a DC 20 skill check. These include Knowledge (astrophysics), Technical (space travel), or even Computer Use if the player wishes to write a program to make the proper calculations.

The Nial wreckage, it appears, crashed on the opposite side of Epsilon 3. Landing on the planet is prohibited to civilians (cf. 'A Voice in the Wilderness') so the players will need official permission to descend. If they're working for the station or the Minbari, this won't be a problem. Otherwise, they'll need a Diplomacy or Forgery check (DC 20) and a convincing story. For example, if working for the Centauri, they might explain that a missing Centauri shuttle was located on the planet, but Ambassador Mollari doesn't want to involve an official rescue crew for 'diplomatic reasons.'

The next challenge will be to get to the crashed Minbari fighter. Most groups won't have their own ship, so they'll need to acquire one. Let them get creative. A group that lacks sanctions by the Earth Alliance or the Minbari will need to rent a shuttle willing to risk the descent to Epsilon 3 and avoid capture by authorities. The shuttle must be of a size large enough to accommodate the body of two-thirds of a Nial fighter. If they don't have their own pilot, whoever flies the shuttle must be trustworthy enough to keep quiet about what was found—or they'll have to be bribed.

If the players are in fact working for the station with the intent to return the wreckage to the Minbari after recovery, a 'businessman' named Hans Kato approaches them just before they set off for the planet. He explains that he knows their mission and offers 10,000 credits if they deliver the wreckage to him instead of station personnel. He doesn't identify himself or who he works for, but if the players succeed in a Bluff or Intimidate check (DC 15), he'll reveal that he secretly works for EarthForce and wants to retrieve

the wreckage for the Alliance, rather than turn it back over to the Minbari. A Sense Motive check (DC 15) reveals that Hans still isn't telling everything.

Accessing his computer file with a Computer Use (DC 10) check reveals that he's indeed an EarthForce operative, but if that same check also exceeds DC 18, the investigating player discovers there's additional information available in a sealed file. Breaking into this requires a Computer Use (DC 25) check and reveals that he's actually an undercover operative for Station Security—obviously a plant to test the players' loyalties. This information can also be discerned through telepathy, as Hans has no way to block or detect scans.

If the players report his activities like good, responsible citizens, security personnel will trust them implicitly thereafter. If they try to take him at his word and score the big payoff, Station Security will arrest him in a 'sting' operation and thank the players for catching this 'criminal' in the act. They won't be charged with a crime, but won't receive any reward and will thereafter be distrusted by all Babylon 5 authorities (–2 reputation penalty to all related skill checks).

Eventually, the players will set off to try recovering the fighter. They aren't the only ones looking for it, though. After they land and start loading the fighter aboard their ship (an operation that takes place on a rocky planetary surface with no atmosphere and normal gravity), two other vessels show up. One is a standard Earth transport shuttle flown by smugglers looking for a salvage opportunity, while the other is a Narn shuttle hoping to grab some technology they can reverse-engineer. (If the players are already occupying one of these roles, replace that one with a group of EarthForce personnel looking to secretly nab the tech for the Alliance.)

The two shuttles approach and their pilots start threatening the players and each other, trying to secure the rights for the Nial for themselves. The smuggler pilot is named Lance Jorgensen, while the Centauri pilot is 'Lord' Tranzig—regardless of Knowledge checks, no player will recognise the name. First, the two shuttle captains promise to open fire if the players don't stop loading the wreckage onto their ship. If this bluff is called (neither shuttle is armed), they start bidding on the Nial, offering up to 50,000 credits for salvage rights. Should the players accept an offer from one shuttle, the other immediately swears to oppose the other at all costs.

While they argue, the players should have enough time to finish loading the wreckage and take off. If they don't, they can buy more time with a successful Diplomacy check (DC 16) to stall the shuttle pilots. Distress calls will go unheeded as the body of the planet blocks signals to Babylon 5. The players can also try creative solutions, like threatening to blow up the Nial if the shuttles approach too closely, or firing on them with hand weapons. Eventually, though, they players will need to take off. When the do, the other shuttles begin an aerial duel, trying to ram the players and knock them back to the ground.

Of course, if the players' ship is armed, they can solve the whole issue by simply firing warning shots at the opposing vessels. Doing so scares them off at once. Otherwise, the players will need to fly their ship in an evasion pattern and avoid ramming attempts. Fortunately, the two opposing shuttles are flown by fairly inexperienced pilots (Pilot bonus +8). Also, they're afraid to fully commit to a collision for fear of giving their rival the upper hand. If one of them eventually does hit the players' shuttle, the other crashes into the first, causing both to spiral out of control and let the players escape.

It's possible that the players could wind up crashing on Epsilon 3 as a result of damage to their shuttle. If this occurs, they need to survive for 6 hours until the planet's rotation puts them in position to radio Babylon 5 for rescue. Surviving smugglers and/or Centauri will attempt to land and seize the Nial for themselves during this period. If the players resist, the enemy will storm the crashed shuttle, but they don't expect a fight and can be easily beaten off. Actually, their approach will be mostly bluster intent on bluffing the players into capitulating. If the players do surrender without fighting, they'll be allowed to live, but the Nial will be captured and taken by the victors.

Suggested experience for this scenario:
Retrieving the Nial and returning it to the Minbari: 300
Retrieving it but selling it for a profit: 100
Losing the Nial to the smugglers or Centauri: 100

Note that if the Nial is in fact stolen by someone else, the Games Master could extend this mini-scenario by having the Minbari hire them to hunt it down before it falls into the wrong hands.

Link to 'The Geometry of Shadows'

In addition to providing a brief side scenario, this also helps introduce players to the *Techno-Mage Fact Book*. Using this link makes the players somewhat accustomed to the Techno-mages, making the rest of the coming module less of a shock, and also gives them additional experience with the mysterious mages that helps explain why Theresa Cross wants the players' help in dealing with a related matter.

This side scenario begins just after the Techno-mages depart the station. Security discovers a badly burned body in Downbelow, and then another appears shortly thereafter. The players are asked to help with the investigation, primarily because security forces aren't exactly welcomed down there with open arms. Witnesses aren't talking, and in fact seem to be afraid for some reason.

The players will need to spend some time wandering around on the various decks of Brown Sector—this could

theoretically bring them into contact with Frankie the Rat's goons on Brown Seven (see the main module text hereafter), but only in a passing manner. They will need to make a Gather Information check to acquire anything useful. Succeeding in a DC 15 check reveals that most residents of Downbelow believe the murders were committed by a Techno-mage who stayed on the station after the others left. If the Gather Information check equals or exceeds DC 20, they learn that the Techno-mage in question is supposedly insane and kills anyone who doesn't do exactly what he tells them to do. This information can then be traced back to a lurker named Ethan Macaulay who is frequently seen getting drunk at the Happy Daze.

If interviewed in a drunken state, Ethan is too wasted to give much information, other than to say he saw his friend Colin burned to death by 'that damned techno-wizard.' If allowed to sober up, he explains that he and Colin were 'hanging out' (actually, they were looking for someone to rob) when a man in grey robes 'attacked Colin for no reason' (they tried to beat him up and steal his money). The man revealed himself to be a Techno-mage when he 'pointed his hand at my best friend in the world and fried him to a crisp.' Ethan then fled while the 'wizard' swore to kill any man on the station who refused to acknowledge him as a god.

Actually, the 'Techno-mage' is one Riley P. Tracey, a lurker whose mind has started to crack after over a year scraping out a desperate existence in Downbelow. When the Techno-mages arrived, he was fascinated by their appearance and self-confidence. He attempted to talk to them several times and was rebuffed, until finally one was forced to drive him away with a fiery show of force. This snapped something in Riley's head. He spent several days constructing a makeshift flamethrower that sprays a flammable chemical on a target and ignites it using a portable cutting torch. When he flings forth his hand, splashing the target with this liquid and setting it afire, he utters some nonsense gibberish that makes any observers believe he's casting a 'spell.'

The only clues the players have to this deception can be found on the bodies of the dead lurkers. First, they were both robbed of anything of value, suggesting that the killer hung around long enough to take whatever survived the fire. What does a Techno-mage need with money and makeshift weapons? Second, anyone with the proper skill can make a Medical check (DC 20) to identify the residue of the chemical accelerant Riley used to burn his victims—traces of which can also be located at the crime scenes. Why would a Techno-mage, master of highly advanced technology, use a common chemical? Clearly this isn't the work of a renegade mage.

In any event, while the players are investigating, word comes in that someone has been set afire elsewhere on the same Brown Sector level where they happen to be at the moment. If the players hurry to the scene, they find Riley laughing and shouting out commands over his latest victim. As soon as he sees the players, he demands they bow down before him or suffer a similar fate. If they refuse, he attacks with his 'flamethrower' (see sidebar). As long as he isn't badly threatened, he keeps using it until it malfunctions, exploding and turning him into a human torch.

If the players have already identified Riley as a lurker instead of a Techno-mage, they can attempt to talk to him before he attacks. If they succeed in an opposed Bluff, Diplomacy, or Intimidate check, they confuse him for one round before he goes totally nuts and starts burning everyone in sight.

Riley P. Tracey

5th Level Human Lurker
Hit Points: 17
Initiative: +6 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee or +5 ranged
Special Qualities: Survivor's Luck
Saves: Fort +7, Ref +3, Will –1
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 15, Con 12, Int 11, Wis 7, Cha 11
Skills: Bluff +8, Hide +10, Move Silently +10, Pick Pocket +10, Sense Motive +6
Feats: Endurance, Improved Initiative, Great Fortitude, Run
Equipment: Makeshift flamethrower, crude knife, 15 credit chits (stolen from previous victims)

Riley is a crazed lurker who now fancies himself a Techno-mage, and therefore worthy of being worshipped as a 'god.' Anyone who doubts him is burned to death and his possessions stolen. He appears as a human in grey robes with a shaved head, and if not laughing maniacally, conducts himself in a calm, wizard-like manner. If allowed to roam unchallenged, he'll eventually collect a small army of followers and become a threat to the other citizens of Downbelow.

After he takes any damage in combat, Riley attempts to retreat, using his Run feat to best effect. Players who pursue are attacked with the flamethrower. If Riley gets away, the next time he's seen, it will be with two 'converts' (2nd-level lurkers who agreed to accept him as a 'deity'). After that, he slowly gathers a larger and larger army with the intent of taking over all of Downbelow. This could lead to further scenarios as his 'cult' develops. Note that he'll make improvements to the flamethrower in this period so it won't explode during future encounters. Also, he will eventually get his hands on a set of padded armour in the interim, making him a much more challenging encounter.

Makeshift Flamethrower: This is a cobbled-together device consisting of a tank of chemicals worn under the robes and a cutting torch attached to the underside of the arm. When Riley points his right hand at a target and toggles the controls on his belt with the left hand, a gout of liquid shoots out and is ignited by the cutter. Because this action is so swift, the viewer must make a Spot check (DC 18) to notice the left hand doing something while the right produces the 'fireball.' Needless to say, Riley needs both hands free to employ the device. The weapon has enough

fuel to produce 10 'shots' (and since he's already used it on his most recent victim, he only has 9 left).

The jet of burning liquid sprays out to 40 feet in one direction (a line, not a cone). Riley makes a ranged touch attack on his intended target, and if he hits, they suffer 2d6 fire damage and must make a Reflex save (DC 14) or catch on fire. Anyone within the line between Riley and the target (including the target if the initial attack missed) must make a Reflex save (DC 14) or catch on fire. The flamethrower can penetrate cover, but cover provides a bonus to the save DC equal to the cover DV bonus (see page 59 of the *Babylon 5 RPG Main Book*).

If desired, Riley can employ the flamethrower in a spray attack instead of at a specific target. If he does this, he covers a cone-shaped area extending out to 30 feet. Anyone in this area must make a Reflex save (DC 14) or catch on fire. Making a spray attack uses the equivalent of two rounds of ammunition.

If the flamethrower is used on more than one successive round, it automatically explodes, scoring 3d6 fire damage on the owner and automatically setting him on fire. Anyone within 10 feet of the explosion must make a Reflex save (DC 14) or catch on fire. If the flamethrower is used more than once in any one-minute period, regardless of how frequently, roll 1d6 for each attempt after the second. A roll of 1 indicates a similar explosion occurs. The weapon is crude and must be allowed to cool between uses, or a catastrophe will result.

Anyone who catches on fire because of the flamethrower suffers 1d6+1 fire damage per round until the flames are extinguished. (Hopefully, because the players are aware that a 'Techno-mage' with 'fire spells' is about, they'll think to bring along an extinguisher or two.)

Suggested experience for this scenario: 200 (bonus 100 if Riley is kept alive)

Encounter One: The Meeting

You're sitting in the Nova Nine Pub, enjoying a cold one and watching a darts tournament take place nearby. The place is packed, since it's Saturday night and the afternoon work shift ended half an hour ago.

As you toss back another drink and trade observations about the darts game with your friends, a familiar face enters. It's Alison Fernandez! You haven't seen her in months, since that incident on P'Lask that resulted in the death of her employer. Standing behind her is a thin, gaunt woman in a black overcoat. Her short hair is brown and styled very plainly. She looks like someone who doesn't want to be noticed in a crowd.

As you all stand up to greet Alison, she shakes your hands warmly. 'Hello, everybody,' she says in that welcome Spanish accent. 'Nice to see you all again. Let me introduce my new supervisor, Theresa Cross.'

Theresa Cross: Like Roland Anderson, Theresa's name is a pseudonym. Her real name is buried in her past, along with whatever background she had before joining IPX. She might as well have died at the end of that previous life, to be reincarnated fully grown as Theresa Cross.

As the description above suggests, Theresa dresses plainly and tries very hard not to be noticed. She wears dark, uninteresting clothing and speaks without any recognisable accent. A Listen check (DC 20) will note that she occasionally slips briefly into one accent, and then another, and another, as if unable to decide what country she's actually from. Whether this is by accident or design can't be determined.

Theresa is a thin rail of a woman who only weighs about 100 pounds. She prefers heavy coats or outfits with shoulder padding to suggest she isn't so frail. She rarely smiles and tends to speak in a cool, businesslike manner. If anyone makes a joke, she laughs along with the others, but it's a clipped, harsh sound that's clearly forced. Humour, it seems, isn't an important part of her life. The only time she shows any true emotion is when describing a potential job or trying to convince others to do what she needs them to do. Then, she becomes animated, appealing to them in whatever way she must to get them to accept the task she sets before them.

At first, the conversation involves introductions and small talk. Let the players introduce themselves to Theresa, who politely won't let on that she's intimately familiar with all their dossiers. She explains that she's Roland Anderson's successor, but she won't discuss her employers or what her actual job is. (It's possible that the players learned in *Fiery Trial* that Anderson was working for IPX. If they did, it's likely that they never let on, and if not, Theresa won't be aware of their knowledge. Should the players confront Theresa by asking if she's an IPX employee, she'll deny it, even if the players insist they know Anderson was a lackey of IPX.)

The players will also probably want to know what Alison's been up to for the last couple of months. She's been on Earth, trying to track down who betrayed her when she was in the Diplomatic Corps. Sadly, she made no progress, despite several promising leads. Every time she thought she might pin down something useful, the information she needed was missing from a database or had been destroyed in some freak accident. She's now resigned to the fact that she'll probably never know who set her up for a fall.

Finally, Theresa gets down to business.

Theresa turns to you and her mouth turns up in a smile. 'As you know from the actions of my predecessor,' she explains in an even, businesslike tone, 'our mutual employer is interested in acquiring

all sorts of rare goods and technology. That's why we arranged for scientific expeditions like those you helped us with last year. Now, we have a chance to acquire a very rare—indeed, a unique—artefact unlike anything we've ever seen. I assume you know what a Techno-mage is?'

At this point, let the players either agree or profess ignorance. If they say they don't know, Theresa gives them a brief tutorial.

Theresa nods at your response. 'Anyway, as I'm sure you're aware, a short while ago Babylon 5 was literally invaded by Techno-mages. During their visit, they generally stayed out of sight as much as possible. When they left, their transport was destroyed by sabotage, so that it seemed the mages were all dead. We thought all their technology went with them, but we've since learned through our own sources that one of them left a staff behind, hidden somewhere on Babylon 5. We need you to find it.'

At this point, the players will probably have a few questions. Some of Theresa's potential responses:

'Why don't you look for it yourself?' 'Oh, I could, but this is actually only the second time I've been on Babylon 5. The last time, I was just waiting to transfer to a new ship and was only here a couple of hours. I really need somebody who knows the place and knows how to get around.'

'How do you know about the staff?' 'Oh, I have my ways. Do a favour here, pass along some information there, and people do the same for you. I won't bore you with the details.'

'Any idea where to start looking?' 'All I know for sure is that the Techno-mages were mostly staying on Brown Seven. Some had quarters of their own, of course, like their leader, but the majority were residing in a small community area. You might ask around down there.'

'Why do you need the staff?' 'Techno-mages, as you know, have technology so advanced it appears to be magic. This technology is all through their bodies, and in some of the devices they carry. No one has ever been able to find a dead Techno-mage, so the only thing we really know about what they do comes from the few artefacts that have been located over the years. Those have all been small things, though—micro-cameras, jewellery, items like that. A staff would be the find of the century—the Holy Grail of research opportunities, if you will.'

'Why don't we just keep the staff and sell it to the highest bidder?' 'Oh, yes, you could do that, I'm sure, but then you wouldn't get any future work from me. Also, I think you'd find an announcement of that sort would attract the attention of some very powerful people—people who wouldn't bother to wait for your little auction to finish. They'd either steal it from you, or just kill you and take it from your bodies. I, on the other hand, offer an easy, painless solution. Plus you can be sure the staff won't fall into the hands of the wrong sort of people.'

'How much will you pay us for the staff?' 'I'm willing to give your group five thousand credits for the safe return of the item.' (She's willing to go as high as 10,000 credits—a princely sum! The players will have to win a couple of contested Diplomacy checks to manage that feat, however. She won't budge if they attempt Bluff or Intimidation rolls, as she knows she holds the high ground here.)

'Does anyone else know about the staff?' 'Sadly, the information that came to me about the staff was not exclusive. I'm sure others are aware of it and may already be searching for the artefact. You should begin your hunt with all due haste.'

'Can we involve anyone else in the search? Station Security, for example?' 'I'd rather you didn't. The more groups that get involved, the better the likelihood that one of them will claim the staff as their own upon its recovery. Best to just keep quiet about it. You probably don't want to mention to anyone what it is you're looking for.'

'Do you know what this thing looks like?' 'Certainly. It's a five-foot walking stick made of a striated black wood, similar to obsidian but much harder. At the top, the wood extends out in four directions to surround a faceted crystal as big as your fist. In theory, it's just for decoration, although I'm told it can be made to illuminate. I always picture the staff as similar to the one Merlin must've carried in all those ancient Arthurian legends.'

'Do you know whose staff it was?' 'We believe it was owned by a mage named Carvin, who happened to be Centauri. Other than the fact that she was female—an unusual thing, considering the social status of Centauri women—little is known about her.'

Others: Theresa will answer any other questions as best she can without compromising herself, her employer, or her true mission. If the meeting goes too long, she rushes the group to action, explaining that other groups may have heard of the staff and might be looking for it. She ends the meeting as follows:

After your questions are done, Theresa rises to leave. 'I'm going back to my quarters to await word of your success. I can't stress to you how much I want that artefact. If you should encounter any difficulties, you can contact me in my quarters in Blue Section, room 624. Should your search require the expenditure of any additional funds, I'll be happy to authorise them within reason. I don't want to know about anything illegal, however. Do what you have to do and keep your methods to yourself. Like Roland Anderson, I only care about results. Good day.'

At that, she departs swiftly, with a final word of farewell to Alison Fernandez, who remains with you. She looks excited about another chance to work with her old friends once again.

The players now have a chance to either get started hunting for the Techno-mage artefact, speak more to Alison, or head back to their quarters to gather supplies. Alison, if asked, says that she doesn't know much about Theresa Cross, having only just been assigned to her employ in the past two weeks. Ms. Cross rarely speaks about anything other than business. She spends all of her free time reading.

If the players attempt to access station records to find out where the Techno-mages were staying, they need a Technical (electronics) check (DC 20) to dig up the required information. Several had quarters in Brown One, but these have been re-rented many times since then, and any other occupants surely would've noticed a staff. (If the players want to check, they can do so. Brown 115 is occupied by a pair of married humans on a month-long vacation, Brown 132 has a single Narn who fancies himself a chef, and Brown 136 is currently empty.) There is a record of a group of Techno-mages 'taking over' a considerable area near the engineering section of Brown Seven. If the players got the name 'Carvin' from Theresa, a search for that name in the Techno-mage records shows no specific quarters rented by that individual. If they access station entry and exit logs, with a Technical (electronics) check (DC 22), they will note the name 'Carvin' among the Techno-mages entering the station, but no record of her departure. She's reported dead with the other mages in the destruction of their transport.

Encounter Two: Deep in Brown Seven

Brown Seven is just like most other lower levels of Downbelow—a veritable maze of corridors and accessways surrounding numerous rooms, open spaces, and hidden ventilation ducts. Every now and then, someone walks past, eyes downcast and feet shuffling. This is a place where only the lurkers dwell, and you keep your wary hands on your weapons.

Brown Seven is 'ruled' by a criminal by the name of Frankie the Rat, a weaselly individual who controls a network of lurkers, drug peddlers and informants. He likes to think he knows everything that goes on in Brown Sector, but in truth he's just a small-time scavenger with big dreams and a bigger mouth.

When the Techno-mages arrived on the station during 'The Geometry of Shadows,' they displaced Frankie by scaring him off with a flashy show of magic. There were also a couple of injuries among his men after an ill-fated attempt to clock one of the mages upside the head and steal his possessions. After a few 'fireflies' dogged his heels, stinging him over and over and resisting every attempt to get rid of them, Frankie wisely moved his operation underground.

After the mages departed, Frankie returned and reasserted himself, but he's a paranoid sort and did everything he could think of to make sure there weren't any 'spells' lingering about. One of his cronies, Ryan 'Bug-man' Bordeaux, chanced upon a mage device about the size and shape of an ordinary rivet. Ryan was using an electronics-sensing device to check for bugs, and turned the rivet over to Frankie. Unaware of the item's purpose, Frankie sold it to a black market buyer for a cool two thousand credits, but later found out through the grapevine that he'd been robbed. Techno-mage devices are all but priceless. After that, he began a careful, but secret, search for other items, eventually locating the staff. Now he's sure he's going to be rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and has put forth a secret call for an auction to be held this very night.

It was this auction that informed Theresa Cross of the staff's existence and brought her to the station, but she hasn't divulged this fact because to do so suggests a criminal connection she doesn't wish to have investigated. Instead, she has set the players on the trail, certain that she'll locate the staff's owner and retrieve it for her—and without any large-scale financial transaction to muddle things. What she doesn't know—that nobody knows—is that when Frankie touched the staff, he set off an alarm that warned Carvin's master that someone other than her is now in possession of the artefact. Thus, as this module begins, the powerful Techno-mage Alwyn is on his way to Babylon 5 to retrieve the device. He doesn't know precisely where it is, but he does know its approximate location on the station, and will stop at nothing to keep his former pupil's weapon from falling into the wrong hands.

The Search

When the players arrive on Brown Seven, they can attempt two possible courses of action—searching the area for the staff, and interviewing people looking for info. If they want, they can search for days—Brown Seven is huge, and the amount of territory to cover is far too much even for a very large group to accomplish successfully. Keep an eye on how much time is spent looking. The players have about six hours before the auction takes place, the buyer takes the device, and the action proceeds to the next encounter. If the players haven't made any progress by then, there's a significant chance Alwyn will simply depart, following the staff's energy signature, and that will be the end of this module.

If the players start interviewing people about the Techno-mages, let them make a Gather Information check. Based on the results of the roll, they can learn the following things. Higher results generate better and more accurate information. Retries are allowed, but each takes about an hour of talking and interviewing. The Games Master can roleplay these attempts or simply provide the data shown, depending on his style of Games Mastering. All encounters will be with shabbily dressed, nondescript individuals typical of most lurkers.

Die Roll	Quote	Other Information Gained
10 or less	'Techno-mages? What the hell are you babbling about?'	Nothing
11-15	'Oh, yeah, I remember them. They were walking around in robes and stuff all the time, making life difficult for us decent folk. I kept my distance—didn't want to get blown up or anything, y'know.'	Not much, but the subject tells a fantastic story of a mage pointing a wand at somebody and making him burst into flame. A simple check of station medical records shows nothing like this ever actually happened.
16-20	'Oh, those guys! Yeah, they were great! I hadn't felt free in a long time. When they showed up, they scared off Frankie and all his buddies. You should've seen 'em scattering like the roaches they are! I wish those wizards had stuck around a bit longer.'	The subject explains that Frankie the Rat runs this part of Downbelow, and is usually quick to deal with any threat. He wasn't stupid enough to challenge the mages, though, and scurried off when they claimed this level as their own. No information is available about where the mages stayed—if pressed, this interviewee grudgingly admits he kept his distance, on the port side of the station. He didn't see the mages there very often.
21-25	'I tried not to look too close at those wizard types. Yeah, I was curious, but down here you learn not to mess with people more powerful than you. Frankie tried it, and look what happened to him! He was still salving those burns for a week after they left.'	Everything in the previous section, plus, the subject explains that two of Frankie's goons tried to attack a mage and wound up unconscious. After that, two or three fireflies that could pass through walls were constantly harassing Frankie and burning his skin. He got the hint and left the level to the mages, but moved right back in after they departed. This individual knows that the mages spent most of their time on the starboard side of the level, and points them in that direction, but doesn't give any more details.
26-30	'Oh, yeah, Frankie was pissed after those mages burned him with one of their spells. He tried getting even, but they were gone. He did get his revenge, though. Turns out he found one of their magic devices and sold it for a huge profit. Don't tell anybody, though! This place will be swarming with treasure hunters!'	Same as above, plus this guy knows about the sale of the Techno-mage rivet. If asked for a description, he doesn't know except that he's sure it was very small (palm-sized or less), so it couldn't be the staff. If the players ask where it was found, he points them to a large antechamber, but warns them Frankie's men like to meet there.
31+	'What, are you here for the auction? You need to talk to Frankie.'	With this roll, the players learn about the existence of an auction. If they press for more, the speaker admits he doesn't know what it was for, but is aware that it's for a Techno-mage device of some kind. The auction is later that evening in Brown 750A, a conference room near the centre of the level.

If the players rolled at least a 16 on one of these attempts—which shouldn't be hard if they have a decent information gatherer available—they discover the general area where the mages were staying, which is the starboard side of Brown Seven. If they roll 20 or less, they need 2 hours of searching to locate the open 'courtyard' area where the mages gathered during their stay. On a roll of 21-25, they get enough data to zero in on that zone within only 1 hour. A 26 or greater points them to the exact spot, which they can proceed to immediately.

The Courtyard

Near the starboard edge of the station, there is a large open room mostly empty of furniture. The room has 2 levels, the top of which includes a railing and catwalk. There is a double-walled airlock on the side, as this area was intended for the transfer of large cargo (but is in fact rarely used). Two entrances, one on either side, lead to hallways heading back towards the main corridors. Ladders lead up to the catwalks in four places, two on each wall. The chamber, referred to as 'the Courtyard' by the residents, is presently empty except for a group of Frankie's goons watching the place.

Along one edge of the Courtyard, just to the right of the access panel controlling the airlock, is a secret compartment. A persistent mage illusion (see sidebar) makes this area look just like a blank, featureless section of wall. However, an object passes right through the illusion into a space beyond—an empty area that was once large enough to house the staff. Carvin hid her weapon here during her last hours on the station, when she purported a deception on Ambassador Mollari (see 'The Passing of the Techno-Mages' by Jeanne Cavelos for details). This illusionary wall can't be detected by any sensing equipment, but can be stumbled onto with a Search check (DC 20) in the Courtyard.

Wall Illusion Generator: This device is the size and shape of an ordinary connecting bolt, of the sort fastened to the inside of small compartments throughout known space. When placed within 5 feet of an open area, the device automatically generates an illusionary surface identical to

that of the surrounding furniture, wall, or other region. The illusion can't be detected with ordinary scanning equipment, but since it doesn't block anything but sight, it can be located through touch or other senses. Generally, locating a panel concealed by the illusion generator requires a Search check (DC 20). Locating the bolt that actually generates the illusion requires a further Search check (DC 25) because the bolt looks so convincingly real. Of course, anyone who realises that Techno-mage technology is at work will be aware that a device *has* to be there someplace, so they'll likely take 20 looking for it.

The illusion generator is a unique item that can be sold on the black market for 2,000 credits. The players could also keep it, using it to hide small areas and compartments from view (but no space large enough to conceal anything larger than a Small creature). They could also turn it in to Theresa Cross in lieu of the staff (see 'Aftermath' at the end of this module).

The problem is, the goons won't allow anyone to actually search the place. Frankie is convinced that the Techno-mages left more of their 'magic items' behind, and eventually intends to tear the Courtyard apart one bolt at a time. First, though, he's going to make a fortune selling the staff before risking drawing any attention to himself with major modifications to the station. In the meantime, though, he wants to be sure nobody else shows up to help themselves to 'his' property.

When the players approach, they're immediately challenged by Kateen, a Drazi lurker who's become one of Frankie's most trusted aides. Kateen is a bulky Drazi who's very confident of his fighting ability and loves to bluster and threaten. With Fat Robert, a very large human guard, at his side, he'll attempt to force back anyone trying to enter the Courtyard. He also has two other guards positioned on the catwalk, but one is reading a book and the other is asleep. Should the players attack without warning and rush Kateen and Robert, the guards up top will be taken by surprise. The book-reader needs a full round to react, while the sleeping one needs to make a Listen check (DC 15) to react to the fight. If both Kateen and Fat Robert drop, the guards on the catwalk will flee rather than fight, unless they possess clear superiority.

Kateen

3rd Level Drazi Lurker/1st Level Soldier
Hit Points: 14
Initiative: +4 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +4/+4 melee or +6 ranged
Special Qualities: Weapons Training, Damage Reduction 5 (1 natural, 4 armour), Survivor's Luck
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +3, Will –1
Abilities: Str 15, Dex 15, Con 10, Int 13, Wis 7, Cha 12
Skills: Climb +3, Balance +8, Bluff +7, Escape Artist +8, Intimidate +8, Search +7, Sense Motive +4, Spot +5
Feats: Combat Reflexes, Ambidexterity, Two-Weapon Fighting, Improved Unarmed Strike
Equipment: Flak jacket, club, knife, trick dice (always come up '7'), 20 credit chits, rat jacket

Kateen is a rare 'smart' Drazi who has given up on his own race as a bunch of hopeless lunkheads. Instead, he tried to make his fortune on Babylon 5 and lost everything gambling. Frankie covered his debts in exchange for service, which Kateen gives willingly, although he still squanders all his pay on games of chance. He'll attempt to bluff the players with his forceful demeanour and insistence that there's 'nothing to see here.' However, if they fail to leave right away, he lunges at them immediately, wielding a club in one hand and a knife in the other.

Note: Each of the NPCs in this section wear 'rat jackets,' which are basically just simulated leather coats with a cartoon rodent emblazoned on the lapel. Frankie trades some of his 'special items' to Disney Planet under the table in exchange for these 'uniforms.' All of Frankie's men wear them, most not knowing or caring of their origins.

Fat Robert

3rd Level Human Lurker
Hit Points: 15
Initiative: +0
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +7 melee or +2 ranged
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 2 (armour), Survivor's Luck
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +1, Will +2
Abilities: Str 18, Dex 11, Con 14, Int 11, Wis 12, Cha 8
Skills: Gather Information +5, Listen +7, Profession (bodyguard) +7, Search +6, Sense Motive +7, Spot +7
Feats: Weapon Focus (brass knuckles), Toughness, Improved Unarmed Strike
Equipment: Padded armour, brass knuckles, 10 credit chits, rat jacket

Fat Robert easily weighs 350 pounds and stands six and a half feet tall. He looks bulky and slow, but is in fact surprisingly quick on his feet. He attacks by pummelling opponents senseless with his brass knuckles, which score 1d4+4 subdual damage thanks to his surprising strength and power. His padded armour won't fit anyone who isn't as overweight as he is.

Sharpshooters
1st Level Human Lurkers
Hit Points: 6
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +0 melee or +3 ranged
Special Qualities: None
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +0
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 15, Con 12, Int 8, Wis 10, Cha 9
Skills: Hide +3, Listen +2, Spot +3
Feats: Weapon Focus (PPG), Point Blank Shot
Equipment: PPG Model 10, rat jacket

These two men are positioned on the catwalk above the Courtyard. One is sitting down reading a book, while the other is napping. If Kateen begins arguing with someone (or combat starts), the first sharpshooter gets to his knees and aims at the closest potential target. The other must make a Listen check (DC 15) each round the arguing continues before he awakens and does the same thing. Neither actually starts firing until either Kateen or one of the invaders attacks.

Note: As long as the sharpshooters remain on the catwalk, they have one-quarter cover against anyone beneath them. The ladders are 15 feet high if anyone wishes to climb up to their level. In the event they need to flee, the sharpshooters have no problem leaping down from the catwalks, accepting the subdual damage from the fall.

Should the players depart without fighting, the guards relax but remain wary. The players could potentially storm the place from two different directions in a surprise attack, which would be an aggressive tactic but one that avoids the possibility of being aimed at by the sharpshooters. They could also attempt to sneak in and search without being noticed, but they have to beat both Kateen and Robert's Spot checks to pull this off.

Another possibility is to shut down the power to the Courtyard, which requires a Technical (engineering) check (DC 18) from a station 40 feet down one of the adjoining corridors. There's no way to rig this to happen automatically—someone will have to throw the switch by hand. Turning off the lights will distract and unnerve the guards, but won't cause them to leave their posts. It will, however, allow the players to attack under the cover of darkness (and none of the lurkers have the Blind-Fight feat).

At any rate, if the players defeat, chase off, or otherwise deal with the guards, they can search the Courtyard at their leisure. They can also question Kateen or the others. The sharpshooters don't know anything, but both Kateen and Fat Robert are aware that Frankie recently found the Techno-mage staff and is planning to auction it tonight. If the players can intimidate, bluff, scan, or otherwise drag this information out of the guards, they will learn that the staff is to be sold in an area of Brown Seven known as the Auction Block—and on this very night!

Encounter Three: The Auction Block

The Auction Block is located in the deepest recesses of Brown Seven. The room is shaped much like the Courtyard, except it is twice as wide and the 'catwalk' on the second level has enough room for a set of benches. Auctions of illegal goods, slaves, and stolen merchandise take place in this area on a reasonably regular basis, but somehow always escape the notice of Station Security. A series of well-placed informants report the approach of security forces, allowing everyone involved in an auction to disappear into the woodwork like roaches in the light.

Anyone with Lurker's Knowledge or Knowledge (Brown Sector) can make a Knowledge check (DC 20) to be aware of the presence of the Auction Block. However, there's no reason anyone should suspect the staff is to be auctioned there, unless they hear about it through a Gather Information roll or by interrogating Kateen. Even if they do happen to know of the Block's existence, they won't know the time of the actual auction without further research.

Attending the auction is a difficult matter. There are several possible means to do this:

Getting Past the Guards: Guards patrol the three halls leading towards the Auction Block and prevent the entry of any unauthorised personnel. Approaching players must produce identicards identifying themselves as one of the buyers—a Bluff or similar check won't get past the guards without one. If the players persist in their attempts, the guard sounds the alarm, drawing a group of lurkers (use the Sharpshooter statistics) armed with PPGs to chase off the invaders. Defeating a lone guard quickly simply means the players will later encounter a much larger group as they approach the Block itself, whereupon they will be challenged and attacked. A concerted effort to fight their way in only scatters the rest of the lurkers, cancelling the auction and forcing it to be rescheduled for a later time when the 'heat' is off.

Should the players be attacked by a large number of guards, they'll be attacked with unarmed combat and subdued. The guards won't mow them down. Survivors are taken to see Frankie the Rat (see sidebar).

Rat Jacket Disguise: One potential method that should suggest itself right away is the use of 'rat jackets' for disguise purposes. The players can get four of these from the guards in the Courtyard, although Fat Robert's coat is so huge it'll look like a blanket on anyone who isn't of a similar build. The players can acquire more jackets by ambushing other lone guards they can catch patrolling the corridors or keeping prying eyes away from the Auction Block. However, anyone with a striking appearance should avoid attempting to infiltrate the Block. Frankie and his top echelons know there aren't any Minbari on Brown Seven, for example, nor are there any members of other unusual races. An individual with some other noteworthy

feature, like a scar or a recognisable face, should also avoid this course of action. If the group tries to penetrate the interior of the Block with such people among them, they'd better have some good disguises. Give the guards a 'generic' Spot bonus of +8 against any Disguise skill employed by the players for this purpose—just roll once, not once per guard. Success indicates they challenge the offending player and accost the group, while failure means they don't notice, or just assume the individual in question is one of Frankie's new acquisitions.

Replacing a Bidder: Another intriguing possibility is to ambush and replace one of the bidders for the staff. The problem of locating them isn't a problem at all, really. Virtually every resident of Brown Seven is either a dirty, unkempt lurker or one of Frankie's goons in those telltale jackets. If the players keep a lookout, they can easily (Spot DC 10) notice a human of Oriental ancestry in a long black overcoat advancing through the sector towards the Block. This is Kanim Hu, a private collector who wants to buy the staff for his own edification. He has no bodyguards, which would be a mistake if he weren't totally capable of defending himself. If the players ambush him in hand-to-hand combat, they're in for a rude surprise.

Kanim Hu

8th Level Human Agent
Hit Points: 22
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 19 (+9 Reflex)
Attacks: +7/+7/+2/+2 melee or +9/+3 ranged
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 2 (armour), Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6, Skill Mastery (Balance, Escape Artist)
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +9, Will +2
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 16, Con 11, Int 14, Wis 10, Cha 13
Skills: Balance +14, Climb +14, Computer Use +13, Escape Artist +14, Gather Information +12, Jump +14, Pilot +14, Spot +11
Feats: Blind-Fight, Improved Unarmed Strike, Ambidexterity, Two-Weapon Fighting
Equipment: Padded armour, black overcoat, briefcase (with computer), identicard

Kanim Hu fancies himself a martial arts master and will fight using a combination of several martial styles unfamiliar to anyone skilled in such things. He makes four attacks per round and dances about like a gymnast. If anyone fires a handgun at him, he says that they are 'without honour' and attempts to deal with them first. In the face of more than one opponent with such weapons, he attempts to flee. If he drops to less than 6 hit points, he lowers his hands and surrenders, stating that there is no shame in losing to a superior foe.

Hu carries a briefcase containing a computer that provides access to his funds for the sole purpose of bidding on and winning the staff. Opening the briefcase requires a successful Technical (electronics) check (DC 25) to bypass the security locks—failure destroys the contents in a quick acid bath. The players can also attempt to intimidate Hu into opening the case, but he receives a +5 bonus to resist because surrendering the electronic key is totally against his nature. Hostile telepathic attacks can also force his hand.

The computer has access to an account created specifically for purposes of the auction to come. Hu has up to 500,000 credits available for this purpose, but he's taken steps to ensure the lurkers don't steal his computer and try to take the money without his direct authorisation. Loyal allies back home stand ready to approve any transfer he attempts while at the auction. He will transmit the password 'Dynasty' to conclude a legal transaction, and the word 'Ming' if he's being coerced. Because these words aren't coded into the machine, no level of Computer Use or Technical skill can discover them. The players can use the machine easily enough, with Computer Use (DC 13), but can't do much with it except try to make a transaction—and any attempt to actually complete a transfer without the proper code word effectively renders the device useless.

If the players don't have Hu with them and attempt to take his place, they can pass themselves off as his entourage using his identicard. This gets them into the auction easily enough. They can even use the computer to assure Frankie that they have enough money to make good on any bids. However, leaving Hu conscious but bound is a mistake—he'll try to use his Escape Artist skill to get free and locate Frankie on his own. Since only Hu knows the details of the original auction announcement, he can use this to prove he's the real bidder, which results in the players' capture by Frankie. The group had better take care to bind him well, or just keep him unconscious somewhere until the auction's over.

Ventilation Shafts: A successful Knowledge (Brown Sector) check (DC 15) reminds a player that a network of ventilation shafts meanders throughout the area, including the ceiling over the room now used as the Auction Block. Of course, Frankie knows this too, and has placed several traps in the corridors to keep unwanted visitors out. Assuming the players move as close to the Auction Block as possible before beginning to sneak in, they will encounter only two traps (a longer course means they run into three), plus the alarm system directly above the Block.

The shafts are 5-foot corridors with dim emergency lighting only that provides a –2 penalty to all ability and skill checks, unless the players bring their own lights. There are no guards, so there's no need to map out the area. However, in various places—usually at three-way intersections—there are various traps. Locating them requires a Spot check (DC 20) or a Search check (DC 15), keeping in mind the penalties for inadequate light. If the players have plenty of time, they can take 20 if they need

to, but this stretches out the trip to the Block to a full 2 hours! Disarming a trap is a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 21). Taking 20 on this requires 15 minutes.

If a trap is set off, everyone within 30 feet of that spot takes 2d6 damage (Reflex for half). Damage is either fire, electrical, or acid depending on the trap (random choice). Anyone on top of the trap (5 feet away or less) takes +2 damage. The trap can't be defeated by covering it up, and can't be avoided by sneaking past—it must be disarmed. A single trap won't alert guards, but a second one going off will. However, it's unlikely that a proper group will be caught unawares by a second trap.

When the players reach the Auction Block itself, they can spot another trap, but this one has DC 25 to remove and is quite obviously attached to an alarm. Failure to disarm this one alerts the entire Auction Block to their presence. Getting past it, however, allows the players to observe the auction from a safe hiding place.

Other: The players may think up another solution to the problem of getting into the auction. Let them be creative. Note that it is possible to try something and fail. Guards won't kill the players, but will take them captive and drag them before Frankie the Rat. If he is convinced that they aren't with Security, he'll let them live, although they'll be restrained. He's so concerned with the auction going off properly that he doesn't mind having a few 'observers.' After all, he plans to kill them later, so it doesn't matter what they observe in the interim.

Frankie the Rat

6th Level Human Lurker
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +7 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +3 melee or +7 ranged
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 4 (armour), Survivor's Luck
Saves: Fort +7, Ref +7, Will +4
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 17, Con 16, Int 15, Wis 11, Cha 15
Skills: Appraise +10, Balance +11, Bluff +10, Escape Artist +11, Hide +11, Move Silently +11, Pick Pocket +11, Spot +8, Technical (electronics) +10
Feats: Weapon Focus (PPG), Improved Unarmed Strike, Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes
Equipment: Flak jacket, multi-part PPG, knife, 200 credit chits, rat jacket (black)

Frankie the Rat is a charismatic leader with a thin build, beady eyes, and narrow face that gives him his obvious nickname. He's actually quite charming, in a used car salesman kind of way, although he's also an accomplished liar and won't hesitate to use that skill. He's very sure of himself, and above all wants nothing to go wrong with his special auction. If he captures the players, he'll tie them up and make them watch the proceedings, all the while standing with arms crossed and a huge smile on his face.

THE AUCTION

Nothing less than a direct invasion by security forces will stop Frankie's auction from actually taking place. He smells a trip to the big time if everything comes off properly. What he doesn't know is that his right-hand man, a shifty Centauri named Tolona, has created a fake staff and swapped it for the real one. While the auction takes place, he's planning to slip away and flee the station with his prize, which he'll then sell to a buyer who contacted him secretly, offering one million credits in exchange for the device. For Tolona, this is the opportunity of a lifetime, and he's set up a distraction to aid his escape—an explosive located underneath the auctioneer's pedestal.

Presumably, the players will be watching the auction from one spot or another. They might be posing as guards, or as Kanim Hu. They might also be in the vents on the ceiling, or they could even be prisoners of Frankie. Read the following boxed text, making adjustments as needed depending on the group's point of view.

As you watch, the auditorium begins to fill. The place is lousy with guards, but you also see a number of other individuals that don't look like lurkers at all. A human woman in a long dress, a Drazi in a military uniform, a Narn in full battle armour, a Caucasian human in a business suit, and an Asian in a black overcoat all climb stairs to the top level, where they take their place on a series of benches overlooking the auction block. Several guards accompany them, along with a thin, mousy man in a black jacket and a taller, heavyset Centauri enforcer type following on his heels. From the descriptions you've heard, and the obvious quality of his uniform, the mouse-like man must be Frankie the Rat. His Centauri bodyguard sees him into his seat, whispers something, and hurries off, going back down the stairs and out the side door.

A moment later, Frankie raises his hand and waves at the doorway below. A tall, bearded man comes out bearing a large box. Two bruisers armed with rifles stand at his side as he proceeds to the podium and opens the container. With a flourish, he holds up a black staff topped by a clear crystal that seems to glitter in the ambient light. At once the man begins to speak. 'We shall get down to business at once,' he says loudly. 'This staff, once the property of a Techno-mage, could be possessed of any number of amazing powers. Its owner will have access to amazing technologies unknown by any of our kind. Shall we start the bidding at fifty thousand?'

At this point, the players might become involved in the auction (if they're masquerading as Kanim Hu) or may simply watch. The auction quickly progresses up into the hundreds of thousands, jumping 10,000 at a time. At 100,000 the auctioneer moves to 25,000 credit increments. At 300,000, he goes to 50,000. At 500,000, he jumps to 100,000 and several of the bidders drop out. (The players could continue bidding if they want to try to bluff their way through and haven't already revealed how much money they have to spend.) Eventually, the Narn and Drazi wind up getting to a million, at which point the auction is suddenly halted:

The room is silent as the auctioneer pauses at the one million credit mark. They are hanging on his every word now. 'One million is the bid,' he says loudly. 'Do I hear one point one million? Anyone? One million going once, one million twice…'

Then, suddenly, a voice rings out from the far side of the second level. All eyes turn sharply to that spot, where a somewhat portly robed figure stands, arms out and face screwed up in anger. 'That staff is not for such as you!' he shouts. 'It is not your property! I have come to claim it as my own!'

Nearby, Frankie levels a fingers and screams, 'A Techno-mage! Kill him!'

Then, before anyone else can react, the podium in the centre of the room explodes in a gout of flame!

If the players are masquerading as guards or are otherwise located on the lower level, they take 3d6 fire damage, with a Reflex save (DC 13) for half. Players on the upper level automatically take half damage and earn a Reflex save (DC 13) for one-quarter. The two bruisers and the auctioneer are killed in the blast, as are 2 other guards. The remaining 8 guards are stunned for 1 round by the unexpected explosion.

In the next round, all the bidders flee down the stairs and out the door, while Frankie screams 'My staff!' and rushes downstairs to find it. The eight guards (use the Sharpshooter stats) take aim at the Techno-mage, whom they assume set off the blast, and follow Frankie's last order to the letter.

The players can take sides as they will, or even try to grab the staff if they're close enough. Locating it in the rubble requires a Spot check (DC 20), or, if they spend a full-round action looking for it, a Search check (DC 15). Frankie will use Spot only, and will attack anyone else who appears to be looking for the staff, or who finds it before he does. However, the staff has been broken in half in the blast, and quite obviously doesn't have any 'advanced technology' inside—in fact, it's just a piece of carefully carved wood. If the players show this to Frankie, he'll stop fighting and order his men to stand down.

The Techno-mage, Alwyn, will fight only as long as he is under attack. If the players aid him, he'll help them with spells should the need arise. If they help the guards or Frankie, he'll assume they are against him and attack them as well. However, the minute he realises the staff is a fake, he'll stop and beg the others to do the same. 'We have no reason to battle,' he says. 'The real staff has been stolen!'

After the battle is over, Frankie realises his bodyguard is nowhere to be found, which tips him off that Tolona was the culprit. 'That bastard! He stole my property!' he wails. 'You there! I don't know who you are or where you came from, but I'll give you ten thousand credits if you get that staff back! Bring me back Tolona alive, and you can have another thousand! Go! Hurry, before he gets away!'

Alwyn, of course, doesn't care about any of that. 'The staff wasn't yours in the first place,' he explains. 'I would punish you, but I think that damage has already been done.' He turns to leave, heading for the exit in a whirl of rune-encrusted brown robes. If anyone tries to follow him, he uses his *ring of invisibility* to vanish after passing through the exit door.

At this point, the players can either take Frankie's deal and try to get the staff themselves, or try to chase after the Techno-mage to help him instead. (Alwyn keeps the invisibility active only until he turns the first corner, since the ring's power only lasts for up to 8 rounds.) They could also go with the mage but secretly plot to bring the staff back to Frankie later. However, Alwyn isn't easy to fool. He'll very likely see through such a deception, and he surely won't give up the staff without a fight.

Alwyn

9th Level Human Techno-Mage
Hit Points: 13
Initiative: +0
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13 (+3 reflex)
Attacks: +4 base, +3 melee, +4 ranged
Special Qualities: FTL Attunement, Mage Focus (dancing), Organelles (+4 saves), Pinnace, Place of Power (Regula 4), Techno-Magery
Saves: +3 Fortitude, +3 Reflex, +8 Will
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 11, Con 14, Int 17, Wis 14, Cha 18
Skills: Bluff +16, Computer Use +9, Concentration +13, Gather Information +10, Knowledge (Star Systems) +14, Magery +23, Pilot +12, Sense Motive +12, Sleight of Hand +12, Spot +8, Technical (electronics) +15, Technical (mechanical) +8
Feats: Broad Aptitude, Cool Under Pressure, High Aptitude, Invisible Spell, Multi-Tasking, Iron Will, Ordered Mind, Skill Focus (Magery)
Primary Aptitudes: Enhancement
Weak Aptitudes: Creation
Power Points: 80
Spells: Acrobat, Alertness, Appeal, Armour, Artillery Fireball, Bright Light, Clarity, Contortionist, Control Flame, Create Fire, Danger Sense, Darkvision, Detect Lie, Determine Direction, Dreamspeech, Elemental Resistance, Exploding Fireball, Falsehood, Far Speech, Fireball, Luck, Greater Armour, Greater Elemental Resistance, Greater Fireball, Greater Luck, Greater Oration, Greater Personal Shield, Greater Phantom Image, Hardiness, Improved Fortitude, Improved Reflexes, Improved Will, Insight, Lesser Armour, Lesser Elemental Resistance, Lesser Personal Shield, Light, Mass Darkvision, Meeting, Might, Minor Healing, Nimbleness, Observation, Oration, Personal

Shield, Phantom Image, Sharp Ears, Sharp Eyes, Spyspot, Stabilise, Skilfulness, Translation, Voice
Equipment: Staff, *ring of invisibility*, flashy clothes, cape, jaunty hat
Pinnace: Illusion Mantle (golden dragon), Gunsight (x2), Long-Range Weapons (x2)

Alwyn is a human with silver hair and the faintest appearance of age beginning to show on his face. He wears colourful, vibrant clothing and enjoys carousing. Alwyn believes that techno-mages should enjoy all that life has to offer. He is passionate about a great many things. In particular, he believes that mages should take responsibility for those that do not share their power. Mages who prefer to hide from the rest of the Galaxy are the ones he considers most hypocritical, and Alwyn will not hesitate to tell them so.

After the death of his student Carvin just after 'The Geometry of Shadows,' Alwyn despaired for a long time. He didn't hide with the other mages, but has instead been spending a great deal of time and effort secretly fighting against the Shadows. He cannot, however, abide the use of his student's staff by non-mages, which he considers a great dishonour to her memory.

Further information on the Techno-mages can be found in the *Techno-Mage Fact Book*, also available from Mongoose Publishing. If you don't have that book, treat the spells as feats that take a standard action to employ, using a number of Power Points approximately equal to their strength (e.g., a standard *fireball* isn't nearly as expensive as an explosive or greater version). Note that a mage's *fireball* isn't like the D&D version, since it only affects a single target. Most spells only affect a single target, except for those with the 'mass' descriptor.

Alwyn begins the fight with *greater armour*, *greater personal shield*, and *greater elemental resistance* already in effect upon his person. *Greater armour* provides a +3 natural armour bonus to DV, while the *personal shield* adds a +3 deflection bonus, and the *elemental resistance* provides 3 DR against energy attacks (i.e., against PPGs). These are not reflected in his stats as listed above. If he gets into trouble, he employs his *ring of invisibility* to disappear—this only has enough power to last about 8 rounds, however, so he won't dally.

Note that during his fight with the Shadows Alwyn has achieved 1 level of experience since the stats given in the *Techno-Mage Fact Book*. In particular, he is now better able to defend himself in a fight, as his spells will indicate.

If the players try to follow Alwyn, he won't dissuade them, although he insists they watch their step. As soon as they prove themselves, however, he drops all distrust and starts slapping them on the back and joking like they're old buddies. He doesn't seem like a man who holds a lot of grudges, although of course he'll pursue the staff to the ends of the universe if he must.

Encounter Four: The Exchange

Because the players don't have any idea where Tolona went, their options are limited. Tracking him is impossible, considering his head start. If they figure out that the Techno-mage has a way of locating the staff, they could follow him and hope he leads them to Tolona (and he will). Another option is to ask Frankie where Tolona lives. Frankie will gladly lead them to the turncoat's quarters and let them look around. He's left nothing incriminating in the room (and Frankie won't let the players confiscate any of Frankie's property)—the only possessions left behind are a terminal, furniture, some clothing, and a rat jacket. However, if the players think to look for deleted files on Frankie's computer, a Computer Use check (DC 21) discovers the following deleted message:

'I agree to your terms. Upon satisfactory completion of the trade, one million credits will be transferred into your numbered Swiss account. Transport off Babylon 5 and a new identity have also been arranged. Deliver the item to Docking Slip B-12 immediately after the conclusion of the auction and everything will be taken care of. (Signed) Garvan.'

Rory Garvan is the name of one of the other auction bidders! Frankie will swear revenge and immediately tries to hire the players to slay him before he escapes with the staff. He offers 1,000 credits for the man's head, but will go as high as 5,000. (He actually doesn't mind if the price escalates because he has no intention of paying.) Frankie then hurries off to gather his own men to attack the ship, but he admits the players will be able to move faster than he can—especially with most of his men wounded or incapacitated—and urges them to leave immediately.

If the players are with Alwyn, he takes his time tracking the staff. Tracking it requires concentration, and isn't an exact science. He takes quite a bit of time to triangulate—in fact, exactly as much time as it takes the players to move from Tolona's quarters directly to docking slip B-12. Thus, regardless of which paths the players take, they arrive at the shuttle at the same time—just as Tolona is handing the staff over to Garvan and his bodyguards. The intent then is for Tolona to slip onto an outgoing shuttle bound for Centauri Prime, where he'll receive plastic surgery and a new life as a rich man. Meanwhile, Garvan will enter his pinnace and leave.

Outside the shuttle, watched over by his own loyal men, Tolona is pacing nervously, wringing his hands as he waits for the transfer of funds to be approved and completed. Only then does he unlock the DNA-coded lock on the secure briefcase he carries, handing over the staff to Garvan. This whole process takes about 2 minutes—enough time for the players to plan an attack on the shuttle, or call in at most a couple of security officers if they wish. Depending on their affiliations and what they've been a part of already

today, they may not want to let Security in on what they're up to.

There are three possible timeframes in which the players might arrive. Also, their actions upon reaching the dock could shift them into a different setup for the final battle. The time periods are:

Before the Exchange: This is appropriate if the players moved straight to the docking port, either by following Alwyn as he triangulates on the staff or by heading there after discovering the deleted message on Tolona's computer. The players basically arrive at the entrance to the docking port and discover Alwyn there (or they arrive with him, if they managed to keep up with him during the chase). If they haven't been with Alwyn all along, he threatens them with violence if they approach too closely. If they agree to help him, he'll be their ally in the coming fight, and spends a few rounds discussing tactics for the attack. Otherwise, he turns invisible again and moves out into the docking bay to find a better ambush position. He then attacks one minute later, during the exchange, unless the players attack beforehand.

During the Exchange: This occurs if the players waste a little time on their way to the docking bay, but not too much. When they arrive, they find the transfer in progress—Garvan working with a briefcase computer, and Tolona opening his case to hand over the staff. Alwyn is nowhere to be seen, but the moment the staff appears, he begins an attack by casting an *explosive fireball* from a position of cover next to the ship. In the confusion, guards spread out and notice the players—assuming they aren't somewhere that spotting them is impossible—so that a full-fledged melee ensues.

After the Exchange: If the players wait too long, the exchange concludes and Tolona heads off towards his escape shuttle. Alwyn, without backup, doesn't risk attacking directly but instead waits to make sure Garvan's ship takes off. In the meantime, of course, he plants a bug on the vessel and retreats to his own ship. He doesn't allow the players to accompany him, and recovers the staff himself after chasing down Garvan's vessel in hyperspace. The players have no chance to get the staff or Garvan at this point, although they can still go after Tolona. Bereft of his bodyguards, the man can easily be caught or arrested before getting far.

The Final Battle

Assuming one of the first two timetables above is followed, the final battle explodes into a violent clash within the docking bay. Arvin attacks from invisibility until the power of his ring runs out, while the players engage both Tolona's and Garvan's bodyguards. Depending on the timing of the attack, those two personalities will react differently. If the attack happens early, before the transfer is made, both stand and fight. If the attack happens while the transfer is going on, they each take three full rounds (their only movement being to duck into cover) to finish exchanging the items. If the attack happens later, or those three rounds of actions are concluded, Garvan makes for his ship with the staff while Tolona flees to try to reach his shuttle. Alwyn, of course, pursues the staff, while the players can either challenge Tolona or let him go, depending on the situation.

Prior to the fight, the players can summon two security men (1st-level soldiers) who are on duty in the area. These men will aid the players in the fight if a Diplomacy check (DC 15) succeeds. Bluff checks can also be tried, but Intimidate checks have a –4 penalty. If all attempts to convince the guards fail, they insist on calling Security and waiting for backup, thereby allowing the potential fight to reach the 'After the Exchange' result mentioned previously. The guards will also be drawn to the area 3 rounds after the firefight begins, but unless they recognise the players as having legal enforcement powers, the security men will demand everyone stand down. If the battle doesn't stop, they attack the closest targets. The guards have a standard PPG, +3 attack, 12 DV (14 Dex), and nothing else of note.

The fight takes place in the rectangular hangar bay, near the entrance to the shuttle. There are two walkways exiting the docking port—the players are at one doorway, and Tolona will try to flee through the other. Several crates and cargo pods are positioned strategically about to provide cover from PPG shots, and Alwyn will position himself behind one of these. Garvan had 4 bodyguards and Tolona has 3. Both Garvan and Tolona are standing next to a large (10x10) cargo crate upon which they will perform the desired exchange.

Tolona

5th Level Centauri Lurker
Hit Points: 27
Initiative: +6 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +3 melee or +7 ranged
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 4 (armour), Survivor's Luck
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +3, Will +2
Abilities: Str 11, Dex 15, Con 14, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 16
Skills: Appraise +10, Balance +10, Bluff +12, Disguise +11, Hide +10, Move Silently +10, Pick Pocket +10, Spot +9, Technical (mechanical) +10
Feats: Combat Reflexes, Improved Initiative, Toughness, Weapon Focus (PPG)
Equipment: Flak jacket, PPG Model 10, 100 credit chits, rat jacket (discarded after he flees), disguise kit

Tolona is a lurker who's finally found a way out—a chance to make a fortune and buy himself a new life at the same time. All he has to do is betray everyone he knows, but that's all right because he never liked any of those people anyway. He only stuck by Frankie

because he knew sooner or later the little weasel would make a mistake, and Tolona could take over his operation. Now he sees his chance, and he's taking it—no matter what the cost.

Tolona's Bodyguards (3)
2nd Level Human Lurkers
Hit Points: 8
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +1 melee or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: Survivor's Luck
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +0
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 8, Wis 10, Cha 8
Skills: Hide +3, Listen +4, Spot +4
Feats: Weapon Focus (PPG), Point Blank Shot
Equipment: PPG Model 10, knife, rat jacket

Tolona has promised these guards a huge payoff after he escapes, and have nowhere to go if things go bad. Thus, they fight with some measure of desperation. If Tolona flees, they lay down a covering fire and follow after him, assuming they're able to do so. They have no loyalty to Garvan and won't help him if his side of the fight gets into trouble.

Rory Garvan
3rd Level Human Agent/3rd Level Soldier
Hit Points: 25
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +6 melee or +7 ranged
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 2 (armour), Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +5, Will +3
Abilities: Str 13, Dex 12, Con 13, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 15
Skills: Bluff +8, Climb +4, Computer Use +9, Concentration +10, Gather Information +8, Intimidate +11, Listen +10, Pilot +7, Sense Motive +7, Spot +10
Feats: Point Blank Shot, Weapon Focus (PPG), Run, Quick Draw, Precise Shot
Equipment: Padded armour, business clothes, briefcase with computer terminal

Garvan once served in the Earth's GROPOS and fought the Minbari on the ground at Proxima during their invasion. Having seen firsthand the way alien invaders treat humans, he wants to make sure humanity is never similarly threatened again. He now privately funds several companies in their effort to locate technology towards that end. He intends to take the staff and study it before handing it over to EarthForce at no cost—but not until he gets a chance to develop any technologies it offers, of course.

Garvan's Bodyguards
1st Level Human Soldiers (4)
Hit Points: 9
Initiative: +6 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: None
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +2, Will –1
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 8, Wis 8, Cha 10
Skills: Climb +4, Jump +3
Feats: Weapon Focus (PPG), Improved Initiative, Point Blank Shot
Equipment: PPG Model 10, rat jacket

Garvan's bodyguards aren't fanatical, but they are well paid. When the battle begins, they defend their leader as best they can, covering his movements and taking up defensive positions. Should Garvan fall, they immediately surrender. If Garvan retreats into the ship, they follow.

Should Garvan and his guards enter the ship, he seals the doors and immediately lifts off, radioing Babylon 5 to open the docking ports so he can depart. Unless the players have specifically contacted B5 Security to stop this from happening, the port opens automatically since Garvan's departure has actually been pre-scheduled. After he gets away, only Alwyn can stop him, using his own ship to track down the staff.

If Tolona flees, he heads for a shuttle on the next docking level. There, he uses his Disguise skill to change his own appearance and that of any surviving guards. Players searching for him will need to beat his opposed Disguise roll to catch him before he gets away. Security can also be called in to help locate him, especially if the players have already learned that he's fleeing the station.

Alwyn begins the fight by targeting Garvan and the guards. The Techno-mage's only goal is to get the staff. If he does so, by any means necessary, he quits the field and departs, heading for his own vessel. If anyone attacks or pursues him, he defends himself only long enough to assure his escape. Needless death isn't his intention here, nor is drawing any more attention to his presence than is absolutely necessary.

AFTERMATH

Much depends on the way the final battle plays out. The whole thing could theoretically fizzle if the transaction between Tolona and Garvan plays out without interruption. The fight could also prove to be quite deadly depending upon how the players approach the fight. After all, with all those PPG blasts going off, anything could happen!

The players' motivation also comes into play. They probably want the staff, but they should be aware that with a Techno-mage here trying to claim it, they aren't going to be able to keep it without consequences. Even if Alwyn dies, the reason for his trip here is surely known to the rest

of the Order, and anyone who is party to theft of a mage's property will eventually be hunted down and dealt with. If the players take the staff and hand it over to Theresa Cross, they're taking a huge risk, with potentially grave consequences later in the campaign. The Games Master can handle this in whatever way he sees fit. Taking the staff to Frankie the Rat will be even more disastrous.

After the battle, Security shows up within minutes and locks down the area until everyone involve can be questioned. If the players haven't fled, they will be held for several hours until the investigation can clear them. They do have a lot of explaining to do, of course. What were they doing starting a firefight in a docking bay? Why didn't they wait for Security to arrive? At a minimum, a Diplomacy check is probably called for…but let the players roleplay the situation to the hilt.

Other Possible Post-Module Events

Rescuing Alwyn: If Alwyn is in grave trouble and the players rescue him, he's in their debt. In this situation—and *only* this situation—he'll agree to give the staff to them of his own free will. First, however, he spends a day on his ship making some modifications to the device to ensure nothing too significant is handed over. Thus reassured that non-mages are truly worth saving and protecting, he departs, leaving the players to do with the staff what they will. Depending on their motives, they could hand it over to Theresa or Frankie, or maybe even offer it up for sale on their own. If they take this latter course, what happens next is entirely up to the Games Master. They might make a huge profit at the cost of annoying Theresa and Frankie, earning their ire—or Alwyn might come back to angrily take back his 'gift.'

Returning Tolona to Frankie: If the players nab Tolona and drag him back to Brown Seven, Frankie pays them a bounty of 1,000 credits (but only after a great deal of whining). If they take the money, he tells them he hasn't forgotten that they basically invaded his territory, and he'll remember that next time they meet. If they refuse the cash, Frankie declares them his friends and admits that he now owes them a 'favour.' At some point in the future, they can now call upon him and his 'rat pack' for aid in any one situation—and there's at least one such opportunity available later in this campaign. Frankie's lurkers won't leave the station, but otherwise this can be for almost anything.

Note that once Security shows up at the docking port, they take Tolona into custody for his complicity in setting off a bomb in Brown Seven. To claim the bounty on Tolona, the players must hurry him away before security forces arrive to start making arrests.

Claiming the Bounty on Garvan: The players might also try to score the promised bounty on Garvan, but Frankie won't pay it. First he'll say he has no proof the players actually took care of the deed, and then he'll say he never ordered a formal 'hit.' If the players insist, he'll eventually settle on 1,000 credits (not the 5,000 originally agreed to) and then kick them off Brown Seven with orders never to return. If they do come back, his guards are to attack them on sight. Frankie becomes a bona fide permanent enemy if the players go this far.

Keep in mind that throughout all of this, Garvan has actually committed no crime! In court, he'll claim that he was 'lured' to Babylon 5 as part of a 'scam' to steal his money, whereupon he was attacked without provocation by bombs and hooligans. Furthermore, paying $1M credits to buy a Techno-mage staff isn't against the law. He's merely a private citizen trying to acquire a unique item for his collection. Since he really hasn't done anything 'wrong,' and Alwyn doesn't hang around to press charges for trafficking in stolen Techno-mage property, Garvan will eventually be released. Naturally, he immediately flees the station before Frankie can hunt him down. Garvan could then appear later in the campaign as an enemy of the players, as he isn't likely to forget their actions against him…and keep in mind that he's *rich*. Rich men have lots of connections…

Setting up a Sting on Frankie: If the players explain what happened in Downbelow, Security may ask them to set up a 'sting' to catch Frankie admitting to various crimes (such as hiring the players to kill Garvan, or the potential murder of Tolona). This could lead to another scenario or two—perhaps Frankie discovers the 'wires' and attacks the players, or he resists arrest and has to be hunted down elsewhere in the station. Of course, if the players' role in such an operation ever gets out, they'll likely lose all their Downbelow contacts and won't be trusted by seedier elements ever again.

Meeting With Theresa: After all is said and done, Theresa is going to want to know what happened to her precious staff. If the players hand it over (regardless of whether it's the original or the Alwyn-modified version), they receive their reward. If they don't have the staff but do give her the wall illusion generator, she goes ahead and pays them the entire amount since the staff obviously was beyond their power to acquire. Even if the players fail to hand over any Techno-mage items, she still covers their expenses and appreciates their efforts, especially if Alison Fernandez gives a glowing report of their performance. Theresa and Alison then depart the station, promising to return if the players' services are needed again.

Suggested Experience for This Module

Clearing out the Courtyard: 200
Participating in the Auction and the battle that follows: 400
Fighting in the final battle (as opposed to taking the easy way out): 400
Giving the staff or the illusion generator to Theresa: 600

Module Two: Dark Secrets

Can it be? Can such a thing really happen in today's society?

I must know the truth. The future of Humanity could depend on it. Yet I cannot afford to be caught in the act, even by my own people. I can't go myself, for I'll surely be recognised, and I can't trust anyone within the company. Furthermore, no matter what happens, I must have plausible deniability.

Fortunately, I know just the team to contact…

Module Summary
- Theresa Cross convinces the players to go to Io to look for wreckage of EarthForce One
- The players search the base at Mount Jove for information, possibly including:
-- A sightseeing trip over the moon's surface on a converted VTOL warcraft
-- A search of Carlton Fisk's hotel room
-- An interview and poker game with the manager of Io's most popular nightclub
-- A visit to an Ionian miner's homestead
- The players put the pieces together to locate the evidence they need
- A final showdown occurs as agents of President Clark try to keep the players from escaping Io

Names and Places of Importance
- Mount Jove: Location of the spaceport on Io
- Taste of Earth: Restaurant on Mount Jove Station that reproduces an Earth-like atmosphere
- Io Guided Tours: Tour agency that offers sightseeing flights over Io's surface
- Nightmare Mines: Set of caves on Io that are now a tourist attraction
- Four Corners: Zocalo-like set of shops on Mount Jove Station
- Comm Centre: The only spot on the station where messages can be sent offworld
- Deep Caves: Nightclub in the bowels of Mount Jove Station
- Mount Olympus Tower: Ritzy hotel on Io
- Grand Central Station: Central location where all transport tubes on Io meet
- Carlton Fisk: Theresa Cross's former friend who disappeared on Io while investigating Santiago's death
- Caitlin Schulz: New pilot of the pinnace *Liberty's Fortune*
- Malcolm McKearns: Scottish operator of the Io Guided Tours
- Eyes of Io: Two converted Frigga VTOL craft used for tours of Io's surface
- Sheldon Pierce: Owner of the homestead closest to the crashed engine of EarthForce One
- Marshall Pierce: Sheldon's son, he was killed in an 'accident' after trying to help Fisk's investigation
- Mindy Ryszek: Very helpful receptionist at the Mount Olympus Tower hotel
- James Weider: Guest at the Mount Olympus Tower who happens to be staying in Fisk's former room
- Michael Seagate: Charming and personable manager of the Deep Caves nightclub
- George Dessenz: Io Security chief and agent for President Clark
- Corona Huygens: Telepath assigned to Io, also an agent for President Clark

The death of President Santiago threw IPX into confusion. Santiago believed in acquiring and mastering alien technologies for the benefit of Earth and its people, never for personal gain or power, and certainly not to turn the Alliance into a force capable of dominating other races. President Clark feels differently. He believes humans should come first in the galaxy, and sees all aliens as a danger. Naturally, agents of the Shadows have fostered this belief, promising Clark what he wants in exchange for favours and, eventually, the kind of chaos and conflict they most desire.

As a result, Clark has changed the goals of IPX. As most readers are aware—but most Earth Alliance citizens, possibly including the players, are not—IPX is more than just an exploration firm. It is, in fact, a front for EarthForce's bio-weapons and technology division. Items IPX collects are studied for use as weapons, or at the very least as a defence against attacks that employ similar devices. Most of the employees of IPX, including Theresa Cross, were brought into the organisation with the stated goal of defending and strengthening Earth so that another Minbari War could never come to pass. They didn't join the company so they could transform the Alliance into a Nazi-style regime bent on conquering the rest of the galaxy under the guise of 'national security.' This has led some IPX employees to resign their posts or enter early retirement…and some of the more vocal opponents of Clark's new orders have simply vanished.

Since the conclusion of Module One, Theresa Cross has begun to worry about the new direction her company is taking. One of her fellow agents, a man going by the name of Carlton Fisk, recently disappeared while on a fact-finding mission to Io. Theresa thought perhaps that he simply suffered from a bad turn of luck, but then she received a curious message from an unknown, untraceable location. The message was in code, using an old cipher she and Carlton once used on a mission long ago. She decoded it to learn that it was, in fact, from Carlton. He told her in no uncertain terms that he'd discovered wreckage of Earth Force One that included solid proof that the ship's explosion was no accident. Furthermore, he set up the coded message to be sent only in the event he didn't return to his computer on schedule. Since he hasn't contacted her again since then, she's certain Carlton is dead.

The discovery that Santiago's death was an assassination has rocked Theresa's belief system to the core. She now questions her entire life's mission. She has spent many years helping IPX strengthen Earth's technology base, and now, it's all about to be subverted for truly evil purposes! Worse

still, those among her contemporaries who are speaking out against the new directives are being forced out of the company or possibly even killed. How could she fail to be worried and afraid?

The one thing she doesn't have is proof. Right now, Theresa is wracked with doubts. A certain amount of paranoia comes with the territory in her job. Could this all be a mistake? Perhaps President Clark is taking drastic steps for a reason she doesn't understand. The coded message from Carlton could've been faked, or the evidence he supposedly discovered might be a plant. She just doesn't know.

Thus, she contacts the players through her intermediary, Alison Fernandez. Alison herself has been given another reason to convince the players—Theresa promises to tell her the truth about her dismissal from the Diplomatic Corps. This data will be handed over upon the successful conclusion of the mission, but not before. Theresa won't give up the information because she suspects Alison won't be too happy about IPX once the truth comes out. However, if the report by Carlton Fisk is correct, Theresa intends to break from IPX and expects Alison to join her in the process. After all, after these revelations, they'll both be united by a desire to oppose IPX and all it stands for.

Suggested Level for This Module: 4-6 3rd level characters

Between Modules

Approximately a month and a half passes between Module One and Module Two. This gives the players a chance to undertake additional missions or side scenarios as needed. They might even advance in level, although this isn't necessary. The events of Module One could be extended or may have other consequences depending on what paths the players take. Meanwhile, Season Two continues, possibly drawing the group into other activities. Some possibilities are listed hereafter.

Link to 'The Long Dark'

In this episode, an alien creature of darkness is brought aboard Babylon 5 by mistake. Able to walk through walls and attack from invisibility, the beast begins killing random victims throughout the station. Most of the deaths appear to be taking place in Downbelow, especially in less inhabited areas close to power relays. The monster seems to attack only those who are alone and defenceless.

Security is, naturally, quite concerned about the beast, and step up patrols in the threatened areas. If the players are known to be troubleshooters on the 'good side' of security, they're offered a bounty if they destroy the creature. Alternately, depending on the nature of the group, any of several other possibilities can be offered to get them into the act. One of the victims might have a rich relative looking for revenge. Ambassador G'Kar, already concerned about the movement of Shadows in the galaxy, suspects this may be one of their ilk, and will also want the creature destroyed. If any of the players are Narns, he'll very likely ask them to look into the matter.

Basically, this side scenario centres around a hunt for the creature and an eventual battle that drives it off—the players probably won't have the firepower to kill it on their own. It's just too tough. Even if they don't win—and even if they don't actually encounter the beast—they might be present at the final attack that destroys it, as seen in the actual episode.

DANGER: This scenario could alter the results of the episode 'The Long Dark' if the players slay the creature in the first encounter.

Note: This side scenario could have significance later in the campaign. During Module Four, a creature similar to this one menaces a hidden ranger camp in Narn space. If the players have fought this Shadow Beast, they will possess valuable experience that will aid them later on. Thus, the Games Master should make every effort to involve the players in this particular encounter, even if they realistically have no chance of outright victory.

If the players interview both security and medical personnel for news about the creature, they can easily learn that the creature seems capable of moving through solid walls, attacks using some form of natural electricity, and when it's through with a victim, they have no internal organs left. Other than that, very little is known. There are reports that it might be able to move invisibly. Although there are other people who are aware of it—Amis and Mariah Cirrus, for example—the players won't be told about these particular individuals. The only chance they have to hear about them is if they actually work in Security or Medlab. Even then, in the latter case, Dr. Franklin will order the players to leave Mariah alone, as she has obviously been traumatised by her experience.

The first step in the hunt is to actually find the creature's hunting ground. This can be accomplished by studying the sites of the first several deaths. (In the episode, only a couple of victims are shown, but the actual number of victims is more like eight.) With this and a Knowledge (Babylon 5 sector) check (DC 20), a player recognises that most of the deaths are occurring near power transit nodes, and always against single individuals.

Also, a Medical check (DC 17) on at least two of the victims shows that they weren't killed instantly. Deaths occurred as the subject's internal organs were slowly drawn out of the still-living body over the course of about a minute. This should suggest that an ambush, with a single target set out as 'bait,' is a likely possibility.

Should the players set out a lone target in the appropriate area, and then withdraw to at least 100 feet away and out of sight, the creature will eventually attack.
The beast simply flows out of one

of the walls and sweeps over the target. The players must then drive it away before the unfortunate 'bait' is slain.

Shadow Beast

Character Level: 10 (40 hp)
Initiative: +8 (+4 Dex)
Speed: Fly 40 ft.
Size: Large (10 ft. space, 10 ft. reach)
DV: 18 (+8 Reflex)
Attacks: +10 melee (1d6 electrical, ignores all DR)
Special Qualities: Damage Resistance 15/energy and 5/–, Incorporeal, Immune to Electricity, Invisibility, Frightful Presence, Paralysation
Saves: Fort +12, Ref +8, Will +6
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 18, Con 24, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 16
Skills: Hide +14, Listen +10, Move Silently +14
Feats: Alertness, Lifesense, Improved Grapple, Combat Reflexes, Improved Initiative

The Shadow Beast is a terrifying opponent because of its method of feeding and its ability to move through walls to attack any target. When attacking, the creature appears as a vaguely humanoid figure with a horned head floating within a coruscating nimbus of electricity. The monstrosity attacks by surrounding a target with energy, paralysing it while it feeds upon the soft tissue within the victim's body. At full strength, the Shadow Beast can take on entire platoons of soldiers and win, but this one is still weak from years of travel through the void of space, and presently is taking care to attack only lone, defenceless targets.

If the Shadow Beast hits its target in melee, it attempts to envelop the victim, making an opposed grapple check with its opponent. The target uses its Dexterity bonus, not Strength bonus, to resist the grapple check. If the grapple succeeds, the target is enveloped and cannot move from its square until it breaks free or the creature moves out of its reach zone. While enveloped, the victim is hit automatically each round by the beast's electrical attack and must make a Fortitude save (DC 16) or lose 1 point of Constitution. A victim whose Constitution is reduced to zero in this manner dies, his internal organs irrevocably absorbed by the Shadow Beast. The creature then retreats through any available wall, temporarily sated.

The Shadow Beast has the following traits:

Damage Resistance: A Shadow Beast is vulnerable only to energy attacks, such as from a PPG, but even these reduce damage by 5 points. All other attacks are affected by Damage Resistance 15.

Incorporeal: The Shadow Beast is incorporeal. Attacks against it miss 50% of the time.

Immune to Electricity: Electrical attacks score no damage upon the creature, and in fact, restore its lost hit points on a one-for-one basis. This is one reason the beast remains close to power conduits, where it can retreat and heal itself over a short period of time.

Invisibility: If it gets into trouble or wishes to arrange an ambush, the Shadow Beast can become invisible. Each round of invisibility costs it 1 hit point of subdual damage. The creature cannot attack while invisible. Fading into or out of its invisible state requires a standard action.

Frightful Presence: The sight of the Shadow Beast is frightening indeed. All creatures must make a Will save (DC 10) or become frightened, fleeing the creature's visage for 1d6 rounds and being shaken for 1d6 rounds thereafter. If the save succeeds by 4 or less, the subject is shaken for 1d6 rounds instead. If the save is made by 5 or more, the subject is immune to that particular Shadow Beast's frightful presence thereafter.

Paralysation: Any hit from the Shadow Beast forces the victim to make a Fortitude save (DC 14) or be paralysed for 1d6 rounds. Additional rounds of paralysation from future attacks stack.

If the creature suffers at least 25 points of damage, it releases any victim it is holding and retreats through the nearest wall, using invisibility if it needs to in order to ensure its escape. Players attempting to track it with handheld sensor devices lose it within moments as its signature merges with power conduits closer to the reactor. Further searches track its movements fleetingly until it finally makes its final stand, assaulted by security forces with heavy guns. The players can take part in this battle, firing as they arrive at the edge of the kill zone. Afterwards, Captain Sheridan thanks them for their efforts, noting that the beast seemed somewhat shaken during the fight. The players may well have softened it up with the earlier fight.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 200

Link to 'Soul Mates'

In this episode, Ambassador Mollari's three wives arrive on the station and vie for his attention. Meanwhile, Talia Winters, B5's resident telepath, meets her former husband, Matthew Stoner. Stoner claims to have been on an archaeological dig recently, during which he uncovered a number of Centauri artefacts. One of these, a carved wooden idol of some kind, is sold to a merchant and later bought by Mariel, one of Mollari's wives. When she gives the present to him as a gift, darts fly out of the idol's eyes and poison the Ambassador.

As it turns out, the planet where the idol was found was once a Narn colony that the Centauri conquered. Since there's no evidence or motive connecting Stoner to an assassination attempt on Mollari, the belief is that the idol was an ancient trap left by a long-dead Narn for Centauri long gone from their world. The touch of a Centauri on the idol's surface activated the darts. Yet the timing is awfully convenient. Did Stoner know about the trap and arrange to have it fall into the hands of Mollari's wife? If so, why? During the episode, Ambassador G'Kar was seen tossing something small and unidentified to Mariel. Did he provide her with the means to 'arm' the trap? If so, how did he find out about the artefact in the first place?

Garibaldi wants to know the answer to all these questions. His questioning of Stoner gets him nowhere, and he doesn't have enough evidence to charge the man with any crime. Psi Corps also starts sending demands that Stoner be released—which of course is another clue that the former telepath isn't what he appears to be. Garibaldi and Sheridan have both come to the conclusion that Stoner is actually now an empath, able to sense and manipulate the emotions of others. Of course, he denies it, and Psi Corps refuses to comment officially. Even Talia Winters, if interviewed, will neither confirm nor deny that empathy is even possible.

Thus, somewhat reluctantly, Garibaldi releases Stoner. He 'strongly suggests' that the man depart the station, but of course he doesn't. Instead, he goes right back to his quarters and holes up there. Garibaldi orders constant surveillance, but then a security man following him gets a little overzealous and a fight results. Stoner complains to Sheridan, who is forced to order Garibaldi to leave Stoner alone.

Next, Garibaldi calls in a little outside help—the players. He offers them each 200 credits if they help him out in this matter. This, of course, assumes he feels he can trust them at least a little bit. If the players have been a thorn in the side of Security, he won't use them unless they're his only choice, or he feels this is possibly a chance for them to redeem themselves. It's possible that a particularly roguish group simply won't qualify for this scenario.

When Garibaldi hands out the assignment, he turns over everything he knows about Stoner, including the fact that he's suspected to be an empath. Empaths, he explains, are more of a rumour than anything else. Only Psi Corps really knows for sure if they exist, and what their capabilities are. However, from observations of Stoner's activities, it's believed that he can sense emotions—at least surface ones—at a distance of maybe 20-30 feet, and he can also alter emotions at the same range. However, the closer he gets to someone, the more effective he is. Garibaldi doesn't know if anything can block Stoner's abilities, so they might function through walls, or pierce anti-telepath defences like a psi blocker helmet (see *The Fiery Trial*, p.43). The Security Chief highly recommends that the players keep their distance.

What he wants is for the players to shadow Stoner and see what he's up to. He doesn't want any violence if it can be avoided. However, if Stoner commits a crime, he authorises the players to make an arrest using any reasonable force. Since Stoner is an empath, they'll have to subdue him from a distance. If Stoner gets close enough, he could make the players fight each other, or become his best friends—whatever he wants. With that in mind, Garibaldi tells the players where Stoner is staying—Red Sector, room 328, a high-class extended stay suite. After that, they're on their own.

Matthew Stoner

5th Level Human Telepath/4th Level Empath
Hit Points: 17
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +5 melee or +8 ranged
Special Qualities: Empathy, Likeable +2, Project Emotions (Like, Friendship, Anger, Fear)
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +9
Abilities: Str 9, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 12, Wis 13, Cha 16
Skills: Concentration +16, Diplomacy +16, Intimidate +16, Sense Motive +18, Telepathy +16
Feats: Unflappable, Point Blank Shot, Quick Draw, Precise Shot, Rapid Shot
Equipment: Needler with 8 tetrazyne darts

Matthew Stoner fancies himself an archaeologist, which is both a hobby and a convenient cover story. He is also still in love with Talia Winters, and believes he can convince her to fall in love with him again, one way or another. Now that he has failed the first time, he's decided to try much more drastic measures. Perhaps after she's undergone the procedure and become an empath like himself, she'll be able to forgive him.

For rules regarding the empath prestige class, see Appendix C.

How the players take this job depends entirely on the makeup of the party and what skills they have available. Here are some things they might try:

Shadowing Stoner: This is harder than it sounds, because they need to stay at least 30 feet away. If Stoner gets a whiff of their emotions, he'll be able to sense that they're up to something. This will mean that any time he goes to the Zocalo, a casino, or anyplace else with lots of people, the players will have to make Spot checks to keep an eye on him.

Planting Bugs: If the players wait until Stoner leaves, they can break into his suite and install listening devices and cameras. All the suites have security systems and complex electronic door locks. Getting in requires a Technical (electronics) check (DC 20), and bypassing the security alarm requires a Technical (electronics) check (DC 25). However, if they blow this roll and set off the alarm, it won't matter because Garibaldi has informed his staff not to investigate any alarms from this particular room. Now wasn't that nice of him? Note: The players can also get him to hand over a key to the room if they succeed in a Diplomacy check (DC 18), or if he owes them a favour.

Searching His Room: If the players search, they find some luggage and clothes, a few personal effects, and a locked box that can only be opened with Stoner's handprint. Anyone making an Appraise check (DC 10) on this box knows it's a DNA-encoded lock that is very difficult to

break. Furthermore, it's designed that its internal sensors detect anyone trying to bypass the lock, so Stoner will be aware that somebody tried to break into it. The players can, of course, steal the box if they wish, or try to break in anyway. Inside, they find a needler and a set of eight tetrazyne darts. This particular custom-designed needler has a cartridge into which all eight darts can be fitted, as though in a magazine.

Interviewing Others: Stoner will occasionally talk to other people, make purchases, play casino games, and buy drinks. Once, he goes back to his room with a female companion. The players can interview these people if they wish, but all they learn is that the individual in question believes Stoner was a nice, pleasant chap who seemed eminently likeable. The female friend also thinks he was great in the sack, and she enjoyed herself immensely, but has no intention of pursuing him further. She knows it was just a one-night stand. No one the players interview provides anything useful.

Other: The players may come up with other ideas. Allow them to get creative, as long as they don't get too close to Stoner. If they do, and he senses their apprehension, he'll become suspicious and approach them quickly, using his empathic powers to convince them to be his friend (this works particularly well if one of the players is a human woman). Over drinks, he'll get them to spill their guts about what's going on, and Stoner will be able to elude them later on.

On the first day of surveillance, Stoner buys a couple of meals, visits a casino, sees a couple of shows, and goes to the Zocalo. While in the latter place, he sits down alone in the Dug Out bar and has a drink. About ten minutes later, Talia Winters enters the bar and meets with a client on the opposite side of the room. Stoner doesn't move, but he watches her out of the corner of her eye. Any players observing him at this moment will notice the arrival of Talia Winters only on a Spot check (DC 20), although if they don't know what she looks like, this won't mean anything. Discerning that he's surreptitiously watching someone requires a Spot check (DC 15). When Talia gets up and leaves ten minutes later, Stoner keeps his back to her, a fact the players will notice if they've observed that he's keeping an eye on her. He doesn't make any attempt to follow, though, and a few minutes later he goes back to his quarters.

If the players have planted bugs in his room, they'll get very bored watching him. He reads a lot, and watches some video programming before retiring for the night. On the morning of the second day, however, he makes a single call that results in a series of glowing lights and some high-pitched noises. Stoner stares at this for several minutes before saying 'I understand' and shutting off the connection.

Next, he goes to his cabinet, opens the DNA-encoded box, and removes and arms the needler. Concealing this in his jacket, he leaves his cabin and makes a beeline for the Zocalo. Here, he returns to the same bar, sits down, and waits. He knows that this is a favourite meeting place for Talia when she performs various telepathic duties on the station, and thanks to some earlier legwork, he knows her schedule well. He waits for her meeting to finish, and then, as she gets up to leave, approaches and tells her he has something she needs to see. After this, he leads her towards the docking bay, using his powers to ensure her cooperation. He intends to spirit her off of Babylon 5 and return her to Psi Corps against her will, so that she'll undertake the same procedure he did.

Presumably, the players are keeping an eye on him and can intervene. As they enter the docking bay, he moves towards a shuttle, taking Talia along with him. By now, she appears glassy-eyed, as though in a trance. If the players don't act while he's in the open, their only choice will be to storm the shuttle, where they'll be in close quarters and Stoner can use his powers easily.

If the players challenge Stoner, he quietly orders Talia to stay in front of him—like a human shield, although he doesn't say that part out loud. Talia moves on his initiative and keeps herself in between Stoner and the players as he moves towards them, hands out and open. The needler remains concealed at this point, while he tries to get close to somebody—running if he must. He doesn't know the players are aware of his powers and doesn't expect them to shoot him. Should they attempt to do so, he draws the needler and opens fire, constantly attempting to get close enough to use his empathic powers. Should he gain control over a player, he gets them to help him and then moves on to the next one. He doesn't want to kill anyone, but will do so if he must.

If the players win, Stoner is arrested and the players are given their reward. However, despite testimonies to the contrary, Talia insists she was going with him of her own free will. He wasn't taking her to Earth, he just wanted to show her something in the shuttle. That's what she testifies to in court. Thus, the only conviction that can be pinned on Stoner is possession of a concealed weapon. That's enough to get him expelled from the station, though, and he departs in disgust.

Should Stoner win, he puts Talia on the shuttle and leaves Babylon 5 with her, heading back to Earth. This could lead to additional work for the players—they might have to go after the two of them, assuming they have transport available. If they don't go after Talia, she returns two weeks later, unchanged, and doesn't want to talk about anything that happened on the trip. However, she does stay that Matthew Stoner won't be a problem any more.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 200 (none if Stoner gets away with Talia)

Encounter One: Private Meeting

One day, while the players are going about their business on the station, each receives an individual message. If they have quarters, the message arrives on their terminal. Otherwise, it's delivered by a courier who hands over a sealed envelope before departing.

The message is the same for everyone: 'This is Alison Fernandez. I need you to all meet me in docking port A-16 at 2100 hours tonight. Bring your gear for an extended journey. I'll explain everything when you get there, but if you don't think you can be away from the station for at least two weeks, don't bother showing up.'

When the players arrive at that docking port, they find a civilian pinnace there. If they were involved in the events of *Fiery Trial*, this is a familiar enough vessel—it's the *Liberty's Fortune*, the same ship used by the group in previous modules. Inside, Alison Fernandez awaits, along with a pilot by the name of Caitlin Schultz (see the Appendix for stats).

Civilian Pinnace: These small vessels are relatively common and inexpensive, but are rarely seen in the hands of individuals due to licensing and registration restrictions. Instead, they are operated by corporations, privately funded research groups, and the like. A pinnace can support a crew of up to 10 individuals, although only one pilot is actually needed. They are not armed, and cannot open their own jump points, so they are limited exclusively to established travel routes. In a pinch, they can move a few metric tonnes of cargo, if all passenger space is excluded, although this is inefficient considering their relatively slow speed.

Alison explains that she intends to take off within the next few minutes on an urgent mission. The players are invited to join her if they wish, and she'll explain along the way. She can't tell them anything at first unless they commit, however, because she doesn't want any word of her mission lingering around on Babylon 5. No matter how hard the players try to get more information out of her, she won't reveal it, unless of course they use telepathy or some other means. She also won't let them leave the shuttle to fetch more supplies, since she originally warned them that they needed to bring all the gear they needed. She also needs their answer immediately, because she intends to take off within minutes.

If the players agree, she has Caitlin close up the ship and take off. As soon as the ship clears Babylon 5's docking ports, it heads straight for the jump gate and enters. Once they're in hyperspace, Alison explains the mission as she knows it.

Alison sits down alongside the rest of you and starts to explain the situation. Her expression is grave as she proceeds. 'Theresa Cross came to me several days ago and told me something that frankly scares the hell out of me. She said she believes that President Santiago's death wasn't an accident. She thinks he was assassinated.'

Alison pauses for a moment to let that sink in and then continues. 'Apparently, one of Theresa's fellow scientists, someone named Carlton Fisk, was conducting a secret investigation on Io and came across wreckage of EarthForce One. Somehow, this wreckage proved the ship's explosion wasn't an accident. Theresa doesn't know where the proof comes from because Fisk didn't send any more messages and has since disappeared.

'Anyway, Theresa is worried because she's afraid if she tells her employers about this, the same thing that happened to Fisk could happen to her. She doesn't know if they had something to do with the assassination, or if they're just totally in President Clark's pocket now. Before she makes any decisions, she needs to know if Fisk's report was accurate. That's why she asked me to look into this quietly. We're going to Io.'

Naturally, the players will have questions.

'What exactly are we looking for on Io?' 'Two things—Fisk, and the evidence he supposedly found. Io Colony, as you know, is a collection of homesteads and domes involved almost exclusively in mining efforts. The only place to land is at Mount Jove, which is where Fisk was staying. We know he set out on several missions across the surface of the planet, and presumably during one of these he discovered the evidence he reported to Theresa. We're hoping he left behind some kind of records we can look at when we get there.'

'Why do you need us for this? Why not someone closer to Earth?' 'Theresa doesn't know who she can trust, but she knows you're the least likely to be working for the other side or to report her activities to someone else.'

'What do you know about Carlton Fisk?' 'Just what Theresa gave me.' (She hands over a photo of Fisk, who looks like a middle-aged man starting to turn bald.) 'For reasons of her own, she's keeping the name of their employer a secret. All I know for sure is that he's an agent, like she is. However, he wasn't acting in an official capacity on Io. He was there for personal reasons, and supposedly stumbled upon the evidence by accident. I have to tell you, though, I'm not buying that. People just don't go to Io for a vacation. He must've been looking for something, and he obviously found it.'

'Is there a chance this is all a deception of some kind?' 'Yes, which is why we're going. We need to find out if Fisk was correct. He sent a coded message to Theresa, using a code the two of them knew well, but others might've known it also. There's also a chance he was interrogated, or forced to send the message against his will. We don't know. I have to ask myself, though—why would somebody go to so much trouble to convince Theresa Cross that President Santiago was assassinated? It doesn't make sense.'

'Who's our new pilot?' 'Caitlin Schultz. I've worked with her before, and she checks out. However, she doesn't know the true nature of our mission. She thinks we're going to Io simply to try to find Carlton Fisk. Don't talk to her about anything else. Once we land, she'll stay with the ship, so there's no reason to worry about another betrayal.' Alison is referring, of course, to Rasheed Isanda's actions at the end of *Fiery Trial*.

'What's in it for us?' 'Well, in addition to learning what happened to President Santiago, Theresa has agreed to pay you all 1,000 credits. That's each, not for your whole group! Plus you get a lovely all-expenses paid trip to Io, the garden spot of the Sol system.' At this, she gives a quick laugh. 'Oh, and I get something else for myself, too. Theresa says she's managed to discover the truth behind my dismissal from the Diplomatic Corps. If we can provide evidence of Santiago's assassination to her—and keep quiet about it in the process—she's agreed to give me full disclosure. At last, I'll finally know what really happened!'

Io Colony

Earth's colony on Io began life as a small military base established in 2132 to help EarthForce patrol the outer planets in search of pirates. The initial Io base was placed in a synchronous orbit behind Io that kept the station free of Jupiter's intense magnetic fields. Later, as protective technologies improved, the base was located directly on the surface of the moon, atop a stable, non-volcanic mountain.

Io, one of the most violent moons in the solar system, is a tremendous source of sulphur, silicates, and other valuable minerals, much of which are readily available on the surface. It was not long before belters began to brave the earthquakes, molten sulphur flows, intense magnetic fields, and electromagnetic disturbances to collect these resources. Since Io always keeps one side facing Jupiter and the other towards space, most belters stayed on the outward-facing side to avoid the giant planet's constant output of radiation. Even so, residents of the slowly growing colony gradually became used to an almost constant electrical charge on everything they touched. Io's low gravity also proved something of a challenge, but long-time residents found themselves slowly adapting to their environment.

Today, Io Colony is a collection of dozens of small domed villages positioned atop hills and mountains considered generally safe from volcanic activity. The domes are reinforced against impacts from meteorites and chunks of rock thrown up by nearby eruptions. Floors and transit tubes are made of flexible materials designed to withstand the constant shocks of eruptions and the slight twisting and stretching of Io's surface by massive tidal forces caused by Jupiter, Ganymede, and other Jovian moons. Most residents wear protective gear at all times and have helmets at the ready, just in case a seal is breached despite all the colony's safety precautions.

Life on Io is difficult, harsh, and stressful. Nearly all civilians are miners who spend the majority of their time engaged in heavy labour. Of course, since the gravity is only one-sixth that of Earth, they can lift a great deal more than they could back home, but their jobs are still exhausting. All the 'free' resources on the surface have by now been stripped away, so the miners are constantly scraping around in a search for new veins to exploit. Digging, tunnelling, and drilling are performed on a regular basis, but are quite dangerous. The worst nightmare for an Ionian is to accidentally break into a buried volcanic fissure and release molten sulphur or lava directly into the homestead. For this reason, most drilling is done remotely and with explosives ready to collapse the tunnel before too much damage is caused. Explosives are not generally used to excavate the land, however, lest they set off an eruption or an earthquake chain reaction.

Io still supports the original military base, which occupies the top of Mount Jove, overlooking the colony like a huge natural tower. The base supports a significant military population as well as rescue workers ready to evacuate miners at a moment's notice. The main job of the base is not to oversee the colony, however, but to guard the nearby Io jump gate, Earth's primary civilian entry point into hyperspace. Literally hundreds of spacecraft pass through this gate on a daily basis, and since the transit time to Earth via normal space is several hours, the defenders must be housed somewhere nearby. Io Station is the largest nearby base of any significance.

The flight to Earth takes three days, during which the players can relax, read up on Io, or otherwise prepare for the mission in whatever way they see fit. They can also catch up with Alison and talk to Courtney, who's a friendly and outgoing sort. Otherwise, nothing interesting happens.

Encounter Two: Mount Jove

Eventually, the *Liberty's Fortune* emerges from the Io jump gate. Courtney takes the ship down to Mount Jove, landing there without challenge on the civilian side of the mountain. The base is divided into two sections, the vast majority of which is military in nature and can't be entered by anyone without the proper clearance. The rest is a civilian docking port acting as a nerve centre for the transport tubes that service the rest of the colony.

After the ship docks, Alison escorts the players off the ship and into the customs area. If the players are all human, they have no trouble getting through. Other races are interrogated closely, scanned, and warned not to cause any trouble. Minbari, in particular, are treated roughly. Io Colony is almost 100% human, except for a few vendors and a single distant homestead with a single Narn resident. The inhabitants don't like foreigners or aliens very much.

As soon as you complete the customs check-in procedure, you're allowed to pass through the large hallway into the main body of the Mount Jove Station. You're immediately struck by the similarities to the inside of Babylon 5. Halls and passageways head off in a variety of directions, and humans of all shapes and sizes walk past. A few give you curious glances, and eyes narrow at the sight of the aliens in your party. No one speaks to you, though, and the citizens pass you by without comment. As though to remind you you're no longer on Babylon 5, you see a wide window along one wall, looking out over the moon's sulphur-coated hills. High above, the orange and white orb of Jupiter hangs over the landscape, dominating the sky.

Welcome to Io.

After this, the players are free to do whatever they wish. Courtney stays on the ship, while Alison accompanies the players. Alison admits that she's never been to Io Colony before and knows about as much as the players do. New arrivals on the base receive a map of the facility and a brief description of the various places the station has to offer. Some places the players can visit are listed below:

The Low Gravity Acclimatization Centre: This is a large gymnasium with padded walls and a variety of obstacles, like walls, balance beams, and the like. Here, the players can get used to Io's low gravity in complete safety. If a player spends at least one hour in the Acclimatization Centre each day, he reduces the Very Low Gravity penalty to Dexterity by one-half (i.e., to –2 for most players, or –1 if they have the Low-G Tolerance feat). This benefit only applies for the next eight hours and must be renewed regularly.

The Taste of Earth Restaurant: This popular establishment is shaped like a dome, with a false 'sky' projected on the ceiling. During the day, a false 'sun' creeps across through puffy white clouds. At night, a clear starfield with the Earth's moon appears, lacking any hint of the oppressive sight of colourful Jupiter hanging overhead. The periods of sunset and dawn are most popular, usually filling the restaurant with residents of the base—including many military types coming over for the event. Some of the homesteaders also make the trip to Mount Jove on occasion to enjoy a good meal under Earth's blue skies. Prices are high—at least twice those on Babylon 5—but this is the best restaurant on Io. In addition to quality meals made from pre-packaged ingredients, some authentic gourmet foods are also available if the buyer doesn't mind paying ridiculous prices.

Io Guided Tours: Although Io isn't exactly a huge tourist draw, several small businesses have sprouted within the last three years. One of these is Io Guided Tours, or IGT for short. IGT is operated by Malcolm McKearns and three other employees. McKearns is an ex-EarthForce pilot who has purchased two decommissioned EA Frigga VTOL craft and converted them for sightseeing purposes. Each operates with a crew of two and can carry up to a dozen passengers who, seated in converted troop bays, can look down at the surface of Io through clear panels. The two craft, known as the 'Eyes of Io,' are able to sail through canyons and over bubbling volcanoes with the greatest of ease. The tours are very popular with visitors and receive glowing recommendations from virtually every resident of the station. However, they cost 100 credits per person for a one-hour tour, or 200 credits for the 'Grand Volcano Tour' lasting 3 hours. Malcolm McKearns is quite proud of his accident-free record, as well as the fact that he's been involved in three different (and successful) rescue missions since his company was formed.

The Nightmare Mines: This is another 'tourist attraction' to which tours are available. The so-called 'Nightmare Mines' are played up as haunted by the ghosts of twenty-seven miners who lost their lives over the years the tunnels were dug. However, to most locals, the place is a laughable tourist trap similar to those you see advertised on billboards and in the backs of cheesy magazines. Visitors travel by transport tube to the Wexton homestead on the outskirts of Io Colony. The Wexton was one of the earliest civilian homesteads on Io and later served as a staging area for deep mining in the so-called Nightmare Caves. Now, it's a museum and gift shop. From here, visitors can put on pressure suits and venture forth on guided tours into the caves, listening to stories about accidents and mysterious sightings within the empty mines. It's all pure hokum, but just about every visitor to Io Colony heads out that way at least once, and the place does a decent enough business. Lately, they've managed to increase profits by adding a side trip to a spot where part of the wreckage of President Santiago's ship crashed after the disaster. For an extra 20 credits, a land crawler takes tourists out to look at the furrow and crater created by the wreck. However, no trace remains of the pieces, the remainder having been carted off by officials from the nearby military base. All that stands there now is a memorial to Santiago consisting of an EA flag placed over a rock carved in the shape of a star.

The Four Corners: At the centre of the Mount Jove civilian base lies the Four Corners, a mall of stores and shops rivalling the Zocalo of Babylon 5. Here, visitors can relax in cafes, shop for clothing or other conveniences, purchase equipment and tools, and even take care of banking needs. Commerce here is oriented about half-and-half between the needs of the adjoining military base and the more distant homesteads outside the station. Here in the Four Corners, the players can acquire any reasonable kinds of supplies, such as those that would be available in any civilian shop. Nothing illegal is available, and if there is a black market on Mount Jove, it's much better hidden than this.

Comm Centre: On Io Colony, communication is limited. There are no communications kiosks, and individual rooms don't have video connections. The Comm Centre is a combination communications and entertainment facility where an individual can place calls to any settlement in the colony as well as to more distant places such as Earth or Babylon 5. However, more distant calls

can only be made twice per day, between the hours of 0200 and 0300, or 1400 and 1500. This is due to interference caused by Jupiter's massive radiation belts. The Comm Centre also provides private areas in which customers can purchase and watch three-D entertainment programs, a luxury not available on base or in most homesteads. These sites are very popular distractions from the other problems of life on Io.

The Deep Caves: Not a series of tunnels, this is actually a nightclub located on the lowest level of Mount Jove. Most of those who visit this place are members of the military looking for a little excitement when they're off duty. Here, a visitor can enjoy a wide variety of drinks, play card games, participate in a low-G darts tournament, or try dancing on the fully enclosed quad-level dance floor. In the back rooms, certain less reputable forms of entertainment can be found—stripteases, prostitution, drug trafficking, and so forth. Actually, prostitution isn't illegal on Io, as long as the employees are property licensed and certified and the Deep Caves pays its taxes. Drug use, however, is strictly against the law—but the Caves pays kickbacks to corrupt EarthGov officials to keep the supplies flowing.

Mount Olympus Tower: This is the primary hotel on Mount Jove, a high-class place extending thirty stories into the black Io sky. A series of rollers and vibration baffles keeps the building perfectly stable even during severe earthquakes. Rooms range from small, affordable suites with one bed and community facilities (water is a carefully managed resource on Io) to expensive penthouses large enough for the entire group. Even the top-of-the-line spots, with simply amazing views, offer surprisingly few amenities and no communications ports. One might as well be back in the Twentieth Century.

Grand Central Station: The hub of transport tube activity on Io lies athwart the main base and the civilian section. From here, a traveller can get anywhere on Io simply by hopping aboard a transport and programming the appropriate destination. However, the vast majority of the homesteads in the colony are private, meaning a transport won't go to those sites without permission from the owner. A visitor will need to make a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 20) to remove the protections and visit a homestead uninvited. Doing so will, however, get the offender arrested.

Naval Base: About 75% of Mount Jove is a naval base dedicated to the defence of the Io Jump Point. Players without some sort of military connection won't be able to enter this side of the station. A player with officer levels will only be able to get in if he has a good cover story and a pressing reason to be allowed past the security checkpoint. Even if the players do manage to achieve entry, there isn't much to do. Carlton Fisk wasn't in the military and didn't make any contacts within the base. About the only thing a military player can do from the naval facility is call his superiors on Babylon 5 and elsewhere and provide a status report.

Other: There are also numerous other small shops, restaurants, lower-class hotels, hospitals, water reclamation facilities, and so forth; the above list only shows the highlights. All in all, the entire base supports a population of about 35,000 people, with another 100,000 scattered across the surface of Io.

At this point, let the players explore the base as they will. They can practice in the zero-G gym, check out the entertainment facilities, get rooms in the hotel, go shopping at the Four Corners, or whatever else they feel they need to do. When they're ready, they can move on to the mission at hand.

Earthquakes on Io: Every couple of hours, an earthquake rocks Io's surface. The first occasion comes as the players are standing around discussing how to get started on their mission, or if they decided quickly, as they're moving towards their first destination. Read this bit of boxed text:

As you're standing there (or walking along), a sudden shaking under your feet startles you. The ground seems to buck and pitch like a ship on rough seas. It's an earthquake! Everybody roll a Balance check… At this point, anyone failing a Balance check (DC 10) falls prone and must remain there until the quake subsides. *As you grab for support, you notice that most of the locals are standing idly with knees slightly bent, arms out for balance. None of them fall, although some are forced to drop or set down whatever they're carrying. Although the quake seems violent, you don't hear any crunching or crashing, and when the shuddering goes away a minute later, everyone continues along without any problems. A couple of the natives do, however, chuckle at the difficulties you all had.*

All the buildings, stores, shops, decorations, and the like on Io are by necessity fastened carefully and constructed to withstand quakes up to 10.5 on the Richter scale. Wall and window seals are rated for up to quakes of a 12.0 rating. Fortunately, most of these events are short-term and weak, lasting no more than a minute and rarely exceeding 8.0 in power. Admittedly, this would be extremely dangerous on an Earthlike world, but on Io—where the gravity is much lighter—an 8.0 quake isn't that serious.

A quake hits on average once every two hours. When one does occur, it lasts for 2d6 rounds and forces a Balance check (DC 10) every round. Failure indicates the subject falls prone and must remain down for the rest of the quake. If the individual in question has experienced at least one day's worth of earthquakes already, he can attempt to get to his feet with a Balance check (DC 15). Doing so is a move action, but if he fails, he loses all other actions that round. In any case, falling prone as a result of an earthquake causes no appreciable damage.

While a quake is going on, all ability scores, skill checks (other than Balance checks made to avoid falling prone), ability checks, and Reflex saving throws suffer a –2 circumstance penalty. This doesn't apply if the individual isn't standing on the ground, so someone in an aircraft sailing over the surface of Io wouldn't even notice the

earthquake. Jumping into the air during a quake doesn't remove these effects.

Rarely, a quake is rougher, lasting 1d6 extra rounds, increasing all Balance check DCs by 1d6. Whenever the Games Master determines that a quake occurs, roll 1d10. On a 1, the quake is severe enough to use these alternate rules.

In general, an earthquake doesn't affect anything indoors unless an object is left in a position where a quake can damage it. All structures and vehicles on Io are designed to absorb earthquakes without any trouble. If the players are outside or in an underground natural cave, the quake seems stronger because there's no high-tech baffle system underneath to absorb some of the shock. Additionally, the individual will have to be wearing a bulky spacesuit to survive in the nearly airless conditions. Thus, falling under such circumstances produces 1 point of subdual damage. In a cave or tunnel, there's also a slim possibility that some sort of cave-in will result. The effects of this are totally up to the Games Master.

Electrical Activity on Io: In addition to earthquakes, Io is constantly under the effects of Jupiter's massive radiation belts. The equipment that protects the colony from this radiation instead produces a constant low-level electrical field, producing a kind of hair-raising static on all residents. Touching anything metallic results in a shock, so virtually all metal surfaces are grounded and anyone entering an area with flammable substances is required to pass through a 'degaussing portal,' designed to strip out any excess electricity collected on the body while walking.

Even this isn't enough to prevent rampant electrical charges from taking their toll. Once a player has been on Io for more than an hour, he suffers 1 point of subdual damage that can't be recovered until he rests. Certain luxury hotel rooms are shielded against the effect, but everyone else on Io just learns to live with it. An individual who's been on Io for at least one month is immune to this penalty, as is any player with the Electrical Tolerance feat.

So What *Did* Happen to Mr. Fisk?

Carlton Fisk came to Io on his own initiative about a month ago. He checked into the Mount Olympus Tower, room 701, and paid for a week in advance. He did a few tourist things, like a visit to the Nightmare Mines and an Io Guided Tour. He also spent a lot of time talking to locals and hanging out in the Deep Caves nightclub, even partaking of some of the borderline illegal occurrences behind closed doors. His goal was to discover what he could about the wreckage of EarthForce One that fell on the moon after the explosion, as well as the activities that took place thereafter.

Over the course of his investigations, Fisk learned that two pieces of wreckage landed on Io that weren't collected by EarthForce, despite the fact that most of the miners are aware of the pieces' existence and even reported them to the authorities. The truth is that President Santiago gave a direct order to leave all engine pieces where they fell. He claimed that this was because the 'black box' had already been recovered. Analysis of the recordings had already 'proved' that the explosion was an accident caused by a cracked fusion bottle, so there was no need to waste equipment and risk lives trying to haul off the massive engine blocks. Actually, he assumed that they would be quickly buried by Io's volcanic activity, and even secretly directed some of his agents to set explosives designed to cover up the evidence. Then he left a couple of agents behind to ensure nobody investigated the remaining wreckage too closely.

Following Fisk's discovery that chunks of EarthForce One were still on Io, he needed a way to get to them. The natural choice was Malcolm McKearns' Guided Tours and the 'Eyes of Io.' Approaching them on a day when he knew they had no tours scheduled, he offered a hefty sum to fly him to one of the engine pieces. Here, he disembarked and spent two hours searching the wreckage. Finding nothing there, Fisk had McKearns fly him to the other engine piece, but found it lodged within a deep crevasse and unreachable. It was, however, very close to a homestead owned by the Pierce family.

After investigating the Pierces, Fisk learned they were descendants of three generations of Io miners. He tried to convince them to let him visit their mine and borrow one of their vehicles—a core miner—but they refused. Fisk then checked out two other homesteads nearby, but found they lacked the necessary tools and equipment to help him reach the engine piece. This forced him to return to the Pierce family. Investigating them closely, he learned that one of them, Marshall Pierce, spent a lot of time in the Taste of Earth Restaurant and watching vids in the Comm Centre. Fisk correctly divined that the young man was sick of the life of a miner and would do just about anything to escape Io. Carlton arranged an 'accidental' meeting and proposed a deal: In exchange for a trip to the wrecked engine, Fisk would help the desperate miner get away from Io and start a new life on Earth. Pierce leapt at the opportunity.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Pierce family wasn't too keen on the idea. They didn't want their foolish young son heading off to an unknown future on a planet none of them had ever visited. First they tried to buy Fisk off, but of course Carlton had no interest in money. He just wanted to investigate the wreckage. Finally, the Pierces acquiesced to his demands and let him head off with Marshall on the core mining machine, a journey that took several hours. However, they also called Io Security and explained what was going on.

This brought the whole incident to the attention of the two agents of President Clark, who were by now insinuated amidst the Io security forces. Taking a team out to the wreckage, they tried to arrest Fisk. By now,

however, he'd discovered the evidence he needed—parts of an explosive deep within the tangled engine wreckage, as well as one unexploded chunk of bomb debris. Fisk took video images and an explosive sample and returned to the core miner, only to find security forces waiting for him atop the crevasse. Desperate, he forced Marshall to drive the miner back into the crack in Io's surface, whereupon the vehicle broke through into a natural set of caves. Pierce followed this as close as he could to the Pierce homestead and tunnelled into his father's mine, from which he returned home, where security forces were already approaching.

Thanking the Pierces for their unwitting help, Fisk hurried to the transport tube and high-tailed it back to Mount Jove, from which he managed to send Theresa Cross a coded message before Clark's agents caught up with him. He hid the evidence he'd collected within the Comm Centre kiosk he was using (booth #102) and returned to his room in the hopes of playing innocent. Unfortunately, the agents weren't too kind to him when they got there, beating him up and hauling him away after a brief attempt at interrogation. Prior to their arrival, however, Fisk left a few innocuous clues in his room.

Unfortunately for the agents, they couldn't prevent Fisk from killing himself with a suicide drug before Clark's telepaths could get to work on learning what he knew. They also aren't sure Fisk ever actually sent a message out of the station, or what he did with the evidence he took from the engine crash site. Since they couldn't afford to leave Marshall Pierce where he was without his story getting out, they took him into custody and then arranged for his tragic death in a transit tube accident on his way back home after his release. After that, they placed explosives near the engine wreckage, setting off a blast that buried the pieces under tons of rock.

Now it's up to the players to figure out all of this, locate the evidence, elude or fight President Clark's agents, and escape Io with the information intact. To this end, the players can try several things, represented as separate encounters below. Encounters Three, Four and Five don't have to be done in that order, but the evidence gained in any or all of them will eventually point the way to the Pierce homestead and, eventually, the important wreckage.

Encounter Three: The Tower

One of the first and most obvious places to look for evidence of Fisk's presence is the Mount Olympus Tower. While on Io, Carlton stayed in room 701, one of the nicer corner suites, but not a penthouse spot. There are two ways to find this out—getting a room in the hotel and hacking the reservation computers, or interviewing someone at the reservations desk. Hacking requires a Computer Use check (DC 15), but if the players don't beat the roll by at least 10, their activities will be detected and they'll be summarily ejected from their rooms. Furthermore, the infraction will be reported to Io Security, so that any further trouble gets them arrested.

If the players try to get the information from a reservation desk attendant, they find a lovely young woman in a sharp business suit. Her nametag identifies her as Mindy (her last name is Ryszek, but this isn't on the tag). She's the daughter of a Russian EF officer assigned to the military base. She works at the hotel to earn extra money so she can party every night in the Deep Caves. If a reasonably attractive male human player approaches and asks for her help, she'll eventually agree to tell them Fisk's room number if he meets her for drinks later in the nightclub. If an appropriate player archetype isn't available (she doesn't go for females or aliens, although a good-looking Centauri might be interesting), it'll take a Diplomacy check (DC 20) to get her to look up the information. Bluff or Intimidate can also be tried, but require a DC 25 check—failure indicates that she calls her supervisor, and the players are sent packing.

Mindy Ryszek

2nd Level Human Worker
Hit Points: 8
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 10 (+0 Reflex)
Attacks: –1 melee or +1 ranged
Special Qualities: White Collar
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +0, Will +0
Abilities: Str 7, Dex 10, Con 13, Int 12, Wis 11, Cha 18
Skills: Appraise +6, Bluff +9, Computer Use +6, Knowledge (local) +6, Listen +5, Perform (dance) +9, Profession (retail) +5, Spot +5, Technical (electronics) +6
Feats: Hobby (Perform), Low-G Tolerance
Equipment: Hotel uniform, skimpy dancing outfit

Mindy is a smart, vivacious 20-year-old who's now in her fourth year stuck on 'this boring rock.' Although her father, Major Karl Ryszek, would gladly ship her to any college in the Alliance, she doesn't want to go to school. She wants to marry a rich, exciting man who'll spirit her away from Io and into a life of adventure. Failing that, she'll be more than happy to link up with anyone who seems remotely interesting, and an attractive player from somewhere else (anywhere else) surely fits the bill. As a result, she'll try to 'put the moves on' any male human who approaches her asking for information. Should that fortunate (or unfortunate, depending on how you look at it) individual need a favour, she'll oblige in exchange for a night of fun and excitement at the Deep Caves nightclub. She'll even agree to show the player around Io, using her local knowledge as necessary, but only so long as the guy strings her along. If she's ever rejected, she becomes an implacable enemy thereafter.

Once the players have the appropriate room number in hand, their next step should be to proceed there and check it out. If they hacked into the computer to get the room number, a second Computer Use check (DC 10) will reveal

that a man named James Weider is staying in room 701 at the moment. They can also get this information from Mindy on a DC 15 Diplomacy check or by promising to buy the first round of drinks at the Deep Caves. Getting the keycode for entry into the room requires either a virtually impossible DC 30 Computer Use check, a Diplomacy check (DC 25) on Mindy, or by showing her a *really* good time at the nightclub (wink wink, nudge nudge). The players can also simply break into the room, but the Mount Olympus Tower has a state-of-the-art security system. Getting through a locked door requires a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 22); failure by 5 or more alerts hotel security to their presence and lands the offenders in jail (see Encounter Six).

The room is occupied by James Weider, a somewhat portly businessman from Earth arranging the purchase of a number of rare materials for his company, JSR Imports. He's been to Io several times and spends most of the day in the Comm Centre making deals with homesteaders and smaller mining companies. At night, he visits the Deep Caves nightclub and tries to link up with women there, but since he isn't particularly good-looking, he usually winds up in a back room someplace buying some attention for the night. This means he's in his room only rarely. Since the players aren't likely to meet him during the module, stats aren't given for his persona. He's not a suspicious sort, so if players set up surveillance on his room to make sure he leaves for a while, he isn't likely to notice unless they totally screw up somehow.

Once inside the room, the players can search at their leisure. Weider has a briefcase, a couple of suitcases, a portable computer, and two data crystals filled with information about the stock market and ores prices—in other words, boring minutia beyond the notice of the players (unless, of course, they wish to become traders in rare metals). If a player with at least five ranks of Computer Use keeps the computer and data crystals handy, he receives a +2 synergy bonus on any Knowledge check related to the purchase or sale of ores on Io.

In addition to this, there is the usual arrangement of furniture—a desk, table, bed, and even a video terminal that provides basic computer and vid services (but no means to communicate with any sites on Io other than rooms elsewhere in the hotel). There's also a room safe of the kind normally opened only with a combination set by the owner. The safe is currently locked and requires a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 30) to open. Alternately, the players could 'convince' Weider to open the safe, or take the combination out of his mind through telepathy. However, the only items inside are 300 credit chits and a JSR Imports credit card.

If the players look over Weider's briefcase carefully, a Search check (DC 17) locates a hidden panel programmed to open only at the touch of Weider's fingertips. Inside, he hides a secret plastic case of Vapour, a mood-altering drug (see sidebar). The players can cut into the case with a knife or other sharp implement if they wish—the case has a Break DC 15, DR 5, and 5 hit points. If they score more than 5 hit points, they also pierce the plastic tube inside, spilling the contents. Alternately, they can bypass the electronic lock with a Technical (electronics) check (DC 26), or by using Weider's actual fingers—one way or another—to open the secret compartment.

Vapour: Vapour is an uncommon 'party drug' that causes anyone drinking it to gain enhanced awareness while lowering inhibitions (Int +2, Wis –4) for 1d4 hours. Users refer to this as the 'vapour high.' The drug is quite illegal and can cause hallucinations. Upon drinking a dose, a subject must make a Fortitude save (DC 15) or suffer not only the ability score adjustments but also strange visions and dementia. An affected victim rolls 1d3 every minute—on a 1, he acts normally, while on a 2 or 3 he wanders around in a daze, staring at images only he can see, utterly unable to interact with the world around him.

Vapour is illegal and possession of the substance results in immediate arrest. However, because of its chemical composition, most drug-sniffing animals or equipment can't detect the drug. A single dose sells for up to 100 credits on the black market, depending on supply and demand.

If the players attempt to identify the drug, they must make a Medical check to recognise it as a mood-altering substance. If their roll equals or exceeds DC 15, they know it's capable of producing clarity of thought, but that's about it. DC 20 tells them it will also lower inhibitions, much like alcohol only without perceptible side effects. Only if the check hits DC 25 will they recognise the substance as Vapour and realise it's also a hallucinogen.

Weider isn't hooked on Vapour—the drug isn't particularly addictive, which is why it's uncommon and unpopular with pushers—and keeps it handy for use only for entertainment. Because it's hallucinogenic, he only uses it when alone, or on the rare occasions he brings a woman back to his room. Sometimes he and the lucky woman in question both partake. Although this is all very interesting, however, it's of little real value—the Vapour subject is more of a red herring than anything else. Still, a player might take the drug for himself, or use it to blackmail Weider for some reason. Or he might use it to show Mindy he's a partying kind of guy.

If the players continue to search Weider's room, they can locate several items of interest on successive Search checks:

Search DC 18: Under the bed, near the wall where cleaning equipment would have a tough time reaching, the players discover a black stain. A Medical check (DC 12) positively identifies this substance as blood—actually Carlton Fisk's blood, but getting a definite ID can be tough. Neither the players nor Alison have any samples of Fisk's DNA. The only way to get

that would be for Alison to communicate with Theresa Cross through secure channels, and that means a trip to the naval base. Alison won't even attempt such a call from the Comm Centre or the *Liberty's Fortune* because she's been warned by Theresa to avoid taking this risk.

Search DC 20: Underneath the table in the corner, along one edge, the players discover a series of numbers written in the faux wood surface in ordinary ink. The numbers are '102,' corresponding to the Comm Centre booth where Fisk hid the evidence he collected from the engine wreck. Of course, the players won't know this when they discover the number, and the Comm Centre doesn't post visible numbers on their booths. The players also don't even know that these digits were written by Fisk and can't prove it by any known means, as there are no fingerprints in the area—and even if there were, there's no way to compare them to Fisk's prints.

Search DC 32: In the back left corner of the closet, under a strip of carpet, the players discover an electronic key. It's a common sort of key that could go to any number of things, but doesn't seem to have any use anywhere in the room. It definitely doesn't fit the safe on the closet shelf. In fact, this key will be useful later if the players do happen to find the box of evidence Fisk left hidden in the Comm Centre. Note: The DC for this Search check is reduced by 10 if the players know they're looking for a key—they can get this information by either talking to Sheldon Pierce, or by locating the box itself.

The players can continue searching the room, but there's nothing else to find. If they've been careful about leaving no trace of their presence, Weider will have no reason to suspect anyone was there and the players get away without incident. However, if they did anything permanent or noticeable—moving things around, breaking into the briefcase, and so forth—Weider will report the break-in after quietly discarding his illicit drugs. Only if the players actually *took* the drugs will he keep his mouth shut. The players could even leave a note to this effect: 'We know what you've been doing. If you tell anyone, we'll hand over the evidence to the authorities.' Either way, he'll be cowed.

Encounter Four: The Tour

Malcolm McKearns is a shaggy Scotsman who runs the Io Guided Tours operation along with his three employees: Simon Quarrie, Kal Lo, and Vivian Chen. Both Malcolm and Simon were assigned to the same GROPOS unit in EarthForce, and survived the war without injury on Io Colony (the Minbari virtually ignored Io in the final push to Earth in the last days of the invasion). Kal and Vivian are a brother and sister team of pilots from Vietnam who emigrated to Io five years ago to escape persecution in their homeland, answering McKearns' ad for qualified pilots. All four are eminently familiar with the converted Frigga-class VTOLs used for low-level tours of Io's surface, cliffs, canyons, volcanoes, and mines. Working as a team, they do excellent business, despite the fact that they have customers only two or three days a week. They spend the rest of the time taking care of their precious Friggas, the 'Eyes of Io,' *Green Eye* and *Blue Eye*. If something goes wrong, they have enough buddies in the naval base to get them the supplies they need to make repairs.

Malcolm McKearns

5th Level Human Officer
Hit Points: 18
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +6 melee or +8 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Army), Rallying Call
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +4
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 17, Con 13, Int 10, Wis 11, Cha 14
Skills: Bluff +4, Concentration +9, Diplomacy +10, Pilot +14, Sense Motive +4, Technical (mechanical) +8
Feats: Skill Focus (Pilot), Spacecraft Proficiency, Veteran Spacehand
Equipment: Toolkit, spare tools for Frigga VTOL, pressure suit, PPG Model 10

Malcolm reached the rank of Captain in the GROPOS before mustering out three years ago, remaining on Io with his friend and fellow officer Simon Quarrie. Both began their new career with a single modified Frigga, a decommissioned model gathering sulphur dust in the 'boneyard' near one of the GROPOS training slopes near the base of Mount Jove. Since Malcolm is a gregarious sort with many friends in the military—and promised plenty of discounts to visiting friends and family of the military stationed at the base—he was able to get all the help he needed to get his new business off the ground. Later he added a second Frigga, first as a spare and second as a backup when things got busy, which they do several times a year. He loves his job and particularly enjoys hitting up tourists for higher tips and bonuses, especially those that involve exciting dives into swerving canyons or trips into the mouths of wide, dark caverns. He's constantly looking for new and better ways to speed up and enhance his outmoded Friggas, too, and boasts that he can fly that ship better than anybody else on Io.

If the players try to get down to business right away, asking whether or not anyone took Carlton Fisk on a tour within the past month or so, nobody remembers him. Malcolm says he doesn't keep track of who takes his tours, save of course for the past week or so in case of any insurance claims. He instead reiterates the prices for tours of Io's surface and extensive lava-strewn canyons. If the players succeed in a contested Sense Motive against Malcolm's Bluff check, they'll be able to tell he's concealing something, but won't be able to get any more out of him. Pressing the issue, he suggests again—a bit more strongly—that they agree to take a tour.

Should the players get the hint, he sets up a tour within a couple of hours. If they don't figure it out, Malcolm follows them out of the tour office and tries one more time, getting a little bit more direct about it: 'I might not be able t'remember somethin' now, laddie, but the light of big Jove shinin' down on me as I fly across the sulphur seas always sparks me memory, if ye know what I mean.'

When the players return for the tour, Malcolm takes them up alone. At first, the tour progresses as normal, the VTOL craft flitting over a variety of snaking rivers of lava or yellow-speckled cliff walls. Then he brings the ship up higher above the surface and speeds along a more direct course. He tells the players he doesn't know or care who they are, but he'll show them what Fisk was looking at if they fork over a 'tip' of 500 credits. This can be reduced by 25 credits for every point by which the group's spokesman beats an opposed Diplomacy check, to a minimum of 250 credits. A female human character earns a circumstance bonus equal to her Charisma bonus for purposes of this check.

If the players pony up the dough, Malcolm cruises over to the first bit of wreckage, a clump of mangled metal partially covered by a recent lava flow. He explains that the debris was still in the open when Fisk was here, and he investigated the pile of junk himself with an EVA (extra-vehicular activity). Malcolm agrees to allow the players to do the same for an additional 'tip' equal to the first—but a contested Sense Motive/Bluff check reveals he's hiding something. When pressed, he admits that after Carlton examined this wreckage, he was disappointed and wanted to move on.

If the players do make an EVA, there are two suits available. They can explore the wreckage for up to an hour and can easily break off pieces to bring back—pieces that can later be checked to see if they were once part of EarthForce One. A Search check (DC 21) discovers a twisted black container of some kind amidst the engine, but when examined closely, this turns out to be an ordinary electronics junction box that proves nothing. This piece of wreckage is a dead end.

After this, Malcolm informs the players that Fisk then moved to study another, larger piece of wreckage. Since by this point the players will be disappointed, he'll take them to that site without any additional charges or complaints. However, when he gets there, all he locates is a sinkhole-like depression in the midst of a deep crevasse. He swears the engine block was here when he brought Fisk. This time, he offers to allow an EVA without any fees. If the players do so, a Knowledge (military) or Technical (engineering) check (DC 15) during the EVA allows them to recognise that some sort of explosives were at work, and a large object of some kind has fallen through into an open space below. However, constant earthquakes have caved in much of the surface, so that trying to get inside without appropriate digging equipment would be foolhardy.

If the players ask McKearns for help excavating the site, he refuses to help. He's a tour guide, not a miner. Besides which, mining and prospecting on Io is carefully controlled by the government and the Belt Alliance. Purchasing such rights costs tens of thousands of credits. In fact, says McKearns, just bringing the players here could be construed as a violation of his charter. If asked, he tells the players he told the same thing to Fisk and sent the man away. After that, he never saw Fisk again, although he did hear that the man was later arrested and exiled from Io. McKearns doesn't know why, but suspects it might've had something to do with his 'unhealthy' interest in the wreckage.

If the players did manage to acquire a piece of debris during this particular encounter, they can analyse it using equipment on the *Liberty's Fortune*. However, the best the computers there can do is identify the sample as coming from an Earth Alliance ship. If the players found the electronic junction box, three hours of analysis and study—plus a Technical (any) check (DC 15)—determines that this is, or rather was, a particularly high-quality piece of equipment not normally found on typical ships. This is enough to suggest that the wreckage did, in fact, come from EarthForce One, but doesn't prove anything more than that.

If the players need to, they can return to the first piece of junk as often as they wish. McKearns will be happy to ferry investigators there many times, especially considering how much money he'll be making. However, he won't go near the second site after the first attempt. He thinks it's too dangerous, as the whole area is obviously unstable. Besides, since somebody obviously tried to blow up the wreckage, it's painfully obvious that trying to locate it can be hazardous to one's health. If pressed, Malcolm suggests that the players try to talk to someone who knows more about mining. Maybe they'll be willing to undertake an excavation operation, but he certainly isn't.

Encounter Five: The Nightclub

Another course the players may take is to ask around for information about Carlton Fisk. For example, they might visit some of the shops and show pictures of him, asking if anyone remembers seeing Fisk around the base. In this case, a Gather Information check (DC 10) easily locates several individuals who remember the man asking around about wreckage on Io's surface. This same check reveals that Fisk was told by some to go to Io Guided Tours, and by others to speak to Michael Seagate in the Deep Caves nightclub. Seagate, it is said, knows something about everything on Io.

Alternately, the players may simply proceed to the club without checking around for information about Fisk. Within the Deep Caves, asking questions in any sort of detail gets you directed to Seagate automatically, especially

if the players are obviously travellers or include aliens in their midst. Seagate is always looking for new people to talk to.

Taking the lift down to the lowest levels of Mount Jove, you emerge into a corridor lined with pipes and tubes, like those you might see in a dank basement. This hardly looks like the place you'd find a nightclub! Yet to the left you definitely hear distant music. Following the sounds, you come to a set of wide bay doors lit with glowing neon. The name, shining in a green glow, is the Deep Caves.

Entering, you find yourself in a different world. You can easily forget you're in the bowels of a mountain, surrounded by flashing lights and thumping music. The place isn't particularly crowded at this time of day, but there are a few groups here and there, as well as a few dancers making use of the raised stage along the right-hand wall. An open bar occupies the centre of the floor, and a few waiters and waitresses meander about, serving the two dozen or so customers. As you stand there looking around, a snappily dressed host notices your group and comes over, smiling. 'Welcome to the Deep Caves,' he says amiably. 'My name is Mark. Can I show you to a seat?'

Whether the players ask to see Seagate or not, the host directs them to an oval-shaped booth and takes their drink orders, also showing a menu consisting mostly of appetizers and light meals. If the players drop Seagate's name, Mark heads off to find him. A few minutes later, Michael Seagate arrives, smiling and introducing himself with zest, almost as though the players are well-known celebrities. He doesn't know them at all, of course—this is just Seagate's way of getting people to feel comfortable in his presence.

Michael Seagate

7th Level Human Diplomat
Hit Points: 13
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee or +3 ranged
Special Qualities: Contact x4, Improved Diplomacy, Government Resources
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +2, Will +7
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 10, Con 9, Int 18, Wis 15, Cha 16
Skills: Bluff +14, Diplomacy +18, Gather Information +13, Knowledge (local) +14, Knowledge (alien life) +14, Knowledge (history) +14, Knowledge (military) +14, Knowledge (star systems) +14, Sense Motive +13, Speak Language (Russian, Spanish, French, Narn, Centauri, Minbari, Drazi), Spot +5
Feats: Resist Scan, Skill Focus (Diplomacy), Charming, Low-G Tolerance
Equipment: Perfectly tailored suit

With the barest hint of a French accent betraying his country of origin, Michael Seagate is a witty, pleasant, charismatic personality indeed. He is the manager of the Deep Caves nightclub and can usually be found in his office, or wandering around the place talking with old friends and introducing himself to new ones. He particularly enjoys just sitting around talking to visitors, soaking up stories and details like a sponge, dropping names with abandon and telling tales of past experiences with abandon. The only thing he won't discuss is why someone like him is stuck in a place like Io—anyone who asks gets a friendly, casual brush-off.

Because he almost never forgets anything, Seagate is quite well respected around the base, but there are also those who keep a close eye on his actions. Clark's two agents, for example. Seagate, naturally, knows he's being watched and takes care to guard what he says. He knows there's something in the wreckage of EarthForce One that someone doesn't want people to know about, but he's not willing to risk his own life to find out what it is. What happened to Fisk is proof enough of that.

Seagate is more than happy to sit down in the booth with the players and swap stories. He's particularly fond of the time Rebo and Zooty gave a show in the Deep Caves, which were so packed with fans it was almost impossible to move around. Also, whenever a ship gets held up at the Io jump gate for some reason or other, the crews usually find their way to the Caves while waiting for repairs or clearance to continue. Seagate claims to have met ambassadors from any number of races, including Ambassador Mollari before he was assigned to his current post on Babylon 5. He's also met a number of prominent military figures while they awaited transfer to new assignments, among them Jeffrey Sinclair.

Seagate trades such tales for anecdotes about some of the players' adventures on Babylon 5 and beyond. If the players are forthcoming about their escapades, Seagate is very friendly and offers up all sorts of tips about things to see and do on Io. If they withhold information, he eventually excuses himself and departs. After all, swapping stories is a two-way street.

Should the players ask about Carlton Fisk or the wreckage of EarthForce One, Seagate shakes his head and mutters, 'One should not discuss such things in public, *n'est-ce pas*?' If the players continue to pressure him for information, he doesn't answer but instead invites one of them to a private poker game at 10 pm (2200 hours) that night. 'Perhaps there we can exchange more information, my friend,' he says before departing. Seagate invites only one player—the one doing the most talking, most likely. He'll try to ask a human player over an alien, although this isn't an absolute requirement. If the player he invites professes not to know poker, he'll agree to accept any other volunteer instead.

That evening, when the group returns, Seagate personally meets them at the door and ushers the requested player into one of the back rooms. The rest of the group isn't allowed in, but is instead asked to kindly wait outside, where they will be served a free round of drinks and appetizers on the house. Meanwhile, read the following to the player with the invitation:

Michael Seagate is all smiles as he leads you into the back of the Deep Caves. You pass along the right-hand side of a smoky room half-filled with eager men staring up at a nearly nude, wildly gyrating woman on a head-high stage. At another door, he leads you into a cramped little room dominated by a small round metal table. Three other men, dressed in business suits, are waiting there, ready to play cards. Along one side of the table, you see a set of magnetic chips and an automatic card-dealing machine. Seagate motions for you to sit down before taking the seat at the dealer's position. 'I've taken the liberty of applying the 500 credits buy-in to your hotel bill,' he says with a wink. Note: If the players are staying on the Liberty's Fortune instead of a hotel, the bill will instead be applied to their docking fees. *'Now please, let's play. The rules are tournament style—winner take all.'*

As might be expected, the primary skill for a game of poker is Bluff. Sleight of Hand is used only if the player wishes to cheat during the game, which isn't recommended—Seagate will point out several cameras intended to ensure honesty in the room. Over the course of the game, the three other players (introduced as Paul Severin, Ivan Chotsky, and Reese Wittenberg) will gradually be beaten by either the player or Seagate—allow the player to roll a few Bluff checks and be steadily victorious over the other contestants. This isn't fudging—Seagate has arranged for these men to be here and deliberately lose the game, so that he and the player can talk privately.

If desired, the Games Master could run the poker game using actual cards. Let the other (non-involved) players take care of Severin's, Chotsky's and Wittenberg's hands. The Games Master can play whatever game of poker he's most familiar with, such as Five-Card Draw or Texas Hold-'Em. In each case, whenever the time comes for a final bet, allow the main player to roll a Bluff check against the defenders' straight-up die rolls. If the player's Bluff check is higher than another player's unmodified die roll (other than Seagate), that player must fold. Otherwise, the pot goes to whoever has the best hand. This represents a significant advantage for the primary player, but again, this is by design. Should the player lose regardless of this benefit, Seagate suggests he 'buy-in' again and continue playing. None of the other three 'shills' are afforded this option, and excuse themselves as soon as their chips are lost.

Finally, Seagate and the invited player are the only ones left in the room. 'At last!' Michael says. 'Sorry for the deception, my friend, but you can never be too sure about anyone in this place. Let us continue the game and we can speak freely. This room's auditory monitoring equipment is, sadly, broken at the moment. What a shame!'

While they talk, Seagate continues to deal and go through the motions of playing poker. However, he suggests that the player keep his head down and his back towards the door. That way, the cameras won't be able to get a good look at his mouth, just in case anyone who's observing won't be able to read his lips. Meanwhile, Seagate does the same thing, lowering his head and pretending to study his cards every time he talks about Carlton Fisk. Here are the answers he'll give to some of the questions the player might ask:

'Did you speak to Fisk?' 'Yes, much as we're speaking now. He wanted to know about the efforts made to collect the wreckage of EarthForce One. I told him there were several pieces still on Io, and that Malcolm McKearns of Io Guided Tours could show him some of the sites from the air.'

'What happened to Fisk?' 'I only know what's rumoured—he went out to try and look at some of the wreckage, but was later arrested. I'm not sure if he found anything.'

'Do you know where he was staying?' 'Yes, he was in room 701 of the Mount Olympus Tower. I remember that specifically because, like you, I arranged the use of his hotel bill to finance our poker game. He lost, regrettably, but then, he wasn't as skilled with the game as you are.'

'Do you know where he went while on Io?' 'Yes, he took one of the Io Guided Tours and later returned for a private tour. He also visited the Pierce homestead, presumably because it was closest to one of the larger chunks of EarthForce One wreckage. I don't know how he convinced the Pierces to let him on their property, however—they're one of the more private families, even more so now that their son is dead.'

'Their son?' 'Yes, Marshall Pierce. He was taken into custody shortly after Fisk was, but was then released. Sadly, a violent earthquake sundered the transit tube back to his homestead, and he died of asphyxiation before rescue teams could arrive. The Pierces won't speak to anyone now, and keep themselves secluded on their homestead. You do know the law, correct? You cannot enter a homesteader's lands without their explicit permission, except in an emergency. Just a friendly word of advice.'

'Is it possible the accident wasn't an accident?' 'Oh, yes, it's possible, but no one found any evidence of any such thing.'

'Do you know who took Fisk into custody?' 'It was Io Security, but that's all I know. Some of them were stationed here only recently, and Carlton especially was concerned about the timing. He tried to convince me they were dangerous, although I haven't seen any evidence of that myself.'

Seagate can describe Fisk in great detail, just in case the player wants to confirm that they're both talking about the same person. He may also offer that Fisk was an inquisitive, suspicious sort who was constantly looking over his shoulder. However, Fisk never once mentioned why he was looking for pieces of EarthForce One. There was no hint of his being involved in any sort of investigation, and in fact, it was painfully obvious that Fisk wanted his actions to be kept secret.

After the player is through picking Seagate's brain, the card game comes to an end. To finish, allow the player to make a contested Bluff check against Seagate on the final hand, winner take all. If the player wins (unlikely considering Seagate's immense Bluff skill), he walks off with 2,500 credits. If he loses, he finds a bill for 500 credits on the hotel or docking tab at check-out time.

Encounter Six: In Jail

There are several ways a player might wind up in the Mount Jove Jail over the course of this module. Some possibilities include:

- Getting caught breaking into Fisk's original room (#701) in the Tower
- Trying Weider's supply of Vapour or being caught with it in his possession
- Weider reporting a break-in and an investigation tracking it by DNA samples left at the scene
- Rejecting Mindy severely enough that she becomes angry and reports the player for an imagined crime
- Cheating, stealing, or any of a number of other petty crimes
- Being recognised as someone with a known criminal record

If the group is careful, there's no reason they ever have to wind up in a prison cell. This section is included only if they do make a mistake. However, as long as they don't commit murder, the very worst they can expect to have done to them is a stiff fine and eviction from the base.

If the players are arrested for something simple, and they don't have a record already, their penalty will usually be a fine and maybe a day or two in jail. In cases where their actions cause damage, they'll be ordered to pay for any such damages in addition to serving time and paying any other fees. For particularly heinous crimes, they'll be ejected from the station or sent to a more permanent penal facility. Of course, dealing with such a severe occurrence is beyond the scope of this module.

If the players are indeed incarcerated for some infraction or other, getting out is a simple matter of waiting for the sentence to conclude or paying the required fine. Any player not locked up can arrange for bail or other payment. Attempted bribery isn't really an option, although a player can try a Diplomacy check (DC 28) to convince the ombuds to go easy on the offenders.

The main risk for the players in prison is that they'll become the subject of interest from Clark's two agents, George Dessenz and Corona Huygens (see sidebar). Unless the players do something really obvious, like put in their police report the true reason they're on Io, this isn't likely to happen. Only if they foolishly made a ruckus, or spread Carlton Fisk's name around too loosely, will the agents start watching. After that, the group will find their movements constantly under observation, and if they do anything particularly egregious, Dessenz will have them arrested on some trumped-up charge. If they don't give a good story (use contested Bluff or Diplomacy checks), Dessenz calls in Huygens to probe their minds for information. As soon as it's proven that the players are here looking into the EarthForce One accident, Clark's agents will kick them off the moon and that'll be the end of this module.

George Dessenz

7th Level Human Agent
Hit Points: 20
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +6 melee or +8 ranged
Special Qualities: Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6, Skill Mastery (Sense Motive, Move Silently)
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +7, Will +5
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 15, Con 13, Int 13, Wis 16, Cha 12
Skills: Balance +12, Computer Use +11, Gather Information +11, Listen +13, Move Silently +11, Sense Motive +13, Spot +13, Technical (electronics) +11
Feats: Low-G Tolerance, Weapon Focus (PPG), Quick Draw, Point Blank Shot
Equipment: PPG

Dessenz is 52 years old and is nearing the end of his career. He's in charge of Io Security, having been placed here by Clark's regime to oversee the recovery of EarthForce One wreckage. After this operation concluded, he was left behind to ensure nobody else started snooping around. Fortunately, getting around on Io isn't easy, and the skies above the moon are off limits to unlicensed civilian craft. Thus, he's convinced that no one is ever going to be able to get to the wreckage. Even so, after intercepting Carlton Fisk, he set explosives to bury the larger piece of engine debris and is now content to keep order on Io.

Corona Huygens

7th Level Human Telepath (P11)
Hit Points: 12
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +3 melee or +5 ranged
Special Qualities: Maintain Concentration
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +2, Will +9
Abilities: Str 6, Dex 10, Con 12, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 17
Skills: Concentration +15, Intimidate +13, Knowledge (telepathy) +13, Spot +12, Telepathy +13
Feats: Combat Telepath, Defensive Block, Far Telepathy, Iron Will, Mindshredder, Nerves of Steel
Telepathic Abilities: Accidental Scan, Daze, Deep Scan, Mind Shield, Reality Fabrication, Sense Telepathy, Surface Scan, Warning
Equipment: Gloves

Corona is a white-haired 50-year-old woman who serves two masters—Psi Corps as well as President Clark. Clark, she believes, represents the inevitable future of humanity,

and although the rest of the Corps doesn't necessarily agree, they didn't object to her assignment to Io. Her main purpose here is to keep an eye out for saboteurs and terrorists who might attempt to disrupt the operation of the jump point at Io. She has joint offices on the orbital base and on the surface, spending about equal time in both places.

Under normal circumstances, Corona won't use her abilities on an unwilling subject unless they've been caught while actively investigating the wreckage of EarthForce One. In this case, she uses her Deep Scan and Reality Fabrication abilities to wrest the players' true mission out of their minds. If she succeeds, she gets the name she wants—Theresa Cross—and after some more digging discovers there's nothing else of use. Of course, if any of the players are telepaths, they can attempt to resist, and if they are also with Psi Corps, Corona will avoid making a scan in that individual's presence.

Of course, as soon as the players visit the Pierce homestead, this will set off alarms in Dessenz's office. He immediately begins investigating the players, learning where they came from and finally setting up the final encounter.

Encounter Seven: The Pierce Homestead

Eventually, from one source or another, the players either discover or discern the need to visit the Pierces. They can get the name from Michael Seagate, or figure it out after a trip on Io Guided Tours. Any map of the Io Colony will show the distant Pierce homestead is the closest one to the buried chunk of EarthForce One's engines.

The problem is, one can't simply hop on board a transport pod and zip out to the Pierces' small dome. They can attempt to place a call at the Comm Centre, but when Sheldon Pierce answers, he immediately denies permission to anyone asking to pay him a visit. The only way the players can possibly convince him to let them come is with a colossal bluff of some sort, at a –10 penalty since Sheldon has already been forewarned. If the players try and fail twice, repeated attempts will get them reported to Io Security—and Sheldon Pierce doesn't hesitate to warn them about this on the second try.

After that, the only way they can get to the Pierces' place is through physical means—hot-wiring a transport tube with a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 20), or hiring Malcolm McKearns to fly them out there in one of his converted Friggas. McKearns will want 500 credits for this, and he won't hang around afterwards, either.

Sheldon Pierce

10th Level Human Worker
Hit Points: 28
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +8 melee or +7 ranged
Special Qualities: Blue Collar
Saves: Fort +11, Ref +7, Will +3
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 15, Con 15, Int 11, Wis 10, Cha 10
Skills: Appraise +13, Drive +15, Knowledge (geology) +13, Profession (miner) +17, Spot +13, Technical (mechanical) +13
Feats: Endurance, Great Fortitude, Low-G Tolerance, Lightning Reflexes, Toughness
Equipment: Mining equipment and tools, pickaxe, PPG rifle

Sheldon Pierce is 39 years old. As owner and operator of the Pierce homestead, he is effectively lord and ruler of his little chunk of the universe. The mining dome houses himself, his wife Betty, his daughters Emily and Rebecca, and his two young sons Luke and Mark. By day, Sheldon operates mining equipment in the caves beneath his dome, scraping up all manner of ores into a collection tank that sorts them for later sale. Every now and then he comes across a few diamonds or emeralds, earning him enough money to buy his family a nice meal instead of the usual soup and gruel. He dreams of the big score—a vein of Quantium-40 that would let him pay off the homestead at last and purchase an education for his children.

To Sheldon, his family is everything. The loss of Marshall was a crippling blow that even today threatens to tear his family apart, and he cannot—will not—allow that. He's certain that Marshall's involvement with Carlton Fisk is what led to his death. Any attempt by the players to bring up the subject of Fisk makes him angry and upset. The only way the players can convince him to help them is with force, or to prove that President Santiago was assassinated. If they do this, they can say Marshall's death was for a reason, and that, at least, will bring Sheldon some peace.

The Pierce home is a small double-walled dome covering a reinforced house with an earthquake-resistant foundation. The building has six bedrooms, a single bath, a kitchen, and a spacious living room. Naturally, there are few decorations or furnishings, and those that do exist are well secured against quakes. There's a seldom-used docking port at the end of a transport tube, and a huge garage filled with mining tools, repair equipment, and the like. There's also a two-man crawler and a core mining machine—a vehicle rather like a large drill on treads, with a collection basket in the back. Entry to the garage is made through a huge airlock, and there's also a man-sized emergency airlock on the outside of the dome. Players can force their way into

the dome through the outside entrances with a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 20), but unless they manage to hide their efforts, both the Pierces and Io Security will be notified of the attempt.

If the players do approach from outside, they can attempt to cut the power to the Pierce homestead's security alarms. Doing so requires a Search check (DC 18) to locate the proper cables and a Technical (electronics) check (DC 21) to do the deed. If they accomplish this, they can break into the house without fear of Io Security getting a frantic call from the Pierces. However, Clark's agents will still find out—they are automatically warned whenever anything happens at the homestead.

Regardless of the means the players use to enter the home, Sheldon Pierce orders his family to lock themselves in their rooms while he defends the house using his PPG rifle. He won't immediately open fire, but instead demands the invaders leave at once. He tells them he's already called for security. If the group attacks, they can easily subdue or kill Pierce if they wish, although he resists to the bitter end, believing he's defending his family even unto death.

More than likely, the players will attempt to parley with Pierce. They could go about this several ways, but the best possibility is the truth. Only if they explain why they're here and why their son died will Sheldon be moved. Otherwise, the players must intimidate or bluff him into submission, or use telepathy to subdue him. The best means of intimidation is to threaten his family, although a promise to destroy his home or something similar will also work. However, in any of these cases, he'll do nothing to help them unless they literally force him to do so at gunpoint.

Should the players explain their situation and what they're looking for, Sheldon gives in and admits that Carlton Fisk did indeed come to the homestead a month ago. Fisk promised Marshall that he'd take him off of Io and set him up with a new life on Earth, and it wound up getting him killed. What promises can the players make to ensure the same thing doesn't happen to Sheldon or the rest of his family? The players will need to come up with a good answer to that question to elicit any further aid from Sheldon. The best answer is that they'll set things up so it looks like the Pierces cooperated only at gunpoint, but the players can also promise to spirit the Pierces away from Io—Alison Fernandez will be able to back up that claim with assurances that Theresa Cross has set up new identities for people on many similar occasions. Other solutions might also present themselves, depending on the players' ingenuity.

In any event, once Sheldon has been mollified, he'll finally answer some questions. The players can also get these answers more forcefully, or through telepathy, but of course the truth is preferable.

'What did Fisk do while he was here?' 'He gave us 200 credits as fair value for rental of my core miner, and Marshall took him out to look over the wreck. While he was there, Fisk got out of the vehicle in a pressure suit and wandered around for a while. When he came back, he was really excited.'

'What did Fisk find in the wreckage?' 'He didn't show me. He said it was for my protection not to say. It was in some kind of sealed case and locked it up tight.'

'So you have no idea what it was?' 'No, but it seemed damned important. I don't think he showed Marshall either, but I guess we'll never know.'

'Can you take us to the wreckage now?' 'Yes, but it'll take a couple of hours to get there in the core miner. I'd take the crawler, but there was a collapse in the tunnels after Security visited the place a few weeks ago. The only way you can get to it now is in the miner.'

'Security visited the wreck?' 'Yes, but they didn't tell us why. I only know about it because I saw a couple of VTOLs fly over. I went out in the crawler to see, but they didn't stay long. A couple of days later I went out there again, and the whole cavern had collapsed in on itself. Probably after one of the big quakes.'

'Did Fisk tell you anything else before he left?' 'When we got back here, he was thanking me and telling Marshall he'd start working on his reward, and that's when I got a docking ping on the transport tube. Another pod was coming in, this time with security guards. Fisk got really agitated and jumped into the pod that brought him here, speeding off in a big hurry. The last thing he asked me was if I had any way to contact someone offworld. I said the only place to do that was at the Comm Centre. I suppose that's where he went next.'

'What did the box look like?' 'It was long and flat, about three feet by two feet by maybe six inches. There was some kind of super-advanced lock on it. He warned me that if I tried opening it, the whole thing would blow up in my face. Not that I believed him, of course. He did say he didn't have the key—if that's true, he must've hidden it someplace before he came here.'

'Did the guards come looking for the box?' 'Yes, they searched my whole damn homestead for it, but it wasn't here, like I told them. Fisk left with it slung under his arm, and that's the Gospel truth.'

At this point, the players can depart, following the lead to check the Comm Centre—especially if they found the numbers in Fisk's original room, which would then suggest which kiosk Carlton used to make the call to Theresa Cross. This will put them one step ahead of Io Security.

Alternately, they can try to visit the wreck using the core miner. If they do this, however, there are two problems. The first is that the miner only fits 4 people, forcing at least one party member (in a normal-sized group) to stay behind. The second is that George Dessenz has already dispatched a team of six security guards to the homestead. These guards arrive about an hour after the players first reach Pierce's home, and the building receives a warning alarm five minutes before this happens. This permits the players a chance to get away in the returning transport pod (or other vehicle) if they move quickly. However, anyone in the miner has nowhere to go once this happens. There isn't enough fuel to get the mining vehicle anywhere else but back to the homestead. Thus, the escaping players will have to arrange a rescue, either with the *Liberty's Fortune* or with one of the 'Eyes of Io' operated by Io Guided Tours.

Should the players undertake a trip on the core miner, use the stats shown on the sidebar for that vehicle. The trip to the engine piece takes an hour and a half, and digging to its location takes another twenty minutes. From there, the players can exit the miner and explore the shattered wreck, which looks like a pile of tangled, useless debris. Inside one exposed section, however, it's possible to find the residue of an explosive device. Locating this requires a Search check (DC 26) coupled with a Technical (mechanical), Knowledge (astrophysics), or Knowledge (structural engineering) check (DC 24) to spot the offending item and recognise it as out of place. Players can't take 20 on the Search check because doing so will take far longer than their air supply will last. Unfortunately, even if they locate and identify the object as an explosive, there's no real way to prove it was used to destroy EarthForce One. Still, it's something.

Core Miner: This vehicle, about the size of a large ground car, is shaped like a cylinder with a huge drill on the front end and tracks on all four sides along the body. The rear possesses a containment section designed to open up and capture ores scraped off the sides of a tunnel. Think about Jules Verne's 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth,' only on a somewhat smaller scale and designed to collect rocks rather than just penetrate them. The vehicle isn't very fast, but doesn't need speed for its normal duties. The interior is completely enclosed and protected against hostile environments, and can seat four comfortably for journeys of up to six hours.

While burrowing, the core miner can travel only forward or in extremely slow turns. Because the tunnel it digs tends to collapse in behind its body, the core miner can't go in reverse and must dig a new path out of the area it's presently mining. The drill on the front can only penetrate crumbling or volcanic rock similar to that found on Io, not solid bedrock or formed metal. The vehicle possesses sensors capable of detecting impenetrable rock or open spaces up to 60 feet ahead, so the pilot is almost never in danger of getting trapped underground.

Statistics: Gargantuan Surface Vehicle; hp 50; DV 6 (–4 size); DR 10; Speed 5 (burrow 2); Acc 1; Dec 1; Han +0; Sensor +2; Stealth 2, Cargo 2,500 lb. (in rear compartment); 1 driver, 3 passengers.

Once the players are finished at the wreckage site, they discover upon returning to the homestead that six guards are waiting for them. Hopefully, anyone left behind will be able to warn the others that a fight is inevitable. Those waiting can either return to Mount Jove in the other transport pod (where they will have to find a place to hide), try to fight the guards on their own, or board the Pierces' crawler to await the players' return. Other less savoury options include using the Pierce family as human shields against the guards, or threatening to blow up the homestead if the guards don't retreat. These options could result in escalation and even a military response, although such things are beyond the scope of this book, and will very likely result in the players' early deaths.

With the crawler, any players separated from the main group can rendezvous with the returning core miner and then either face the guards or try making it back to the base in the vehicle. If they choose the former option, they'll have to defeat six men with the stats shown in the sidebar. In the latter case, they travel overland for some time only to meet a second crawler with four soldiers armed with PPG rifles (use the same stats except for the weapons). The players will find their vehicle under fire until they surrender. Should they escape, they can get to the base safely—otherwise, they have to either give up or resist upon reaching the base's airlock. In the latter case, any players who might've already returned to the base will be able to be there to help, along with the *Liberty's Fortune* pilot, Caitlin Schulz. Victory here leaves the players with no choice but to rush back to the ship and flee Io at top speed—any attempt to go anywhere else results in another encounter with guards.

Io Security Guards

1st Level Human Soldiers
Hit Points: 9
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: Damage Resistance 4
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +2, Will –1
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 10, Wis 8, Cha 10
Skills: Balance +4 (cross-class), Climb +5, Jump +5
Feats: Weapon Focus (PPG), Low-G Tolerance, Electrical Tolerance, Endurance
Equipment (indoors): PPG Model 10, flak jacket
Equipment (outdoors): PPG rifle, flak jacket, pressure suit

These guards work for Io Security, but are also handpicked for their loyalty to George Dessenz and by association President Clark. They won't listen to any explanations about evidence that President Santiago's death was an assassination. Other guards encountered later in the module—such as while trying to get back to the ship—might be swayed by such arguments, if the players succeed in a Diplomacy check (DC 19). Otherwise, all Io guards use the same stats shown here.

Incidentally, if the Games Master enjoys a bit of high drama, the middle of this fight would be the perfect time to toss in one of Io's frequent earthquakes.

Encounter Eight: Leaving So Soon?

At some point, the players will decide it's time to leave. They might feel like they've done all they can. Perhaps they have the explosive residue collected from the engine wreckage, or perhaps they even have the ultimate evidence—the sealed case taken from the Comm Centre.

In general, getting the latter item should require, at a minimum, a complete search of Fisk's old hotel room followed by a trip to the Pierce homestead, where Sheldon Pierce unwittingly provides the vital clue. The correct communications booth, of course, is #102, the same number found scrawled underneath Fisk's desk. The kiosks aren't visibly numbered, but a player can find the proper one by simply asking an attendant or by performing a Computer Use check (DC 13) on several booths until he zeroes in on the proper spot. Once there, a Search check (DC 18) locates a long, flat box secreted underneath and behind the communication monitor.

The box itself is locked with a high-tech electronic device that prevents access by anyone without the proper key. Any attempt to open it produces an audible warning that trying to pierce the electronic lock without the key results in an explosion. The key, of course, is hidden under a strip of carpet in Fisk's former hotel room, but the players will have a tough time finding it if they don't already know of its existence. Breaking the seal without the key requires a Technical (electronics) check (DC 40!), and anyone even starting to work on it will immediately know they've got a virtually impossible task ahead of them. Should an attempt fail, the box explodes, causing 6d6 damage to everyone within 30 feet and destroying the evidence located within.

Note that if Alison Fernandez is present, she'll tell the players that they don't necessarily need to open the box—Theresa Cross will probably have the means, so all they really have to do is deliver it to her as is. If, of course, they don't mind taking the risk that the container is empty or doesn't have the evidence Theresa wants.

In any event, when the players go to depart, it's extremely likely that Clark's agents will be waiting for them in the hangar bay. They can be aware of the players' actions through any of a number of means, including informants reporting their activities at the Deep Caves, or hidden alarms located on the Pierce homestead. Thus, the players may well find themselves surprised to find a group of guards waiting, backed up by the white-haired George Dessenz. Be sure to alter the following box text as required to set up the scene, depending on which direction the players took to get here.

Just ahead, you see the hangar bay and the doors to the docking port where the Liberty's Fortune awaits. Everything seems quiet as your group moves along. You're confident that at this point, your escape is assured and your mission is over. But then, the doors slide open and you come to a halt. Standing there before you are several guards with weapons at the ready. Behind them, a uniformed man with white hair waits with a smile. 'Surrender at once,' he orders, 'or we'll open fire!'

Unless the players have deliberately broken the law, Dessenz and Huygens will be reluctant to use anyone other than loyal guardsmen to make the arrest. This limits the final showdown to 6 guards, or at most 4 if the players have already fought and defeated some opposition on their way to the ship. The players may also have Sheldon Pierce with them, hoping to take his family to a better life somewhere else, or Mindy Ryszek if she's involved in a romantic relationship with one of the players. Their only options are to flee immediately, attack, or surrender.

Surrender: If the players surrender, the module is basically over, unless some members of the group aren't present and can attempt a rescue. Anyone who was arrested has his property seized and is deported from Io on the next transport back to Babylon 5. If they had any evidence in their possession that points towards Santiago's assassination—such as the box from the Comm Centre—they're instead killed. (In this case Alison Fernandez, if present, will warn the players that surrender in this case is tantamount to death.)

Flight: If the players flee, they don't really have anywhere to hide on the station. Their best bet is to flee onto Io's surface where the *Liberty's Fortune* can pick them up. Getting to the surface can be accomplished either by taking a transport tube back to the Pierce homestead or by getting into one of the 'Eyes of Io' to rendezvous with the ship later on. Other options may also occur to the players. As they flee, a running gun battle will likely result with the players and Dessenz's guards.

Combat: The final option, attack, is probably the most likely. George Dessenz begins by parleying, trying to convince the players to give up right then and there. He doesn't have a weapon out, and holds up his hands in a non-threatening, almost inviting manner. 'You have no other choice,' he tells the group. 'You have nowhere to go. Even if you get onto your ship, there's no way the airlocks will open for you now.'

This is actually a significant problem, but there are two ways around it. One is if Mindy has fallen in love with one of the players. If so, she'll do anything to help out, including using her powers of sex appeal to convince the officer in charge to let the *Liberty's Fortune* go. The players have to think of this in advance, however. Otherwise, the *Fortune's* pilot, Caitlin, will have already made surreptitious 'arrangements' (i.e., computer hacking) to get the doors to open on command. Dessenz is so convinced that the players have nowhere to go that he doesn't even consider escape as a possibility, and if he survives the showdown, he'll be so stunned to see the ship escape that he won't be able to summon military help until the players reach the jump gate.

Should the players fight, use the stats for Dessenz and Huygens, along with the requisite number of security guards from Encounter Seven. During the battle, Huygens uses her Daze telepathic ability while the others open up with PPGs. Caitlin Schulz will come to the players' aid, opening fire on the enemy's rear with her own weapon, but upon doing so two guards will rush the ship, forcing her to close the hatch once again. If the fight lasts more than 10 rounds, 2d6 additional guards will come into the fray, charging from down the docking port's long hallway. A Spot check (DC 10) or Listen check (DC 10) notices them, but anyone still in combat or inside the docking bay suffers a –5 penalty on these rolls. Basically, the extra guards prevent the players from wasting too much time looting the bodies of anyone they dispatch.

After the battle ends, the victorious players can board *Liberty's Fortune*, at which point Caitlin activates the hangar doors and the pinnace makes its escape. She orders everyone into crash couches to prepare for combat, but to everyone's amazement, the ship reaches the jump gate without any further incident or challenges.

AFTERMATH

After this escape, the players reach Babylon 5 a few days later. If they left the base without incident (which is generally likely only if their mission failed), they can land with no trouble. However, if they ran afoul of Clark's agents, the *Liberty's Fortune* is met by a flight of Starfuries immediately upon exiting the jump gate. The ship is escorted back to Babylon 5 where the players are all placed under arrest. The ship is impounded and searched, and any items of evidence the players collected are taken away.

Shortly thereafter, Sheridan and Garibaldi interview the group and ask for an explanation. Talia Winters, surprisingly, isn't present. Garibaldi insists that the players respond truthfully so that a telepath's intervention won't be necessary. The two then both listen to the players' tale of what happened on Io, and what they found while they were there—if anything. If they discovered any wreckage or Fisk's box (opened or not), Garibaldi produces these items and asks if these are what the players are referring to. Upon receiving confirmation, he and Sheridan exchange nods.

After nodding to each other, Captain Sheridan rises from his seat. 'I was afraid of that,' he explains. 'For some time we've heard occasional rumours that Santiago's death might not have been an accident. I'm not sure these items, or your word of honour, proves this is the case, but they're certainly strong evidence in favour of this theory. I have to tell you, the authorities on Io were quite adamant that you be arrested upon returning here, but I don't think any crime has actually been

committed. The charges against you were theft (plus possibly murder, flight from justice, etc.), *but I don't think we're ready to release the full story of your little quest to the public just now. Therefore, Mr. Garibaldi and I are going to arrange a 'trial"—he says the word with his fingers making little quotation marks in the air—'and pronounce you guilty, but the sentence will be suspended pending further investigation. Further investigation, I might add, that will never take place. Is that acceptable?'*

After the players agree: *At that, he nods and pushes your belongings across the table. 'All of this happens under one condition, of course. You must keep quiet about what you know for now, since we don't know if it's true. If it is, the only reason this Theresa Cross person would've wanted this evidence is if she's on the right side, so it's all right to give it to her. I do have one recommendation for you, though—don't plan any more trips to Io in the near future!'*

After this, the players are released. They can do what they will with any evidence they've managed to collect. Theresa Cross, it seems, is waiting for them on Babylon 5 and has left messages in the players' quarters asking to meet at once. If the players do go, and hand over whatever evidence they found, she gives them their reward and thanks them profusely for their help. She looks simultaneously relieved to know the truth and upset at the confirmation she received. (Note: In the event the players hand over only Fisk's unopened box, Theresa takes it and departs, promising to transfer the reward money should the contents prove worthy. This she does three days later, along with a private message to each participant that what they found did, indeed, prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that President Santiago was assassinated.)

Additionally, Theresa lives up to her promise to Alison Fernandez, taking her aside privately and revealing the long-awaited truth: IPX agents arranged for her dismissal from the Diplomatic Corps. They did this because Ambassador Sullivan specifically asked them to do so—Theresa doesn't know why, but assumes he just didn't like her for some reason and wanted her removed. IPX agreed to his terms because they were able to then gain their services for themselves. Thus, in a sense, Alison has been working for the enemy all this time. Theresa then asks Alison to work alongside her in a new task—fighting an underground battle against President Clark and anything his vile hand has touched. This, naturally, includes IPX—so Alison readily agrees, and departs the station with Theresa immediately.

Other Possible Post-Module Events

Pierce Haven: If the players left Io with Sheldon Pierce and his family, the ex-miners depart the station aboard the *Liberty's Fortune* with Theresa Cross, who promises to take them somewhere else in the Earth Alliance and give them all new identities. Where they wind up isn't relevant to the scenario, and in fact, Theresa won't tell them unless some pressing need later arises. One way this might happen is if some of Pierce's family remains on Io and require 'additional rescuing.' In this case, the location of the Pierces' new home is up to the Games Master.

A Blushing Bride? If the players brought Mindy back to the station, what happens is totally up to the player who led her there. Mindy wants an adventurous husband, and one of the players will certainly fill that role. Mindy could become a permanent non-player character, or even a player's wife, if the romance continues. She's not a stay-at-home kind of person, though. If the player leaves her behind during an adventure, she probably won't be waiting for him when he comes back.

Once and Future Enemies: If the players fought Clark's agents on Io and left them alive, Dessenz and Huygens become permanent enemies of the group. Dessenz is forced to retire on Io, and Huygens is recalled to Psi Corps where she receives a demotion and reprimand. Both could reappear in the campaign at some future point seeking vengeance. In addition to this, the players also become known to President Clark's other agents, which could have other consequences later on.

Suggested Experience For This Module

Searching Carlton Fisk's hotel room: 100
Playing poker with Michael Seagate: 100
Using the Io Guided Tours to check out the wreckage: 100
Getting onto the Pierce homestead: 100
Convincing Sheldon Pierce to help the players despite what happened to his son: 200
Collecting evidence directly from the engine wreckage: 300
Defeating Dessenz and Huygens in the final battle (as opposed to running or surrendering): 200
Reneging on a promise to help the Pierce family after acquiring their aid: –300
Returning Fisk's evidence to Theresa Cross: 800 (opened or unopened)

Module Three: Requiem for the Dilgar

This is not a good time. Enemies are far more numerous than allies. I need to make friends in any way I can. I must seek others, and I must reach beyond the normal borders. I must, as my associates in the corporations say, 'think outside the box.'

Fortunately, just such an opportunity has presented itself…

Module Summary
- A freighter crew drops off an amnesiac on Babylon 5
- The players have an opportunity to interview and scan this 'John Doe'
- John Doe walks out of Medlab and disappears, and the players are asked to help find him
- The players track Doe to Brown Seven, and he is identified as a Dilgar named Lac'Zon
- The players must fight a Drazi hunt team assigned to capture or kill Lac'Zon
- Lac'Zon is released and the players are asked to observe his movements
- Theresa Cross arrives and asks Alison Fernandez to try making an alliance with Lac'Zon's people
- Lac'Zon goes to meet his own people on Mitoc
- Drazi commandos attack the meeting on the ground
- A Drazi ship attacks the Dilgar and Earth forces in a three-way space battle

Names and Places of Interest
- John Doe: Anonymous name given to mysterious amnesiac
- *Even Steven:* Belt Alliance ship that disappeared in 2257
- Alvin Seale: Belt Alliance crewman, vanished in 2257, whose uniform is worn by John Doe
- Comac: Brakiri system where John Doe was recovered floating in space
- Lac'Zon: Dilgar agent sent to Babylon 5 to gather information
- Jamison Phillips: Drug pusher who fights the players in Downbelow
- Elshadaz: Drazi who saw Lac'Zon entering Brown Seven
- Mitoc: Mostly dead planet where Lac'Zon meets up with his recovery team
- Jal'Maris: Dilgar friend of Lac'Zon who arrives to take him home
- *Demeter*: Hyperion that arrives to help the players
- *Feeder of the Flame*: Dilgar Ochlavita Destroyer that arrives to help the Dilgar
- *Tol'kani*: Drazi ship that arrives to destroy the Dilgar

The tale of Jha'Dur's death at the hands of the Vorlons as she departed Babylon 5 spread like wildfire through the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Within less than a month, the story had reached every corner of known space. There were celebrations on the Brakiri, Drazi, and other capitals of nations who had lost millions at the hand of this cruel and unscrupulous taskmistress. The day she was at last brought to justice became a holiday for a great many cultures.

They were not the only ones who heard the tale, however. In the midst of a backwater system, within an asteroid field surrounded by a deadly radiation belt, a small Dilgar outpost has survived to the present day. On this station, approximately 250 survivors of a now-dead race remain hidden from the rest of the galaxy, fully aware that were they to make an appearance anywhere in the civilized territories, they would be captured, questioned, and executed in any of a number of terrible ways. For twenty-six-plus years now, they have been content to remain in hiding, scavenging and raiding on occasion to gain enough resources to eke out their sheltered existence. For that time, they have believed they are the last of their people in the universe.

Until Jha'Dur, that is. With her return, these survivors have now begun to believe that perhaps more of their kind survived the war. What if a fleet of ships escaped and is now hiding on the rim? What if a distant colony was founded prior to the destruction of Omelos and still remains undiscovered? For these lonely Dilgar, marooned on a listening post whose purpose has long since become moot, they now have more hope than they have enjoyed in the last two decades.

But how can this last bastion of a once-proud race make contact with any other survivors, if they even exist? They cannot simply send out a message, which could be traced. Nor can they visit frontier worlds, because if they are caught and recognized, they not only bring themselves a swift death, but could lead others back to the last of their kind in their desolate outpost. No, there must be a central location somewhere—a base where any other Dilgar survivors would be most likely to visit. A gathering place where members of dozens or even hundreds of other races meet regularly, so that another arrival would barely be noticed. A site where a Dilgar in disguise could slip in easily and remain undetected.

Fortunately, as these desperate survivors have just now realized, there is such a base. The very same base where Jha'Dur met her end. The name of the place is Babylon 5.

Suggested Level for This Module: 4-6 4th level characters

Between Modules

This module takes place over a period of several weeks on Babylon 5. The only off-station time comes near the end, in the final few encounters. Thus, events that are happening 'between' modules can also happen as this one unfolds. Some suggestions are listed here, while the Games Master can also come up with more of his own.

Link to 'The Coming of Shadows'

In this episode, the aging Centauri emperor makes a state visit to Babylon 5. During his visit, he collapses, and while on his deathbed makes an apology to G'Kar for all the wrongs the Centauri have levelled on his people in the last few decades. Shortly thereafter, a Narn base is attacked and wiped out by Ambassador Mollari's secret allies, the Shadows. The Emperor dies, whispering a final warning to Mollari. G'Kar goes berserk and tries to kill Mollari, but is talked out of it by Captain Sheridan.

During the early stages of this episode, a nosy reporter named Tania Lancaster pops up on the station and tries to arrange for an interview with the Centauri Emperor. At first, she tries to set up the meeting through Ambassador Mollari, before the Emperor even arrives. A Centauri player who is part of the diplomatic staff will have to deal with this pushy, annoying woman who refuses to take no for an answer. She'll try anything—bribery, complements, tantrums, whatever it takes to get the player to agree. Should she convince him to set up the interview, Mollari angrily vetoes the idea and lambastes his unfortunate underling for being so brainless. The Emperor is in no shape to grant interviews to every reporter who comes along!

Tania Lancaster

5th Level Human Diplomat/4th Level Reporter
Hit Points: 15
Initiative: +0
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +3 melee or +3 ranged
Special Qualities: Contact x3, Journalistic Sense, Sex Appeal
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +2, Will +8
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 11, Con 8, Int 14, Wis 11, Cha 17
Skills: Appraise +10, Bluff +15, Computer Use +14, Diplomacy +19, Forgery +10, Gather Information +19, Knowledge (personalities) +14, Intimidate +15, Listen +14, Sense Motive +15, Spot +14
Feats: Nerves of Steel, Alertness, Stubborn, Iron Will, Skill Focus (Diplomacy)
Equipment: None

Tania is an up-and-coming reporter looking to make a name for herself by interviewing as many important personalities as she can. She's very aggressive towards this end, and has an unfailing sense of who she needs to talk to in order to make an interview happen. She usually seems sweet and genuine at first, but if refused, she changes to more desperate tactics, and possibly even threats. She's not making a lot of friends, but considers such things unimportant.

Should the players not be involved in this initial meeting, Tania still makes the attempt and is soundly rebuffed. She doesn't give up easily, though. She continues trying to make the arrangements by speaking to other Centauri, and eventually the Ambassador complains to Security about her actions. They naturally have her banned from the docking bay, and anyplace else that the Emperor is going to be during his visit. However, Tania hears through her own connections that there's a group of troubleshooters on the station who can accomplish damn near anything. She approaches the players as they relax in the Nova Nine and offers them 1,000 credits if they can get her an interview with the Emperor.

At this point, what happens is up to the players. They may simply refuse her offer, but of course she'll try whatever she needs to if she thinks it'll help her get her way. She's definitely not above using sex appeal, either. If she gets nowhere with the group, she picks the most charismatic and attractive male human among them and tries a different tactic. She 'runs into' that person later on, alone, and explains that while she's sorry they couldn't come to terms, she has other options. Still, she thought he was interesting, and wanted to get to know him better. This proceeds to dating and possibly more, only to have her make her pitch again later on, at whatever time seems appropriate.

Should all her tactics fail, she does eventually try again, and is arrested after she tries to sneak into the Emperor's room in Medlab later on. A player who works in Medlab could be involved in this fracas, too. She shows up with a cameraman and tries to force her way past Dr. Franklin. If the player acts quickly, he can keep the two of them from bothering the dying Emperor.

If she does convince the players to help her (one way or another), Mollari is adamant that the interview not take place. The only way the players have any chance is to try to intercept the Emperor as he moves from one place to another. Centauri Guardsmen won't let any of them pass, however, and attempting to do so provokes a huge firefight. Since the players aren't likely to be foolish enough to challenge the elite of the Emperor's personal guards, stats for them haven't even been provided here, but suffice to say they would make short work of any group of medium-level players.

This is actually a very difficult scenario. The players aren't likely to succeed in arranging the interview, considering the Emperor's health and Mollari's absolute refusal to permit the meeting. The only way the players can theoretically pull it off is if they have a favour they can call in, or know someone with some significant interest or pull. Even if the players don't succeed, however, they should be rewarded for their efforts as long as they gave it the old college try.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 200

Links to 'GROPOS'

During this episode, 25,000 ground-pounders arrive on Babylon 5 and take 'shore leave' on the station. The possible side scenarios this presents are endless. Here are some possibilities:

The Stereotypical Brawl: While the players are relaxing in the Nova Nine Pub, a group of unruly soldiers start a fight. Of course, the players are there, and have to put a stop to

it before their favourite watering hole is damaged beyond recognition.

Sibling Rivalry: A sibling of one of the players is among the soldiers, and the reunion is not particularly happy. The player's brother/sister confronts him, and is then arrested for disorderly conduct. It's up to the player to bail him out.

Murderous Intent: A soldier is accused of murdering a civilian who cheated him during a card game in Downbelow. Security can't get anyone to talk, so it's up to the players to figure out what really happened. Did the soldier really do the deed, or was he framed by someone else?

The Stolen Bikes: One of the transports reports three missing Skirnir-class recon bikes (see the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*, p.165) from its inventory. Meanwhile, reports start coming in that motorcycles have been seen racing along the Central Corridor, through the Hydroponics Garden, and in other areas of Babylon 5 where wide-open spaces can be found. Security can't react fast enough to catch the fast-moving bikes, which disappear into lifts after the races and thence vanish into Downbelow.

To solve this latter encounter, a lurker or other player with connections in the underground will need to pass himself off as a skilled race driver. Bookies in Downbelow manage the races, staging runs through the station and broadcasting them using pre-placed cameras. Although the players quickly discover the location of the betting parlour—a back room of the Dark Star, located with a Gather Information check (DC 14)—finding the bikes themselves will be a much greater challenge. An undercover investigator will be carefully checked out before being allowed to try the bikes for himself.

Should the player's cover story check out, he's allowed to participate in the next race. Races are being held almost on an hourly basis, and overworked security forces just don't have the means to stop this otherwise petty crime. The next race is done along a stretch of the Central Corridor, and the undercover player learns this with just enough advance time to get the rest of his team into position to interrupt the race. As soon as they do so, however, the other two bikers flee, setting up a running high-speed chase through Babylon 5's curving interior!

If the players recover the bikes, Garibaldi pays them an appropriate reward (if necessary) and the vehicles are returned to the transport. The GROPOS, however, aren't very happy with the players, for watching the bike races was a lot of fun. A brawl or two may be the result…if the players don't hide until the soldiers finally ship off.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 150

Encounter One: The Amnesiac

This is an unusual module in that there's no standard 'briefing' at the beginning. By now the players may have become used to having their patron show up, give them a mission, and send them on their way. This time, the mission comes later, as a reaction to other events. If this is handled properly, the players may not even be aware that they're involved in a major module until it's halfway over!

As this scenario begins, the opening moves of the Narn-Centauri War are in full swing, but that doesn't mean the war is the only thing happening. Behind the backdrop of a steadily growing conflict, life goes on. Traders continue to ply the space lanes, and commerce is still taking place throughout the known galaxy. Except for the occasional fight between Narn and Centauri residents of Babylon 5, life on the station proceeds as it always did.

Unnoticed amidst the daily press of dockside activity, a civilian freighter arrives on its way to deliver Brakiri brandy to Vega. When the ship docks, the captain reveals to Security that they picked up a 'floater' while outbound from Comac. (A 'floater' is a life pod with its occupant in suspended animation.) The individual on board was wearing little more than a ragged uniform identifying him as a member of the Belt Alliance, but he has no memory of what happened to him. The freighter crew hands the man over to Garibaldi for processing, and he in turn delivers the unfortunate amnesiac to Dr. Franklin for examination.

Since the man cannot recall his own name, Franklin refers to him as 'Mr. Doe.' This refers to a long-standing tradition, leading back to the ancient 20th Century, in which unknown victims of serious injury are named 'John Doe' or 'Jane Doe' until identified. After a series of interviews and examinations, the doctor decides that Mr. Doe could be suffering from amnesia, but he just doesn't know enough about the man's physiology to be sure. Mr. Doe seems to have genetic markers for a variety of different races in his body, making his actual race indeterminate. Although he generally appears human except for a significant lack of body hair, he has Narn, Abbai, Brakiri, Vree, Markab, and human DNA in his system, in addition to several others Dr. Franklin can't identify (one of them is Dilgar, but this is almost impossible to detect).

John Doe

Treated as a 3rd Level Agent of an Unknown Race
Hit Points: 10
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +3 melee or +3 ranged
Special Qualities: Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +4

Abilities: Str 13, Dex 12, Con 16, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 13
Skills: Bluff +7, Computer Use +6, Escape Artist +7, Gather Information +7, Listen +6, Sense Motive +6, Speak Language (English, Narn, Centauri, Brakiri, Dilgar)
Feats: Endurance, Iron Will
Equipment: None

John Doe appears to be a mostly bald human about 55 or 60 years old, but very spry for his age. He has no memory of any of his skills or abilities, such as Computer Use or Escape Artist. Should he need to use them, he does so instinctively, and wonders afterwards just how he was able to accomplish such a feat. The English language is second nature to him, and in this persona he does not realize he actually knows any other tongue. However, should he hear anyone speaking any of the other listed languages, he recognises the words and discovers he can converse with that individual like a native.

Medical Interaction

It's very unlikely that a player will be involved in the actual arrival of Mr. Doe on Babylon 5. Basically, the crew of the freighter *Raphael's Masterpiece* calls ahead as they're landing to have a medical team standing by for a delivery. A sedated John Doe is then handed over to Security and sent straight to Medlab. Unless the player happens to be on duty in the docking bay at the time, they won't have any reason to be notified of Doe's arrival, which isn't very big news—what with the war and all.

Players learn of the amnesiac's presence at this early stage only if they're working in the dock or are in Medlab for some reason when Doe is delivered there. If an injured player is in Medlab recovering from wounds from a previous scenario, this would be a perfect time to begin this module. Also, a player with medical background might be present in Dr. Franklin's office area while Mr. Doe is first examined, or perhaps shortly after he arrives.

Any player in Medlab (for whatever reason) on this first day has a chance to look at any of the numerous scans and tissue tests made on the mysterious new arrival. In the event the player is a doctor, and is called upon to identify DNA samples, such an action requires a successful Medical check (DC 20). If this is successful, the player recognizes that multiple racial DNA samples are present, one of which is clearly human. A further Medical check (DC 25) is required for each of the five other racial types that can be identified (Narn, Abbai, Brakiri, Vree, and Markab). Following this, a successful Medical check (DC 40) can discern Krish, Mitoc, and Dilgar DNA, but this level of success should be beyond the reach of most players.

In addition to the DNA, a player who examines the scans of Mr. Doe's body, and succeeds in a Medical check (DC 18), will notice a faint residual radiation signature that can't be identified. A further Medical check (DC 22) reveals that this radiation is not harmful, and seems to be a product of the natural environment of the man's homeworld. Although the signature produces a faint interference on medical scans, this can be easily corrected. (Actually, this radiation is a potential clue to the location of the Dilgar outpost, but the players probably won't realise this until much later, if at all. If there is no doctor among the players, Dr. Franklin should mention the presence of the radiation at some point, but keep it low-key, as if it were of little importance.)

If any of the players is a doctor or has another professional reason to hang around in Medlab, he'll get a chance to talk to John Doe after he awakens. Doe speaks willingly, but shakily, as if always constantly struggling to dig deeply into memories he can no longer access. Here are the answers to some common questions the players might think of:

'Do you remember your name?' 'No. They've started calling me Mr. Doe, and for now, I'm content to go with that.'

'What do you remember?' 'Very little. Sometimes I catch glimpses of men in dark blue uniforms. They were shouting orders. Something very bad was happening. I remember a fire, I think. Bright lights, anyway. Was my ship destroyed? I don't know.'

'Did you get in the lifepod, or did somebody put you there?' 'I can't remember. Sometimes I think I remember crawling into something that could've been a capsule, but it's all very hazy.'

'What would you do now if you were allowed to leave Medlab?' 'I don't know. I have no memory of what I like or dislike. I suppose first I'd go eat some foods and watch some vids. Maybe then I'd start to remember who I was. Dr. Franklin says I should stay here tonight, though, and that's fine with me. If I go out wandering around, I could get lost.'

Other Questions: The players can ask any of a number of other questions, such as 'How is it you have Narn DNA?' or 'Where did you learn English?' Doe always responds that he doesn't know. If the players continue badgering him, Dr. Franklin comes back over and asks them to stop. Then he sedates Doe and tells the players to let the poor man rest.

Telepath Interaction

Another obvious means of examination is to employ a telepath to scan Mr. Doe. A player telepath will be called upon to do this if available; otherwise, Talia Winters or any other commercial telepath can be used for this role. If the players don't have a telepath among them, they will have to specifically request or suggest Talia's presence—she won't bother unless the players insist or recommend she perform a scan.

Mr. Doe will not initially resist any telepathic ability, as long as the offer is made up front with the stated purpose of helping him with his amnesia. A surface scan will reveal that he's telling the truth, as far as he knows it. A deep scan will show nothing but dead areas where information

seems to be missing, as though from brain damage. Mr. Doe will last for three rounds of deep scans before falling unconscious from subdual damage, but he remains 'out' for only five rounds following the termination of the scan and recovers quickly.

While a player is performing a deep scan, he may attempt to locate the reason for the missing information. If this is done before Mr. Doe falls unconscious, the player may make a single Telepathy check (DC 25). Upon a success, he discovers that telepathic alterations have been made in Mr. Doe's mind, although the nature of those modifications is unknown. If anything, the changes resemble those done during a mindwipe, or total personality replacement. The obvious conclusion now is that someone did this to Mr. Doe deliberately, but the reason or the changes remains a mystery at this stage.

Should the player fail to succeed in this check, they learn only that something is 'wrong' about Mr. Doe's mind, but the nature of the 'wrongness' cannot be determined. The weakened Mr. Doe refuses further attempts at deep scans because they are causing him great pain, and if scans are forced upon him, they reveal nothing more.

If Talia (or another commercial telepath) is performing the scan, she won't go so far as to attempt this check unless the players specifically ask her to do so. This is the sort of information the players must acquire on their own initiative—it won't be freely given.

End of Day One

After the day passes, Dr. Franklin decides that the mysterious amnesiac is no threat and leaves him in a private, unguarded room. The next morning, Franklin intends to anaesthetise Mr. Doe and perform an operation to inspect his cerebral cortex for damage. Some time that night, however, the patient disappears. No one saw him leave. Apparently, he just decided to get up and walk out, and nobody noticed. Mr. Garibaldi puts out an all-points bulletin on Mr. Doe, but security forces cannot locate him.

Encounter Two: Investigations

Depending upon the players' nature, they may or may not actually participate in this encounter. If the players have no connection with Security or Medlab, they might well not even hear about Doe unless they read the 'Universe Today' article about him. After reading that particular feature, interested players might inquire further. This isn't required, however. Players don't actually need to participate in Encounter One or Encounter Two in order to continue with the rest of the module, although if possible, they should be given every opportunity to get involved.

Interviewing Security

After Doe disappears, University Today reporters pick up on the story and publish the article shown in the Appendix, along with a photo of the mysterious man. This is the most likely way the players find out about him. By this point, the chance to interview him has been lost, but other sources of information are available. Also, a lurker or other uninvolved player might actually have an encounter with Doe without realising it. See Encounter Four.

In any case, upon learning of Mr. Doe's existence, inquisitive types will likely think of Security as the first place to go start the interview process. This is appropriate for those who frequently look into mysteries or take on detective work, but they need to have good reputations in order to tap this source of data. A Diplomacy check (DC 15 or higher) may be required if the players aren't well known or have dubious reputations.

In any event, if the players visit Security, they can speak to Zack Allen, who will answer the following questions:

'Where'd they find this Doe guy?' 'He was found floating in a lifepod by the civilian freighter *Raphael's Masterpiece*. He was in the Comac system at the time.'

'Where did the freighter dock?' 'Bay A-16, one of the freighter ports.'

'Any identifying marks on or in the pod?' 'The pod, and Doe's uniform, were Belt Alliance designs, but we don't know what ship.'

'Isn't it unusual to not know what ship?' 'Yes, most pods have identifying marks and serial numbers, but this one looked like it got fried by some significant heat. All those things were burned off the outside, and the inside just looks like any common escape pod.'

'Was Doe okay?' 'He was suffering from amnesia, but otherwise, I think he checked out. Ask Dr. Franklin.'

'Did he talk at all?' 'Yeah, but he didn't say a lot. Like I said, he had amnesia. Last night, he just wandered off, and nobody knows where he went.'

'Did a telepath scan him?' 'I don't know. Ask in Medlab.'

'What happened with the DNA check? Did that identify him?' 'I don't know. You'll have to ask Dr. Franklin.'

'What happened to the ship that found him?' 'They're already gone, bound for Vega. Mr. Garibaldi didn't see any reason to hold them up just because they were kind enough to drop off a drifter.'

'Can we see the lifepod?' The players should make a Diplomacy check (DC 16). If this fails, Allen refuses, but on a success, he grudgingly agrees. 'Go ahead, if you want. They've got it locked away down in cargo bay A-16. I'll call ahead and let 'em know to let you in.'

Other Questions: The players may also think of other queries, but the above represents the sum total of Zack Allen's knowledge on the subject. Other requests will be directed to Dr. Franklin in Medlab.

The Lifepod

The pod is stored adjacent to docking port A-16, in a small cargo storage bay. A single roving guard has his eye on the area. Players visiting the hangar without permission to investigate the pod will need to make a Bluff check opposed by the guard's Sense Motive skill of +6. Success indicates they've managed to convince him that they have the right to look over the pod. Of course, if the players already have permission, the man stands aside without resistance. He does, however, insist on watching their efforts either way, just to make sure they don't take anything or damage the evidence.

The pod is essentially a bullet-shaped cylinder with a rounded tip. The whole thing is scarred, pitted, and burned as if it passed through something very hot, possibly an atmosphere. There's no window looking in, although the top can be snapped open easily enough.

Pods of this sort are cold sleep capsules designed to keep someone alive for very long periods. A player who succeeds in a Knowledge (astrophysics) or Technical (space travel) check (DC 18) realises that this pod design isn't commonly carried by Belt Alliance vessels, but are sometimes used to transport the victims of injury or disease to a location where they can receive help. If a ship was damaged or destroyed, it is conceivable that a crewman might take to one of these escape capsules to save his own life.

Although Zack Allen said there were no serial numbers visible on the pod, a player who succeeds in a Knowledge (astrophysics) or Technical (space travel) check (DC 21) remembers that Belt Alliance vehicles often inscribed serial numbers within their interior control panels. That, or a Search check (DC 23), locates the serial number of this particular pod underneath a metal slat by the sole occupant's feet.

Although the players won't be able to look up the information immediately, the serial number matches that of a pod assigned to the Belt Alliance freighter *Even Steven*, reported lost with all hands in 2257. If this information is to be acquired clandestinely, it requires a Computer Use check (DC 22) to track down this obscure detail. If the player has access to security records on the level, he can take 20 on this check. Alternately, the players can simply ask Security to look up the information for them.

In addition to searching the pod, a player may perform a highly detailed scan of the vehicle itself, looking for anomalies. Of course, he'll have to bring his own scanning equipment along. This is something that must be done by a player—security teams won't succeed on their own, and indeed, have already tried and come up with little useful information. If the scanning player succeeds in a Technical (space travel) check (DC 25), the player will note that the Comac system, where the pod was found, has an ambient cosmic radiation level far in excess of what this pod has actually endured since it presumably was released in 2257. The obvious conclusion is that Mr. Doe has not really been floating in space for two years—more like two weeks. Dr. Franklin can also confirm this later, but only if shown the evidence and asked to perform the appropriate tests.

Interviews in Medlab

Inquisitive players don't have to stop asking questions at Security—they can also go to Medlab. Of course, a player who already works or regularly visits Medlab on a professional basis will already know much of the information listed hereafter. Upon beginning to ask questions, players are directed to Dr. Franklin, who is more than happy to provide answers.

A thinking player might also wish to investigate the uniform. Dr. Franklin is more than happy to oblige, and shows the group to a locker where Doe's clothing and personal effects are stored. The players discover a torn set of rags that show evidence of fighting, mostly from several PPG burns. If the players perform a detailed examination of the uniform, the blood stains and hair samples they find don't match those of Mr. Doe. This evaluation requires a Medical check (DC 15) and must be performed with the proper medical equipment. Dr. Franklin, incidentally, hasn't bothered to investigate this possibility because it quite frankly hasn't occurred to him. Why would a floater be wearing someone else's clothes?

In any case, here are some of the questions the players might ask of Dr. Franklin. Note that the answers to these questions will be different if the players participated in Encounter One. They may already know the answers, or may have learned something in addition to these tidbits.

'Was there anything unusual about Mr. Doe?' 'Other than the amnesia? Yes. He looked human, but he had genetic markers for the Narn, Abbai, Brakiri, Vree, and Markab in his body. I have no idea why.'

'Anything else?' 'Well, he had some radiation traces in his blood, but nothing harmful. Otherwise, nothing I can think of.'

'Is John Doe human?' 'Honestly, I don't know what race he is. He could be any of those races. Human genes are clearly dominant, though. He looks and acts just like a human.'

'Did anybody make a telepathic scan of Doe?' 'No, not that I'm aware of.'

'Did he say anything interesting?' 'No, mostly he was just confused. He could speak English and recognized common objects and tools, but didn't remember anything about his identity.'

'Any idea why he left?' 'No, although I can tell you he wasn't being held here. He was in an open room. Maybe during the night he recovered some of his memories. I doubt that, though. Amnesia doesn't fade swiftly, but in bits. My guess is he had a troubling dream, or possibly had a single spark of recollection that sent him searching for more answers.'

'Is it possible he's dangerous?' 'Only to himself. I did do a full scan of his body, and he's not a walking bomb or anything, if that's what you're worried about—and if he's a saboteur, there are far better ways of sneaking onto Babylon 5 than floating in a lifepod and hoping for rescue. No, my guess is he's very confused and lost right now, and all I can do his hope he hasn't wandered into Downbelow. Otherwise, we'll be identifying his body later on.'

'Can I look at his charts or other medical information?' This requires a Diplomacy check (DC 17) unless the players are known to be friends of Dr. Franklin or someone else on the medical staff. Should Franklin agree, he hands over the medical scans, which confirm the information about the weird genetic markers, and the radiation signature. If a player has a scan of the radiation from the pod and compares it to the radiation in Doe's body—succeeding in a Medical check (DC 18) in the process—he discovers the two signatures don't match at all. Franklin is very puzzled by this, and can offer no explanation for this seeming incongruity.

'Did you know the uniform he was wearing wasn't his?' 'No, what makes you say that?' If the players turn over this information to Dr. Franklin, he makes DNA scans of the hairs and other DNA evidence on the ragged clothing and quickly agrees with their analysis. So whose DNA was it on the uniform? The answer comes from the depths of the Medlab computers: a Belt Alliance petty officer named Alvin Seale, lost along with the BAS *Even Steven* in 2257.

'So is John Doe really Alvin Seale?' 'No, I don't see how that's possible. Yes, there are some weird genetic markers in Doe's DNA, so I can't tell what race he really is, but if he were Seale, there's at least be some common ground somewhere. No, I suspect the real Alvin Seale is long gone, and for whatever reason, John Doe took his place. How, I don't know—we probably won't know until Doe gets his memory back and can tell us what happened on the *Even Steven*.'

'Did you notice that the radiation in the pod isn't appropriate for the Comac system?' 'No…you mean it isn't? How do you know that?' (The players can also get to this point by asking Franklin to check the pod's radiation against that of the Comac system.) If the players now show Franklin their scans of the pod, he studies them carefully, comparing them to Comac's known radiation, and makes the conclusion that John Doe definitely was *not* floating in Comac for years. So was he planted there? Franklin doesn't know, but urges the players to report this information to Security at once. Something strange is clearly going on.

Other: The players can ask any other questions they wish. If Franklin doesn't know the answers, he can check the medical scans to find out. For example, the players may wish to know if Doe had any brain damage (he didn't) or some other condition (none of note). The Games Master can fill in such details as he wishes, since the answers are basically irrelevant.

Encounter Three: The Search Begins

If the players haven't taken the bait provided by the Universe Today article, the final method for getting them involved in this module is with a detailed search of the station for the missing man. By this point, several days have passed since Doe vanished, and enough additional information is unearthed to mark him as a potential threat. In particular, a detailed scan of the lifepod allows Dr. Franklin to make the connection that Doe wasn't really floating in space for years, and armed with that data, he discovers the fact that Doe's Belt Alliance uniform isn't really his. Now Garibaldi's suspicious side kicks into high gear, and he guesses that the man's presence on Babylon 5 isn't an accident. An all-points bulletin is posted, which is how the players are most likely to get involved. If the players are part of Station Security, they are assigned the job of finding Doe. Otherwise, Garibaldi might hire their services for a few hundred credits. This amount later increases as further information about Mr. Doe is uncovered.

So What's Really Going On?

During the night before his disappearance, Mr. Doe (actually the Dilgar agent Lac'Zon, under cover of a carefully constructed false identity) experienced a telepathic awakening in which the time-delayed mental blocks placed on his memory fell away. Now fully aware of his mission, he waited for a gap in the nurses' rounds and simply walked out of the facility. From there, he stole a janitorial uniform from a laundry room and made his way into Downbelow, where he is attempting to locate any other Dilgar survivors lurking there. Of course, he isn't asking specifically about Dilgar, but about any mysterious individuals from an unknown race attempting to locate others of their kind. In the event this initial attempt fails, Lac'Zon's plan is to set up a monitoring facility where he can attempt to identify other Dilgar visitors to the station in the future.

One of the problems faced by Lac'Zon was actually getting on board the station. Since the Dilgar, sheltered as they were in their hidden outpost, had no information on how to create false IDs or decent cover stories, they instead took a much safer route. They surgically altered one of their own, implanted him with a telepathic block, and placed him aboard a lifepod stolen from a Belt Alliance ship they attacked and destroyed in the Tirrith system in 2257. Then, they planted the lifepod in an orbit sure to bring it into sensor range of a known commercial freighter route that had Babylon 5 as its next stop. Since Lac'Zon had what would seem to be a complete case of amnesia, it was hoped that he could simply vanish into Babylon 5's underworld.

So why didn't he just fly directly to Babylon 5? The Dilgar didn't want to take the risk. They had no identicards, so they couldn't just land and walk aboard. Stowing away on a ship would be sure to result in arrest. Lacking any knowledge of the station or its procedures, they came up with the best plan they could given the amount of information they had available. Now Lac'Zon is wandering about in Brown Sector in disguise, talking to people and surreptitiously scanning them in the process. He avoids security men and otherwise looks just like any of hundreds of other lurkers.

Starting the Investigation

After the players begin the investigation near Medlab—the last place where John Doe was sighted—the first thing they can learn is that one of the janitors lost a uniform in the laundry. (Normally, this would be a piece of data that falls under the security radar, but because someone disappeared in the vicinity, the theft report becomes more prominent.) Discovering this information requires a Gather Information check (DC 15).

From this, they know that the individual in question is dressed as a janitor. Allow the players to make several more Gather Information checks as they search the various decks for the missing Mr. Doe, but regardless of the rolls, their searches are unsuccessful. No one matching Doe's description has been noticed on Green, Red, or Blue Sectors. Eventually, the hunt will proceed to Brown Sector.

As soon as the players venture into Downbelow, they notice a janitor matching Mr. Doe's description (tall, bald, and nervous-looking). He's not Mr. Doe, though, but Jamison Phillips, a down-and-out lurker who's trying to earn passage back to Earth by selling drugs on the side. He's presently talking with a man and a woman dressed in shabby clothes, both of whom seem to be shaking or shivering for some reason. If the players are wearing Security uniforms, the two nervous-looking types flee while Jamison dumps the contents of two small vials into a bottle of cleaning fluid. This action can be noticed on a Spot check (DC 12). Jamison claims that he was just preparing to clean a spot on the nearby wall, but a suspicious player can take the vials away and examine them closely. A Medical check (DC 18), coupled with the proper equipment, identifies the liquid residue as that of the illegal drug Jump (see *The Earth Alliance Fact Book*, p.184). After this, the players have Jamison at their mercy.

If the players aren't wearing Security uniforms, or some other recognisable badge of authority, Jamison is immediately hostile as the players approach. If they say even one word to him, he draws a knife and demands they turn around and go back the way they came. His two drugged-out associates, however, interpret his weapon differently and attack, resulting in a sudden melee.

Jamison Phillips

5th Level Human Lurker
Hit Points: 16
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +5 melee or +5 ranged
Special Qualities: Lurker's Knowledge, Survivor's Luck, Multi-Skilled (Read Lips)
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +1
Abilities: Str 14, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 12, Wis 10, Cha 9
Skills: Bluff +7, Hide +10, Move Silently +10, Pick Pocket +10, Read Lips +9, Sense Motive +8, Spot +7
Feats: Endurance, Weapon Focus (knife), Run, Improved Unarmed Strike
Equipment: Knife, 2 doses of Jump, 5 packs of legal medications, janitor's outfit and supplies, 100 credit chits

Jamison is one of those few lurkers who has managed to get a job and keep it for a reasonable period of time. In the process, he's also established himself as a drug pusher, primarily selling the highly illegal substance known as Jump. So far, he's been able to remain under the radar of Security, but constantly keeps his eye out for informers. Recently, he's managed to save almost enough money to earn a passage back to Earth, so he's desperate enough to attack anyone who threatens his chances to finally escape this damned station.

Drug Addicts (2)

2nd Level Human Lurkers
Hit Points: 10
Initiative: +9 (+5 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +1 melee or +6 ranged
Special Qualities: Lurker's Knowledge, Survivor's Luck
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +5, Will –1
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 20 (modified +5 by Jump), Con 10, Int 9, Wis 8, Cha 9
Skills: Bluff +7, Hide +10, Move Silently +10, Pick Pocket +10, Spot +7
Feats: Great Fortitude, Run, Improved Initiative
Equipment: 5 knives

These two lurkers are hopelessly addicted to Jump, and in fact, have just consumed a dose they've purchased from Jamison for 50 credits each. When they aren't high, they amuse themselves by tossing darts, knives, and

other weapons. In combat, they'll throw their first four knives, saving the last one for melee combat. If Jamison is defeated, they throw one final knife and flee into the bowels of Downbelow.

If the players have already met Mr. Doe earlier in the scenario, they can recognize that Phillips is not Mr. Doe on a Spot check (DC 22); otherwise, they must contact security later to verify the truth. If they have any images of Phillips handy, they can make a comparison during the fight, but this requires a standard action. Jamison stops fighting only if the players convince him this is a case of mistaken identity—this requires a Diplomacy or Intimidate check opposed by Jamison's Sense Motive.

After the fight, the players will easily discover the two doses of Jump if they search Jamison's overalls. Depending on the players' affiliations, they can either report Jamison's crime or keep the drugs for themselves. Tracking down the drug supplier can be a side scenario in itself, or left up to Security to undertake at a later time.

If the players end the fight with the goods on Jamison, he answers their questions truthfully. He hasn't met Lac'Zon, but if the players mention a janitor's uniform, he does remember seeing an unconscious man in a nearby hallway with a janitor outfit draped over him. Jamison agrees to show them to that spot in exchange for his freedom. If the players agree, he leads them there. If they disagree, he keeps his mouth shut, although the information can be dragged out of him with an Intimidate check opposed by Sense Motive, or through telepathy. The players can also find the site on a Search check (DC 25), but must succeed on the first attempt or the unconscious man will wake up and leave the area.

If the players do find the unconscious man, he has an obvious bump on his head. A Medical check (DC 18) wakes him up, or the players can just wait half an hour for him to recover. The man's name is Ricardo Fentis, and he's actually not a resident of Downbelow. He works in Hydroponics, but has a few friends he visits occasionally in Brown Sector. This is the first time he's been mugged, because, as he freely admits, he usually carries a PPG. Whoever robbed him took not only his clothes and money, but also that weapon as well.

At this point, the search for John Doe enters the next phase. However, in the meantime, there's a chance that he might've been encountered accidentally. In fact, it's entirely possible that someone ran into him without even knowing who they were talking to.

Encounter Four: Accidental Encounters

While the players are busy searching for John Doe, Lac'Zon is meandering around Downbelow, talking to as many people as he can, but avoiding security or anyone else who looks like an authority figure. He reasons that any Dilgar hiding in the bowels of Babylon 5 won't risk their anonymity by taking any high-profile jobs or otherwise singling themselves out.

Generally, the players aren't likely to encounter Lac'Zon accidentally. The only chance of this happening is if they're as yet unaware of his presence or importance on the station. For example, if the players haven't been a part of Modules One or Two, but have a lurker in their group, he might bump into this mysterious, unnamed figure as part of his regular wanderings. If the group is split, with some members operating under 'official' channels (in Security or Medlab, for example), they might know about John Doe and his disappearance, while another player—not yet briefed on Doe's situation—runs into him separately. The Games Master could even run both segments as independent encounters, neither side realising that what they just did was connected until they jointly discuss the matter later on.

Other than this, those who encounter Doe are more likely to be non-player characters unaware of his true identity. If interviewed or telepathically scanned, they'll be able to describe their meeting with the mysterious, unnamed figure in the gloomy halls of Brown Sector. Generally, finding an individual who's met with Doe requires a Gather Information check (DC 19). The players must specifically describe Doe and provide images of him, which they can get from Dr. Franklin's records. If they just ask 'Did you see anybody wandering around aimlessly, or who lost their memory?' the answer will always be 'no.'

In any event, an encounter with Doe always occurs in passing. Doe is wearing a janitor's outfit with a hood pulled up over his head. At first, he says something like 'Nice day, isn't it?' and then continues with a few other innocuous questions. He does so in a way that will preserve his cover story if captured—in other words, so he can still claim that he's an amnesiac. The sort of questions are: 'Do you know anyone of a race you can't identify? Is there anyone on board with the traits of several races? Have you met anyone making similar inquiries?' Presumably, he supposes, another Dilgar agent would be hidden in a manner similar to himself. He has little hope of success in this line of questioning, but it's the first step in his plan.

In addition to his questions, Lac'Zon attempts to telepathically scan anyone with whom he comes into contact. He tries to physically touch them in one way or another, usually by shaking hands during his introduction—a human custom that he's embraced wholeheartedly. The purpose of the scan is to detect any trace of the Dilgar language in the person's thoughts, and to implant a single Dilgar word ('Shara,' a basic greeting) in their brain to see if there is any reaction. He performs these actions so skilfully that the target is generally unaware of any telepathic contact. However, if the individual being questioned

is a telepath, he will recognize the attempt at once, and can decide what to do and how to respond. No non-player lurkers will have this ability, so he'd have to meet a telepathic player—a statistical unlikelihood.

After meeting Lac'Zon, the word he left in the person's mind can be remembered on an Intelligence check (DC 10) within one hour of the meeting. If the check fails, or more than an hour has passed, the individual remembers that something was there—an image or word of some kind—but doesn't know what it was. The Dilgar word 'Shara' won't be recognised by anyone in Downbelow, of course. Locating a non-player character who both met Doe and thought to write down the word requires a Gather Information check (DC 24).

If 'Shara' is simply entered into a computer for investigation, at least a dozen proper names and places pop up. Only if the player specifically searched language databases, and succeeds in a Computer Use (DC 24) check, can he discover that this is the Dilgar word for 'hello.' It also happens to be a Drazi word meaning 'furry petal,' but has no meaning in any other tongue.

Encounter Five: Showdown with Lac'Zon

As the search continues, Dr. Franklin has been busy in Medlab. In fact, he concludes a detailed study of Mr. Doe's physiology, providing this information to Security, who relays it (eventually) to the players. The information includes the following points:

1. He now knows for a fact that the mysterious visitor has been surgically altered, although this was performed to a level of perfection so high that he didn't notice it until his fifth detailed study of the patient's physiological scans.

2. He can now identify the three other DNA combinations in John Doe's blood—Krish, Mitoc, and Dilgar.

3. Finally, and most worrisome, he knows that most of the DNA residue is inert—that is to say, it has no real purpose in Mr. Doe's blood, except to confuse medical scans. The subject is clearly of one of the three races that were most difficult to identify. Since the Mitoc and Dilgar are both dead races, the apparently obvious conclusion is that this person is Krish. However, the Krish are a race of flightless birds with vestigial wings for arms and obvious avian features—there is no feasible way that simple surgical modifications could transform one of their people into a human-like form. One might as well ask a Gaim to look human simply through plastic surgery!

With that in mind, both Garibaldi and Sheridan focus their attentions on the most dangerous and worrisome possibility—John Doe is a Dilgar. Finding him is now vital, and word has already leaked out that a Dilgar might be loose on Babylon 5. Some of the alien races are mobilising their own 'hunt teams,' in particular the Narns and Drazi. Worse, anyone even remotely resembling Doe is being accosted, drawing security teams away from the actual search.

With this in mind, the reward for Doe's capture is doubled. However, Garibaldi now wants the man brought in alive for interrogation. He also asks the players to conduct their search independently of Security. He's afraid that if Security gets involved, one of these other 'hunt teams' will try to take him out before they can get him back to lockup. In other words, the players are on their own from this point forward. They'll need to capture Doe and bring him in quietly, in such a way that observers don't recognise who he is. Exactly how this is done is up to the players—but first, they have to actually go through the motions of finding and catching their quarry.

Tracking Down Lac'Zon

With security teams actively hunting for him, Lac'Zon goes to ground. He makes his way to Brown Seven and holes up in a power relay chamber. One of the doors to this normally restricted room has been forced, a sure clue that someone is inside who shouldn't be there. However, the players won't be able to just stumble across this room without some help.

Fortunately, as soon as the hunt for Doe escalates, their very next Gather Information check (DC 14) puts them in contact with a Drazi lurker named Elshadaz. He's an elderly Drazi with a bent spine and tattered scales. For 25 credits, he'll tell the players where John Doe is. The players can either pay the money, Intimidate it out of him (DC 20), or use telepathy. Either way, the only thing Elshadaz knows is that he saw someone who looked like Doe sneaking into Brown Seven. A telepathic scan reports he's telling the truth, and a deep scan gets the telepath a good look at the face of the man Elshadaz saw—a dead ringer for John Doe. If the players are kind to Elshadaz, or make a deep scan of his mind, they can also learn that he's also told this same information to others—a group of Drazi looking to capture Doe for their own purposes.

This clue should lead the players to head to Brown Seven next. There are three basic ways the players can find Lac'Zon from this point:

Using Frankie: If the players have a good relationship with the Frankie the Rat, resident crimelord of Brown Seven (see Module One), they can go to him and ask for help. Frankie is aware of the current hunt for John Doe and that groups other than Security are roaming about looking for him. Frankie is *not* happy about his turf being invaded and wants Doe found, if indeed he's located on Brown Seven at all. Thus, he'll do whatever he can to help the players in their quest. If the players give him a communicator tuned to their frequency, he'll call them when he knows something. Twelve hours later, if the players haven't found Lac'Zon already, he lets them know someone matching John Doe's description was seen moving through a corridor fairly close

to the Courtyard. After that, the players can make a Search check of that area (DC 18) to find the door that Lac'Zon forced open. Frankie will tell them the area contains a power relay and is usually kept carefully locked—even his own people won't go inside because of the high voltage. He also mentions two other details: no ordinary lurker could force that lock, and there's another entrance to that room through another corridor.

Old Enemies: If the players made an enemy of Frankie the Rat, he'll oppose them as they search Brown Seven. Frankie still wants Doe found and the hunt called off, but he definitely doesn't want the players to be the ones to make the big score.

Depending on the whims of the Games Master and the level of anger Frankie has built up against the players as a result of the encounters in Module One, this could manifest in several ways:

Aid & Comfort: Frankie could provide some of his 'rat guards' to help the Drazi in the showdown with Lac'Zon. Use the stats listed in Encounter One to add some additional firepower to the Drazi force.

Pointing out Lac'Zon: Obviously, once Frankie's guards notice John Doe skulking about, he'll be sure to tell the Drazi instead of the players.

False Information: Frankie might have a couple of his men, planted in the guise of lurkers, give the players false information. A 'helpful' lurker could tell the players that Doe was seen on the opposite side of Brown Seven, or went to a different level of Downbelow. This should be done in such a way that the players have a chance to discover the deception—a Sense Motive check (DC 15), for example, reveals that the man is lying.

Outright Attack: If the players were particularly rude to Frankie in their last meeting, he might well set up an ambush. Use any one of Frankie's surviving henchmen along with several guards and set up an encounter in the halls or rooms of Brown Seven. A henchman who was particularly embarrassed by the players might even set up his own ambush without Frankie's knowledge, even if he's otherwise friendly to the players. Such an encounter could be arranged through a 'friendly informer' as described in the previous paragraph.

Setting Up Surveillance: The players can't possibly search every corner of Brown Seven, but they know that if John Doe is really there, he'll have to come out sometime for food and water. To this end, they can place lookouts or even cameras to watch for him. Doe is too cautious to be spotted by hunters directly, but is vulnerable to the camera trick. If the players do this, allow anyone watching the screens to make a Spot check (DC 25) every four hours. If they make the check on one of the first three attempts, they notice Doe moving through a corridor in a section of Brown Seven that's mostly uninhabited. After that, they need a Search check (DC 18) as described previously. If they don't make the Spot checks, on the 16th hour they notice the Drazi (see below) gathering in the hall near the relay room. Clearly they're on to something.

Watching the Hunters: As the players meander around on Brown Seven, they'll quickly notice an unusual number of Drazi wandering about the level. (They might already know about these hunters from their encounter with Elshadaz.) The last time the players were here, they noticed that humans almost exclusively populated Brown Seven, so the presence of Drazi is very unusual. A Spot check (DC 14) tells any observer that the Drazi are quite actively casting their eyes about, studying every lurker carefully, sometimes even glancing down at images cradled carefully in their scaly fingers. If the players have no other resources available to aid in their search, they might follow these hunters about, hoping to follow them to Doe should they locate him first. After 16 hours of searching, one of the Drazi finds the door to Lac'Zon's hideout and radios the others. Anyone shadowing them can make a Listen check (DC 15). If they can understand the Drazi tongue, they hear this: 'I think I know where he hides! A door to a power relay room is broken into. None of these scum have the brains to do this. My location is section beta, relay room two. Get here! Now!'

Capturing Lac'Zon

The main problem with grabbing Lac'Zon isn't the agent himself, but the Drazi looking for him. While the players have been busy, so too have these hunters. The Drazi aren't stupid. They've noticed the players and are keeping an eye on them, just as they too are being watched. As soon as the players make a purposeful move anywhere, the Drazi follow them. Furthermore, the Drazi have a technician with them who's tapping into their communications. If the players are using any sort of wireless radios—either to talk with Frankie or with each other—the Drazi are able to intercept these messages. This will lead them to the power relay room, where they'll interrupt the showdown.

Exactly how the Drazi get involved depends upon the circumstances. Basically, there are three ways this could happen:

If the Drazi get there first, they will have tripped the first trap. By the time the players arrive, they have Lac'Zon cornered and are about to take him into custody. As soon as the group shows up, the Drazi attack them without hesitation. In this case, Lac'Zon fires on the Drazi and avoids shooting the players, but as soon as the Drazi are defeated, he has no problem attacking the players if they insist on trying to take him into custody.

If the players get there first, they will have to deal with the first trap on their own. After that, as Lac'Zon starts firing at them, the Drazi show up behind the group and attack at once, putting the players in a crossfire. The players could, of course, turn the

tables if they suspect the Drazi are following, and could be waiting in ambush.

If the Drazi are forewarned about the players' destination, they will enter the relay room by blowing open the sealed second door on the opposite side. Anyone standing within 15 feet of the door must make a Reflex save (DC 14) or suffer 1d6 explosive damage and 1d6 subdual (concussion) damage. The sheer shock of this sudden, unexpected twist forces everyone in the room—Lac'Zon included—to make a Will save (DC 14) or be stunned for one round. After this, the Drazi pour in, attacking both the players and Lac'Zon with abandon (and hopefully with surprise on their side).

The Hunters

3rd Level Drazi Soldiers (4)
Hit Points: 15
Initiative: +4 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +7 melee or +6 ranged
Special Qualities: Covering Fire, DR 5 (3 from armour)
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +3, Will –1
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 10, Wis 6, Cha 11
Skills: Climb +9, Jump +9
Feats: Dense Scales, Improved Unarmed Strike, Weapon Focus (hunter's blade), Weapon Focus (PPG)
Equipment: PPG Model 10, hunter's armour, hunter's blade

These Drazi are part of an elite 'hunt team' that specialises in finding people or objects and retrieving them using any means necessary. They will stop at nothing to get their hands on Lac'Zon—dead or alive. If the players get in their way, a fight is inevitable.

The Hunt Leader

4rd Level Drazi Officer
Hit Points: 16
Initiative: +8 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +7 melee or +8 ranged
Special Qualities: Covering Fire, DR 4 (3 from armour)
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +3
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 16, Con 12, Int 12, Wis 8, Cha 13
Skills: Computer Use +8, Sense Motive +6, Intimidate +8, Spot +6
Feats: Improved Unarmed Strike, Improved Initiative, Weapon Focus (PPG)
Equipment: PPG Model 10, hunter's armour, hunter's blade

This is the hunt team's leader. He uses his PPG exclusively while his soldiers make the main attack. He's not cowardly, however, and should the opportunity come, he'll gladly enter melee with the rest of his troops.

Hunter's Blade: Drazi hunters are specially trained in the use of this wickedly serrated blade, a rare weapon indeed. Non-Drazi treat it as an exotic weapon. The jagged knife has a cost of 350 credits, damage 1d6, critical 18-20/x2, size medium, weight 5 lb., and damage type piercing.

Hunter's Armour: Drazi hunters employ this special armour, designed to fit their stocky frames and work in concert with their body scales. Formed of interlocking metal plates covered with a cured leather cover, it provides significant protection in melee combat. Because it's so heavy, the armour is rarely used by non-Drazi, and even those who do wear it suffer from reduced manoeuvrability. Statistics are as follows: Cost 500 credits, weight 30 lb., DR 3 (4 against slashing or bludgeoning weapons, 5 against piercing attacks). Wearing this armour reduces the owner's Dexterity by 2 and speed by 5 feet; these penalties are doubled for non-Drazi.

THE POWER ROOM

Lac'Zon is hiding inside a power relay room. The room is about 40 feet wide and 30 feet long, with a series of power terminals near the centre. There are doors on each of the shorter walls. As a bolthole, Lac'Zon has opened up one of the ventilation tunnels, but he hasn't entered yet because he knows from previous explorations that there are traps inside. As you'll remember from Module One, Frankie the Rat makes sure that nobody can sneak around the hidden shafts that surround his private little slice of Babylon 5, and Lac'Zon doesn't wish to challenge the crimelord's trap-making skills. At least, not until he's desperate. Should the Dilgar operative be seriously challenged in his lair, he flees through the ventilation duct. This could result in a running battle within the shafts of Babylon 5, with Lac'Zon slowed in his flight by his need to deactivate or slip cautiously past each trap.

In any case, Lac'Zon remains in hiding when either the players or the Drazi hunters enter the room. He waits until they set of his first main trap before popping up from 3/4 cover to start shooting. Except as noted previously, he considers anyone who enters the room as his enemy.

There are two traps in the room, each tied directly into the power relay system. The first is a ten-foot strip of thin wires stretched in a hemisphere ahead of his hiding place, around the edges of the machines. Lac'Zon tries to wait until as many invaders as possible are standing on the wires before activating the trap. The wires are laid down amidst some other cables so they don't look out of place—a player in the room must make a Spot check (DC 25) to notice something out of the ordinary. When Lac'Zon activates the trap, electricity surges and sparks, scoring 3d6 electrical damage to everyone standing on the wires. A Fortitude save (DC 17) halves the damage. Once the electricity is flowing, constant arcing reveals the trap's location so it can be avoided in the future, but the power only stays on for 5 rounds before something critical burns out. A

player can also deactivate the trap by reaching Lac'Zon's current location and taking a standard action to throw the switch. He can also spend a full-round action to study the machines in the room, and if so, a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 21) locates a vulnerable spot along the floor. 5 points of damage scored on that position (DV 10, no DR) shorts out the electricity and deactivates the trap.

If this isn't enough, Lac'Zon has another trap prepared as well. The 5-foot square on which he stands—next to the escape vent on the wall—is surrounded by electrified floor sections. Anyone coming close enough to attack him with melee weapons takes 1d6+1 electrical damage (half is subdual damage) for each round they stand on an adjacent square. There is no save against this effect, and there's no easy way to deactivate it. The energy is tapped directly from the main power grid. Players need some way to completely deactivate all of Brown Seven's power before this trap stops functioning.

Lac'Zon

3rd Level Dilgar Agent, 5th Level Telepath (P10)
Hit Points: 20
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +6/+1 melee or +6/+1 ranged
Special Qualities: Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +5, Will +8
Abilities: Str 13, Dex 12, Con 16, Int 18, Wis 12, Cha 13
Skills: Bluff +6, Computer Use +12, Concentration +9, Diplomacy +9, Escape Artist +7, Gather Information +6, Knowledge (telepathy) +10, Listen +6, Sense Motive +6, Speak Language (English, Narn, Centauri, Brakiri, Dilgar), Technical (mechanical) +10, Telepathy +9
Feats: Endurance, Iron Will, Far Telepathy, Improved Defensive Block, Synergy
Telepathic Abilities: Accidental Scan, Mind Shield, Sense Telepathy, Warning, Danger Sense, Daze
Equipment: Club, PPG

Lac'Zon was sent to Babylon 5 to try to locate others of his kind, and if that failed, to set up a listening post on the station. His main goal at this stage is to remain hidden and avoid combat. If he engages in combat, he tries using Daze to stun the most dangerous target and use sneak attacks for maximum damage. If a player does get to melee range with Lac'Zon and stays there despite the electrical trap underfoot, the Dilgar agent uses his Daze ability and flees into the ventilation shaft. He also runs if he's about to be overwhelmed, or if his PPG runs out of shots. Should he be cornered, he battles with telepathy and his club until subdued. He does not, however, commit suicide. He does have one final card to play if he does get captured.

Encounter Six: Interlude

If Lac'Zon is killed in the fighting, this module is all but over. It's still possible for the players to gather information leading them to an eventual meeting with the other Dilgar, but this requires some significant insight. The rest of this module will assume Lac'Zon is still alive at this point.

After Lac'Zon is brought back alive, Dr. Franklin performs some tests to discover the Dilgar agent's true nature. Lac'Zon is also locked up in a private room with a round-the-clock guard at the door—for his own safety as well as to keep him from getting away. Both Mr. Garibaldi and Talia Winters then interrogate him at their leisure. The players can also join in if they wish.

Attempting to telepathically scan Lac'Zon is fruitless. He's a low-level telepath with the ability to 'turn off' his brain if he senses a telepathic invasion. The moment a deep scan begins, he simply keels over, and his mind becomes blank. This lasts for about half an hour until he reawakens. He will use this same technique if truth drugs are used upon him. Meanwhile, if interrogated normally, he reveals only that his real name is Lac'Zon and his reasons for coming to Babylon 5 are his own. He hasn't committed a crime, other than violating immigration laws. Defending himself from attack wasn't against the law. He demands to be set free at once, even if it means deportation.

After about six hours following Lac'Zon's capture, Dr. Franklin finally discovers that the former Mr. Doe is actually a Dilgar. This has been suspected all along, of course, but now the truth is revealed—all the other genetic markers in Lac'Zon's blood and tissue are carefully planted deceptions. The agent doesn't admit to his true nature until formal medical evidence is presented to him, and even then he simply insists that being Dilgar isn't against the law.

Captain Sheridan, of course, knows full well what happened the last time a Dilgar showed up on Babylon 5—the League almost tore the station apart. He has no intention of allowing this to happen again. The only people who know Lac'Zon is actually a Dilgar are Sheridan, Garibaldi, Franklin, and of course the players themselves. Therefore, Sheridan decides the best course of action is to tell a little white lie. He orders the players, and everyone else involved, to keep their mouths shut about Lac'Zon's true nature. Then, he issues a press release stating that the 'supposed Dilgar agent' was actually an Alvin Seale, a former Belt Alliance trader and now an unfortunate amnesiac. Furthermore, he's a veteran of the Dilgar War, during which he suffered horribly as a victim of Dilgar wartime atrocities. That's why he has so many other racial markers in his blood. The poor man is deserving only of pity, not persecution. The masses buy this explanation readily.

Once this fire is put out, the storm of controversy dies down. In fact, most of the populace of Babylon 5 is ashamed of their actions when they reflect back on the past few days. If anything, though, the plan works too well. The people of Babylon 5 will begin to wonder why Sheridan is still holding this 'Alvin Seale' if he's really as harmless as everybody says. Thus, Sheridan decides to let the man go. He does, however, do two things. First, he plants not one but two transmitters on Lac'Zon—one on his back, between the shoulder blades, in a spot he can't see or reach easily; the second inside his body in the form of a bug consumed with one of the prisoner's meals.

The second thing Sheridan does is hire the players to keep an eye on Lac'Zon. He knows he can't use formal security guards, so instead he uses a few trustworthy civilians. In addition to their job of watching the Dilgar's actions, the players are tasked with making friends with him and finding out what's really going on. He informs the players that Lac'Zon has a sub-dermal homing device on his back, and lets them know how to track it should he get away. Sheridan doesn't tell them about the second, backup transmitter lodged in the Dilgar agent's gut, however. This is his 'insurance policy' should something go wrong.

If the players are affiliated with EarthForce or Station Security, this becomes a semi-permanent assignment. If they are independent contractors, Sheridan agrees to pay them 50 credits per day (each) to undertake this mission—a princely sum. They are, however, responsible for all their own expenses. Sheridan suspects that this Dilgar isn't the only one still out there, and wants to find out what they're planning. Thus, he gives the players tremendous latitude to do whatever they feel necessary to achieve this goal. He doesn't want the Dilgar dead—he just wants information.

When Lac'Zon is released from prison into the players' care, he's totally baffled. Quite frankly, he expected to be killed, or at the very least deported from the station. The fact that he can walk around without being accosted amazes him. He makes no attempt to escape his watchdogs (the players), and cooperates with them without complaint. He still doesn't explain what he's doing on Babylon 5, but if the players don't stop him, he proceeds with his original mission, which is finding a place to hole up and create a listening post by tapping into the station's computer network. The fact that the players let him do this without interference is mind-boggling, as far as Lac'Zon is concerned. If they help him find a job and get his own cabin, this will leave him all but stunned.

Of course, he's not stupid. He suspects something is going on, but he doesn't care. As long as he can proceed with his mission, he doesn't even try to search for the tracking devices he's pretty sure have been planted in or on his person. Instead, he continues hacking merrily through Babylon 5's computers. If the players wish, they can set up counter-hacking or monitoring programs to observe his online activities. This requires a contested Computer Use check, but Lac'Zon doesn't mind if they succeed. As long as he can undertake his search, he doesn't care who's watching. In fact, if he would've known he could've gotten away with this without any resistance from Security, he would've come right out and asked in the first place.

Lac'Zon continues working on his search for several days. The players can watch him all they want, and even become friends if they so wish. After a while, the Dilgar agent even explains what he's doing. He says he's looking for more of his kind who might've escaped the 'purging' and are still in hiding. He even goes so far as to thank the players for helping him, and for keeping his secret to themselves. Inwardly, of course, he's not quite convinced the players are really his friends—but he's good at keeping his true thoughts to himself.

The Secondary Mission

Meanwhile, Theresa Cross and Alison Fernandez arrive on Babylon 5. For once, Theresa doesn't have a mission for the players, but is here to try to establish some other connections with potential allies in her fight against IPX. By now, Alison is firmly convinced that IPX is her enemy as well, so she visits her friends (the players) to let them in on what's going on. She hopes the players will turn on IPX also, seeing as how they've been deceived all along just as she was. In the process, she asks what they've been up to.

If the players explain their current mission, she takes that information back to Theresa. Even if they don't, Theresa still hears about it through her own network. It's very likely that she won't actually know Lac'Zon is a Dilgar—unless the players fill Alison in on this detail—but even so, he clearly has his own agenda. Is he one of IPX's tools? Or is he a representative of some other organisation? In the former case, Theresa wants Lac'Zon destroyed; in the latter, she wants to sign him up as an ally.

Thus, when Lac'Zon announces that his work on Babylon 5 is done, she has no problem agreeing to loan the players the *Liberty's Fortune* to take him back to his people. However, Theresa gives Alison secret instructions. If Lac'Zon turns out to be associated with IPX, he and whomever he meets with are to be killed. On the other hand, if he's indeed a representative of some other group, Alison is to establish permanent contact with him. After all, Theresa needs all the eyes and ears she can find. Who knows when someone like that might come in handy?

Of course, if the players have access to their own ship, they may not need the *Liberty*, but even so, Alison will still try to join them on their mission. Also, should the players ask permission of Sheridan or Garibaldi to allow Lac'Zon to leave Babylon 5, they agree. As long as the players keep an eye on him and find out what the Dilgar are really up to, where Lac'Zon goes is immaterial.

Note that Lac'Zon, in his guise as Alvin Seale, spends about three weeks at his listening post before determining that he's finished on Babylon 5 for now. During this period, in addition to Theresa and Alison's arrival, any number of other events may occur. The flow of the campaign may

take the players away from the Dilgar for a while, but eventually, he'll decide it's time to go.

Encounter Seven: Meeting the Dilgar

When he does, he sends a coded message off into deep space. If the players are monitoring his activities electronically, they pick up on this with a Computer Use check (DC 14) and can make a recording of the message. Decoding it requires a Computer Use check (DC 25). The message reads: 'Mission complete. Meet in ten solars as arranged.' Any player who can speak Dilgar, or thinks to search the Dilgar language files, knows that a solar is a Dilgar day—about 1.2 standard days.

Lac'Zon intends to hire a ship to take him to Mitoc, a devastated world the Dilgar virtually destroyed during the Invasion. If the players offer to take him there, he'll accept their offer readily. If they refuse to let him leave, he expresses regret and then tries to leave anyway. He continues to try until he either escapes or the players are forced to lock him up, at which point he determines that his mission is a failure and commits suicide.

Should the players agree to let him go on his own, he climbs aboard a chartered civilian craft and flies off. Naturally, an Earth Alliance ship shadows him during the journey, following the tracking devices implanted in and on his body. As the players learn later, those tracers showed quite clearly that he visited Mitoc as planned, but that was where he disappeared. The trackers go offline shortly after his arrival on the dead world, and no one knows where he went after that. The module is basically over at this point.

If the players agree to take him to Mitoc, Lac'Zon collects his belongings and departs on whatever schedule they arrange, so long as it's within a day or so. (If they need more time, he agrees as long as he has an opportunity to send another message with an update on his progress.) Theresa Cross puts the *Liberty's Fortune* at the players' disposal, with Caitlin Schulz as pilot and Alison Fernandez going along for the ride.

The trip takes 8 days, passing through Narn space on its way to Mitoc. The ship is challenged at the Kotak jump transfer point, but the Narns there accept Caitlin's explanation that they are couriers bound for League territory and let them pass. The journey through Sin'talith and Gamma 7 is uneventful. After just more than a week, the ship arrives in the Mitoc system.

The Mitoc: The Mitoc were once a peaceful race of explorers. They are nocturnal, opossum-like creatures with prehensile tails, well suited for arboreal life. Most of their cities were built among the tall trees and forests of their verdant homeworld, which shares the name of their race.

Although pacifistic by nature, the Mitoc did not share the peaceful view of the universe suggested by their neighbours, the Abbai and Krish. The Mitoc knew they would have to develop a strong defence in order to survive, and set about to do so as soon as they could. The only nearby race which would provide weapons with them was the Vree, and what those shrewd traders sold was ancient plasma and particle technology that most other races considered obsolete. Still, it was the start of what the Mitoc hoped would be a strong defence program, and they viewed with pride their first (and what would soon be their only) ship class, the Jomic frigate. From such a small start they planned a navy that would soon be respected in the region, and could even extend to aid their friends the Krish when needed.

Unfortunately, the Dilgar Invasion came well before the Mitoc were ready. Upon seeing the huge armada of Dilgar warships approaching, most of the Jomic-class ships turned and fled for the safety of hyperspace. After re-forming there into a small but scrappy fleet, they returned to their system several days later to see what, if anything, they could do. The sight they saw horrified them—dozens of Dilgar ships bombarding their world with nuclear bombs and mass drivers! Unable to do anything to stop the carnage, the Mitoc fleet attempted to get help from their nearby neighbours, but failed, finding the Cascor and Brakiri under constant attack, the Abbai bottled up, and the Krish all but dead.

The little fleet headed to Bestine, just hours ahead of the Dilgar invasion force, and were sheltered there by the Descari. After Earth forces liberated Bestine, the frigates returned home to find a smoking ruin. Every form of land-based life larger than an insect had been wiped out by the constant bombardment and plagues set loose by the Dilgar. Mitoc was effectively a dead world. The few survivors of the Mitoc race now live in small, primitive villages amidst the few habitable places on the planet.

What the players don't know—but may well suspect—is that the *Liberty's Fortune* is being followed. Captain Sheridan has notified EarthForce of the Dilgar agent's movements, and the Hyperion cruiser *Demeter* has been sent to shadow the *Liberty*. Earth isn't the only one with their eyes on Lac'Zon, however. The suspicious Drazi, annoyed by the failure of their hunt team in Brown Seven, have learned through their own sources about the mission to Mitoc. They don't have a way to track the Dilgar agent, but they do have a ship in the area, the Sunhawk-class battlecruiser *Tol'kani (Fist of Death)*. The Sunhawk has been sent to Mitoc, where it hides on one of the planet's two moons and awaits the arrival of the *Liberty's Fortune*.

On or about day 8, the *Liberty* arrives. Caitlin turns the nose of the ship towards the planet called Mitoc, actually the third world in the system, and after an hour's flight the little pinnace enters orbit.

Through the viewing ports you can see the blackened shell of a world. It's hard to believe this was once an Earth-like planet filled with life. All that's left is a scarred land and dried-up oceans. Even the atmosphere looks dark and foreboding. Yet even through the haze, you can see a few green and blue specks on this ruined globe. Life, perhaps, is slowly returning to Mitoc. Though it may take decades or even centuries, perhaps one day the whole planet will be habitable again.

As you mull that over, Caitlin receives a signal. Lac'Zon perks up at once and rushes to the communications console, where he types in a coded response. A moment later, Caitlin announces that she has a fix on a landing beacon. Without hesitation, the Liberty's Fortune noses towards the tortured planet below and begins its descent.

You all strap in and prepare for landing. Caitlin manages the trip with easy skill. After ten minutes or so, the ship slows, straightens, and settles down to a halt. You look out the windows at a ragged, rocky landscape. Dust kicked up by the wind swirls in miniature dust-devils, obscuring the view beyond a few hundred yards. At the fringes of your vision, you see a glint of metal. Slightly closer, a prefabricated shack stands, keeping a lonely vigil amidst the debris.

External sensors reveal that the atmosphere is sufficient that pressure suits aren't required, but breather masks are recommended. Radiation levels are also acceptable. Anyone without a mask finds the air thin, forcing a Fortitude save (DC 14) every ten minutes. Failure indicates the player becomes fatigued until he's breathed ordinary air for at least an hour.

Lac'Zon insists that he's in the presence of friends and asks for a mask. He exits and heads for the little shack. If the players follow, they notice that the glint of metal behind the building is actually a shuttle. The make is unfamiliar, but a Technical (space travel) check (DC 25) positively identifies it as a Dilgar design.

Inside the shack, which is little more than a 25-foot square area designed for use as a shelter, there are four other Dilgar waiting. They are armed, but pay little attention to the players. They're too busy embracing and congratulating Lac'Zon, speaking quickly in the Dilgar tongue. Finally, they turn to introductions. The four Dilgar are Fol'Tan, Ti'Shal, Re'Thas, and Jal'Maris, the latter of whom seems to be the leader. All of them understand and speak English, using that language for all conversations unless they need to speak privately.

Jal'Maris
4th Level Dilgar Officer/4th Level Agent
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +4 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +9/+4 melee or +9/+4 ranged
Special Qualities: Low-Light Vision, Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Rallying Call, Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +7, Will +6
Abilities: Str 14, Dex 15, Con 11, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 11
Skills: Bluff +8, Concentration +12, Diplomacy +7, Listen +12, Pilot +14, Sense Motive +13, Spot +8
Feats: Alertness, Toughness, Improved Initiative, Point Blank Shot, Resist Scan
Equipment: Flak jacket, PPG rifle (Dilgar equivalent), suicide bomb, communications headset

Jal'Maris is one of Lac'Zon's closest friends, and has been greatly worried about his safety during the mission. With his friend now safe, he concerns himself first with security and then with a cautious retreat to the hidden base. He has no intention of revealing to the players anything more than he must. He also gives the players only what he thinks they want to hear—that the Dilgar are just poor, pitiful survivors who wish only to be left alone in peace. That's true for some of them, of course, but not all.

Jal'Maris has a suicide bomb strapped to his waist. If he dies or willingly triggers this weapon, it explodes for 8d6 blast damage to everyone within 30 feet, Reflex save (DC 17) for half. All his compatriots willingly fail their saves, virtually ensuring their deaths. Should the players threaten Jal'Maris and the others, he reveals the presence of the bomb and threatens to set it off if they don't back away at once.

Fol'Tan, Ti'Shal, and Re'Thas
8th Level Dilgar Scientists
Hit Points: 16
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +3 melee or +5 ranged
Special Qualities: Low-Light Vision, Primary Area of Study (Medical/Knowledge (genetics)/Technical (electronics)), Use Alien Artefact, Peripheral Studies (Knowledge (alien life)/Medical/Technical (space travel))
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +8
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 12, Con 12, Int 18, Wis 14, Cha 12
Skills: Computer Use +15, Concentration +12, Knowledge (genetics) +15, Knowledge (alien life) +15, Knowledge (star systems) +15, Knowledge (military) +15, Knowledge (alien language) +15, Listen +13, Medical +13, Profession (doctor) +13, Spot +13, Technical (space travel) +15
Feats: Alertness, Toughness, Great Fortitude, Resist Scan, Alien Anatomy
Equipment: Scanning tools, medical tools, PPG Mark 10 (Dilgar equivalent)

These doctors are here to ensure Lac'Zon is free of bugs and sensors, and has survived his ordeal without any life-threatening injuries or alien diseases. Once he's cleared, they intend to return to the shuttle at once.

Jal'Maris thanks the players for their help while the other three begin scanning Lac'Zon. Jal'Maris listens to the agent's explanation while nodding thoughtfully. Meanwhile, the scientists discover the tracking device on Lac'Zon's back and quickly remove it. Then, they announce that there's another beacon inside the agent's body. The need a few minutes to remove it, which they begin to do using a tube inserted through Lac'Zon's throat. He puts himself in a trance while this is done. Meanwhile, Jal'Maris can answer whatever questions the players have. Here are some possibilities. Items marked with an asterisk (*) are partial truths or outright lies that can be detected by an opposed Bluff/Sense Motive check.

'Are you really Dilgar?' 'Yes, we represent a small band of Dilgar survivors. We've been in hiding since the war. You'll understand if I don't explain where, of course.'

'Who are you, though?' 'We were scientists, not warriors.* Perhaps the fact that we weren't military is what enabled us to escape detection by your forces during the war. Now, we are simply survivors.'

'What do you want?' 'Merely to live somewhere free of oppression.* Our current quarters are uncomfortable at best, and our people have no future there.'

'What was Lac'Zon's mission?' 'He was sent to find out if there were any other like us still alive, and we felt your station Babylon 5 was the best place to begin our search. Since he has found no one, we must conclude we're alone.'

'Why did you choose now to do this, and not some other time?' 'We heard about Jha'Dur. Until she surfaced, we were certain we were the only ones left. Her appearance gave us hope.'

'Do you have any anger towards us for the war?' 'No.* Our military did what they felt they had to do. They failed, and our star has fallen. We have come to accept this. All we want now is a chance to live in peace and maybe someday make amends for our failings.*'

'What will you do now?' 'Return to our base and discuss Lac'Zon's findings. Until we do, we don't know. We may appeal to your leaders for sanctuary, or we may simply remain in hiding. The galaxy may not yet be ready for us to emerge.'

Alison Fernandez: At some point, Alison will introduce herself and say this: 'I'm here representing Theresa Cross, a woman who sympathises with your plight. She would very much like to talk to you about helping to provide further options to you. Here is a data crystal explaining the situation and how you can reach her in the future.' She hands over the crystal and is greeted with a smile by Jal'Maris: 'Thank you. I'll be certain to discuss this matter with my people once we return.'

Other: The players can ask any other questions they can think of. Jal'Maris answers in a kind, friendly voice but doesn't hesitate to duck or dodge anything that asks for too many details. He won't reveal the location of his base, nor will he elaborate on anything if he's caught hiding the truth or telling a partial truth. If any telepaths attempt to probe his mind, he resists, and further attempts result in a battle. Should the players seem likely to win, he sets off his suicide bomb. He'll also show the bomb if he feels like the players can be talked out of fighting with the threat of its detonation.

Eventually, the time for talk nears its end. The scientists discover and extract the bug from Lac'Zon's gut and prepare to wake him up. This is when things start to go wrong.

Encounter Eight: The Attack

Close by, under cover of a dust storm, a Drazi shuttle has landed. Six handpicked Drazi commandos charge across the rocky landscape and rush towards the makeshift shack. Read the following:

Lac'Zon is just awakening when suddenly Jal'Maris's communicator begins to spit out frantic words in the Dilgar language. Before you can even try to translate, your own comm squawks loudly. It's Caitlin, aboard the Liberty's Fortune! 'Heads up over there! I'm picking up a bunch of heat signatures coming your way fast. Get back here! Now!'

At this point, the players should roll initiative. Set up the map with everyone inside the shack, the Dilgar shuttle about 80 feet away to the left, and the *Liberty's Fortune* 100 feet to the right. The Drazi begin the encounter 120 feet to the south, charging towards the shack in an inverted V formation. Three break to the left, drop behind rocks and cut off escape to the Dilgar shuttle. The other three do the same in the other direction, blocking movement to the *Liberty*.

Drazi Commandos

7th Level Drazi Soldiers (6)
Hit Points: 25
Initiative: +5 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 17 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +10/+5 melee or +10/+5 ranged
Special Qualities: Covering Fire, DR 5 (3 from armour)
Saves: Fort +9, Ref +5, Will +1
Abilities: Str 16, Dex 16, Con 14, Int 10, Wis 8, Cha 9
Skills: Climb +13, Jump +13
Feats: Dense Scales, Improved Unarmed Strike, Weapon Focus (Drazi assault rifle), Weapon Focus (hunter's blade), Weapon Specialisation (hunter's blade), Great Fortitude
Equipment: Drazi assault rifle, Drazi heavy combat armour, hunter's blade, concussion grenade, communications headset

These Drazi are here to capture Lac'Zon and any other Dilgar they find. They are ruthless in their methods and will kill anyone who resists. They won't retreat, but fight to the death.

Drazi Assault Rifle: This weapon is similar to a PPG rifle, but is heavier and includes a laser sight. Stats are identical to a standard PPG rifle except as follows: Cost 1,200 credits, critical 18-20, ammo 20, weight 10 lb. Generally, these weapons are only available in Drazi space.

Drazi Heavy Combat Armour: These extremely bulky metal/ceramic composite suits are primarily designed to defend their wearers against energy attack. They have these statistics: Cost 3,000 credits, weight 40 lb., DR 3 (5 vs. energy), +2 armour bonus to DV, speed reduced by 10 feet, –2 penalty to Dexterity while worn. A non-Drazi suffers double the listed penalties.

At this point, how the battle plays out is up to the players. The Dilgar refuse to move to the *Liberty* and insist on going to their own shuttle. They also don't want the players on their shuttle, either, although if the Drazi prove too difficult to dislodge, they'll agree if they must.

Anyone taking cover behind rocks receives a +4 cover bonus. The Games Master should set up a random assortment of rocks on the map to provide plenty of tactical options for this fight. Dust being blown about outside also provides a +1 DV bonus for every 15 full feet between a ranged attacker and his target.

As long as the players remain in the prefabricated shack, they're treated as having three-fourths cover (+7 DV). The shack also provides a +3 natural armour bonus to DR against any incoming fire, which penetrates the thin plastic walls fairly easily. The players may realise that they can cut their way out the back of the structure, fleeing into the dust. If they do this, they can sweep back around to their ships. The Drazi, seeing this, are forced to spread out to cover more territory. This allows the players to either pick them off piecemeal, or face no more than one or two of them before retreating to their ships.

Possible results of this tough fight are as follows.

If the players are victorious: The Dilgar collect their dead, thank the players, and head for their shuttle. They don't allow the players to join them unless they have no choice—which would basically happen only if threatened by superior firepower. The Dilgar vessel then lifts off and departs.

If the players escape to the *Liberty's Fortune*: The Dilgar fight a running battle back to their shuttle. If he must, Jal'Maris uses his bomb to slow down the pursuers so Lac'Zon and the scientists can get away. As soon as every Dilgar who can escape gets to the shuttle, it takes off and flees. The Drazi then run back into the windstorm, back to their own craft.

If the players flee onto the Dilgar shuttle: Though reluctant to allow this, the Dilgar will permit this option if they must. As soon as everyone who can possibly be rescued is aboard, the shuttle lifts off. The Drazi take any Dilgar prisoners or bodies as they head back to their own ship, leaving any unconscious or dead players behind. Once the Drazi are gone, Caitlin will emerge and treat any wounded players as best she can, using a medkit from the *Liberty*. After that, she takes the survivors aboard and takes off.

If the players are defeated: The Dilgar fight to the bitter end, but the Drazi only kill those who resist. If the players surrender, the Drazi take their weapons and imprison them inside the shack until the battle is over. Jal'Maris uses his suicide bomb in a way that will kill as many Drazi as possible—which may theoretically turn the tide of battle. If the Dilgar still lose, the shuttle pilot takes off, abandoning his fellows and fleeing into the dusty sky. The Drazi take any Dilgar prisoners or bodies and retreat to their own ship, leaving the players behind.

As soon as the shuttles start taking off, proceed to the final encounter.

Encounter Nine: Three-Way Battle

By the time the *Liberty's Fortune* reaches orbit, there are three ships on her sensors. These are the EarthForce Hyperion *Demeter*, the Dilgar Ochlavita Destroyer *Feeder of the Flame*, and the Drazi Sunhawk *Tol'kani*. The Hyperion is inbound from the jump gate, the Drazi is in the shadow of a nearby moon, and the Ochlavita is running silent in geosynchronous orbit far above the meeting place. The Dilgar shuttle makes for their ship, while the Drazi one sends a message summoning the Sunhawk. Meanwhile, Caitlin receives a message from the *Demeter* broadcast to all ships—stand down and prepare to be boarded.

Dilgar Ochlavita Destroyer: One of the more common Dilgar ships, this heavy combat vessel was designed to be fast and manoeuvrable while sporting a decent amount of firepower. It carries no fighters, however, and had few comforts for the Dilgar crewman. There are several different well-known variants, so that there was virtually an Ochlavita for every type of mission imaginable. The one in this scenario is a leader version, referred to as the 'D' variant during the Dilgar War.

This particular Ochlavita is very old—it's a relic of the Dilgar War, kept in operating condition on the hidden Dilgar base. Anyone making a Technical (space travel) check while scanning the ship identifies it as an Ochlavita on a DC 17 result, an Ochlavita-D on a DC 20, and notices its extreme age on a DC 22.

Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 375; DV 11 (-10 size, +11 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 3; Han +3; Sensor +3; Stealth 5; Cargo 25,000 lb.; 5 Officers, 4 Pilots, 5 Sensor Operators, 32 Crewmen

D Model Weapons:
As a leader variant, this ship gains +1 on its initiative check in combat.
One Bomb Rack; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20 (when used in missile configuration); Critical 20; Range 10; Ammunition 8; No Reloads
Two Quad Pulsars; 1 Front Left, 1 Front Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 14+2d10; Critical 20; Range 5; Rapid Fire (4 shots per round)
Two Laser Cannons; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Two Medium Bolters; 2 Rear; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 35; Critical 20; Range 4
Four Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Front Left, 1 Front Right, 1 Left Rear, 1 Right Rear; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Shuttles

As soon as the shuttle docks, the Ochlavita high-tails it towards the jump gate. The Sunhawk recovers its own shuttle and follows, slowly gaining. Meanwhile, the Hyperion takes up a position to intercept both ships and repeats its order to stand down. Naturally, neither of them do so.

Caitlin contacts the captain of the *Demeter*, Commander Reyna Martinez, and is told to land aboard the ship. She ignores any other communications, as she's too busy preparing his ship for what appears to be an inevitable fight. The *Liberty* can reach the *Demeter* before either of the opposing vessels because she isn't held up waiting to recover shuttlecraft. Caitlin lands, glad to be aboard what she sees as a safe haven.

Once aboard, the players find themselves on an Earth Alliance warship at red alert. They can help out if they wish, depending upon their personal skills. The ship is likely to take damage during the fight, so some may become part of the damage control crews. Others can help at gunnery stations, or on the bridge.

The ship has no Starfuries available for combat, because the usual flight of six have all been damaged or destroyed during recent battles with raiders. Captain Martinez won't send any of her own pilots out in damage fighters, but a player might try flying the one flight-capable (but severely patched-up) Starfury if he can make a Diplomacy or Intimidate check (DC 16). The Starfury has the following damage: –10 hit points, –2 acceleration and deceleration, –1 handling, –1 sensors, –2 penalty to all Pilot checks. Furthermore, it can only employ its afterburners once during the scenario.

Captain Martinez has orders to follow Lac'Zon and protect the *Liberty*, so she's not sure what to do as the two opposing spacecraft barrel towards her. Unless the players intervene, she won't fire unless fired upon. Unfortunately, the Drazi and Dilgar both see the Hyperion as a threat. The Sunhawk and Ochlavita start exchanging fire as they approach the *Demeter*, and then, as they pass on either side of her, open up on the Hyperion. Instantly a three-way battle is under way.

If the players rush to the bridge and intervene, they may be able to convince Martinez to change her actions. To do so, they must make a Diplomacy check (DC 21) or Bluff check (DC 25). Attempting an Intimidate check, or failing a Bluff check, causes her to throw the players off the bridge, and the battle goes as described above. If they succeed, she'll act on their suggestion, which could be just about anything. They might ask her to attack the Drazi only, or to withdraw, or to contact the Ochlavita and arrange to team up on the Drazi.

The Drazi ship won't retreat or withdraw until the Dilgar ship is destroyed—they refuse to back down in the face of these hated enemies of their people. Should the humans not fight the Dilgar, they are obviously collaborators and are to be destroyed. Unless the players intervene, Martinez realises that politically her only option is to fight both ships. If she doesn't attack the Dilgar, she *will* look like a collaborator, and if she doesn't fight the Drazi, she's a sitting duck to a potential sneak attack by the Ochlavita.

Note: If some or all of the players are aboard the *Feeder of the Flame* instead of the *Demeter*, Commander Martinez is still forced to fight a three-way battle. The Dilgar ship doesn't stop for fear of the Drazi, and the Drazi fight to the death for the glory of destroying their hated enemies. However, Martinez does take care not to blow up the Ochlavita as long as the players are aboard. Meanwhile, the players on that ship can assist as best they can, firing guns or working damage control as best they can. If things go poorly for the Dilgar ship, they will be evacuated by shuttle, but none of the Dilgar retreat in this way. They, too, fight to the bitter end.

AFTERMATH

How this all works out depends entirely upon the outcome of the space battle.

If the Dilgar ship survives and the Drazi is destroyed, the Dilgar cease fire at once and make a beeline for the jump gate. They refuse to stop no matter what, even if it means their destruction. Captain Martinez stops firing only if the players ask her to do so, or if there are players on board the Dilgar ship. If there are any players aboard,

they are put in a shuttle and released just before the *Feeder of the Flame* escapes into hyperspace.

If the Dilgar ship is destroyed, the Drazi break off the battle at once and head for the jump gate. Commander Martinez demands that they stop and answer for their crime of shooting at an Earth Alliance ship. The Drazi reply that unless the *Demeter* ceases fire at once, they will be reported as Dilgar collaborators. Fernandez stops shooting, and the Drazi captain says his government will issue a formal thank-you for their 'support' in eradicating the Dilgar threat.

If the Hyperion is destroyed (unlikely), the players will have to flee on board the *Liberty's Fortune*, presumably with as many crewmen as they can rescue. As soon as the Hyperion is defeated, the other two ships concentrate on each other and make no attempt to finish her off or collect escape pods. The victor limps to the jump gate and disappears, leaving the *Liberty* to fend for itself.

If the players are aboard the Hyperion when the fight ends, Commander Martinez interviews the players and gets their statements about what happened, and why the beacon on Lac'Zon is no longer available. No matter what they say, she dutifully takes down their report and then takes them back to Babylon 5. Should the *Demeter* have severe damage, she reluctantly releases the *Liberty's Fortune* to make its own way back to the station, while the Hyperion moves towards the nearest repair facility.

Once back on Babylon 5, Captain Sheridan interviews the players and considers their words carefully. More than likely, his conclusion will be that the Dilgar are no threat, although the fact that they had a warship—even if just a destroyer—is somewhat worrisome. If the players brought back a scan, or report that it was obviously an aging relic, this eases his concerns somewhat. Regardless, he files a report with EarthForce, pays the players their money, and considers the matter closed.

Meanwhile, Theresa Cross also thanks the players for their help, and takes Alison's report with a grain of salt. She then settles back to wait to see if the Dilgar every contact her on the special channel she set up for that purpose. Whether or not they do—and what happens as a result—is for the future.

Other Possible Post-Module Events

Next Step for the Dilgar: Exactly how the remaining Dilgar survivors act from this point on depends on how the players conducted themselves during the module, and what happened in the final battle. If the players were always professional, and convinced Fernandez to help defeat the Drazi in the space battle, the Dilgar will be more trusting, and will open up a secret dialogue with Theresa Cross later on. Otherwise, they're likely to simply stay in hiding, feeling that perhaps the galaxy isn't ready for their re-emergence yet. The Games Master may choose to have them pop up again later in the campaign—either as allies or foes of the players.

As a result of this scenario, it's also possible that Lac'Zon, or possibly another Dilgar, could reappear later. A Games Master may even allow a Dilgar player if circumstances permit. In this case, use the statistics for the Dilgar found on p.208 of the *Babylon 5 Main Rulebook*. Some additional Dilgar-related feats are available in Appendix C of this book.

The Dilgar Plan, or Lack Thereof: Note also that this module deliberately doesn't define the Dilgar's ultimate plan, nor does it specify the location of their outpost. It's suggested in the introductory text that the Dilgar were looking for more of their own, but they may have had an ulterior motive. Did they want to make amends for their atrocities during the Dilgar War? Or do they really just want to find a garden spot on an isolated planet somewhere so they can live in peace? On the other side of the coin, do they want to find a way to secretly continue the Dilgar War as guerrilla fighters? Perhaps, in the years they've spent in isolation, they've developed a new and destructive bio-weapon that can wipe out all life wherever it appears—thereby continuing Jha'Dur's legacy, and creating a new 'monument' to the Dilgar race. Any of these possibilities could lead to future scenarios.

What About the Outpost? And where, exactly, is their hidden outpost? The precise location isn't important for purposes of this module, but could make an excellent seed for further investigation. The strange radiation signature in Lac'Zon's body could be a clue that leads the players to the site, if the Games Master wants to provide further scenarios along this track.

Suggested Experience for this Module

Returning to Theresa Cross with the news: 1,000
Lac'Zon survives the fight with the Drazi commandos: 200
Jal'Maris survives without having to blow himself up: 200
Each Dilgar scientist who escapes to the shuttle: 100
The Dilgar Ochlavita escapes the final battle: 200

MODULE FOUR: NEW ALLIES

So. It is all true. My worst fears, realised…

The corruption goes far deeper than I ever dreamed. This is more than just an assassination of our President. More than just profit-mongering by the company I once adored with all my heart and soul. This goes deeper even than the acquisition of weapons for EarthForce, a deception I once accepted as necessary. Much deeper.

The ancient technology we've been studying isn't so ancient after all. The ones who built it aren't long dead as we surmised. They're back, and growing in strength. A war is coming…if it isn't already here. And President Clark is turning the Earth Alliance into their puppets.

This isn't a personal crusade any longer. This is war. I must have allies now, more than ever. More than that, I need resources. I can't afford to throw away anything.

Or anyone.

BACKGROUND

Module Summary

- Theresa Cross asks the players to help a Narn rescue his 'family' on a planet in Quadrant 14
- An assassin tries to kill Theresa
- The players journey to Sigma 957 and transfer to a captured Centauri patrol ship
- The players travel to Quadrant 14, elude a battle in progress and land on S'hanthus
- The group moves through some caves, fighting native creatures, to find the ranger base
- The players must defeat creatures of Shadow to free the rangers from the base
- The players are (most likely) captured by Centauri after leaving the planet
- The players escape when the Centauri ship is attacked
- The players face a final showdown with Centauri guards and another Shadow creature in the doomed Centauri ship's shuttle bay

Names and Places of Interest

- G'Trokk: Narn who needs help rescuing his 'family' (actually a ranger training encampment)
- Quadrant 14: Narn system attacked by the Centauri in the spark that set off the war
- R'Shon: Narn assassin who tries to kill Theresa Cross
- S'hanthus: Fourth planet of Quadrant 14 where a ranger training base is hidden
- *Nemesis:* Centauri Haven provided by Theresa Cross for this mission
- Tareen Feraz: Centauri agent who helps the *Nemesis* get into Centauri-occupied space
- Admiral Priya: Centauri commander of the garrison in Quadrant 14
- Tunnel Worm: Creature native to S'hanthus that attacks by burrowing through walls
- Tobias: Ranger inductee the players meet early in their explorations
- Dark Hunter: Creature of Shadow that attacks the players and rangers on S'hanthus
- Armoured Rat: Vermin native to S'hanthus that attacks from hiding
- Tinthatil: Ranger in charge of the S'hanthus base
- Lieutenant Nevia: Cowardly Centauri officer put in charge of the captured *Nemesis*

While the eyes of the Galaxy have been on the Narn-Centauri War, Theresa Cross has been busy. She's met with all manner of potential allies in her quest to discover the truth behind what's going on within the Earth Alliance. In the process, she's learned a number of disturbing things—things that quite frankly leave her numb with fear.

Behind the cover of making the Earth Alliance 'safe for humanity again,' President Clark has gone too far. He has secretly allied Earth with an ancient, destructive alien force that will soon throw the galaxy into chaos. Clark is on his way to becoming the new Hitler. Under cover of racism and 'Humans First,' he plans nothing less than the conquest of the galaxy—and this will doom the Earth as surely as it doomed the Dilgar, and all those other would-be conquering races that came before.

Worse, the mysterious aliens—whose technology Theresa has been so helpful in locating—are behind Clark all the way. She knows these 'Shadows' must have an agenda that extends beyond helping Clark take power. Surely a race so advanced and powerful wouldn't concern themselves with a tin-plated would-be dictator when other, more powerful empires are available to act as pawns. So what are their true goals? Theresa doesn't know. She wants very much to know, however. That's why she's so active in seeking allies and informants.

Now, her network is bearing fruit. Entirely on her own, she's learned about a clandestine group known as the 'rangers.' Made up of mostly humans working alongside Minbari and a few other races, these people share Theresa's goals almost one hundred percent. They both intend to stand as beacons of light against the dangerous Shadows. All that remains is for Theresa to make contact with these people. Yet this is more difficult than it appears. The rangers won't even consider talking to a former IPX agent, no matter how good her cover story is—or how many people seem to be trying to kill her. This leaves Theresa only one possible way to reach the rangers and prove herself worthy of their trust.

Once again, she must call upon the players…

Suggested Level for This Module: 4-6 4th level characters

BEFORE THE MODULE

As usual, several links to other scenarios are available. Note that Alison Fernandez, Caitlin Schulz, and the *Liberty's Fortune* don't leave the station after the end of the previous module. If asked, they explain that the ongoing Narn-Centauri War makes travel difficult, so they're basically on permanent station here should Theresa need the players for anything on a moment's notice. The players will have access to the *Liberty* for the beginning of this module and all intervening scenarios.

Link to 'All Alone in the Night'

During this episode, aliens known as the Streib kidnap Captain Sheridan and a number of other pilots from throughout civilised space. The intervention of the Omega Destroyer *Agamemnon* and several other vessels destroys the Streib ship and ends the threat. Or does it?

Some members of the Earth Alliance aren't so sure. The Streib homeworld has been located and their raiding ship dealt with, but who's to say they won't try again? What if they're taking what they've learned and mobilising for war? A small team is needed to return to the Streib planet and set up an automated listening post in the system. Special Forces would do this themselves, but EarthForce doesn't have a team close enough, and besides, if they're caught, this could spark a war. Intelligence believes that the Streib won't protest the recent justified action against them, but further missions into their space could fan a fire that right now is just an ember.

This mission is more appropriate for players who have an individual with a military background of some sort among their number. If the group is all civilian, they probably won't get this assignment, unless they've proven themselves capable of stealthy operations in the past.

The scenario begins as Colonel Wilhelm Schmidt, an Army officer, approaches the group in their usual haunts. He explains that he has a job for them, if they're interested. The pay is 250 credits each plus expenses, as well as the gratitude of the Earth Alliance. If the players at least agree to listen to his mission, he explains that all he needs is for certain equipment to be placed on a certain moon in a certain system, the name of which will be given to them after the mission begins. No combat is required and the moon is known to be uninhabited and airless. The only caveat is that if the players get in trouble or are captured, the military won't acknowledge them or send a rescue party.

Schmidt also offers the players the use of a corporate escort (see p.148 of the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*) if they don't have their own ship. However, he won't provide any crew. Since the corporate escort is fast and armed, the players are advised to accept this kind offer. Alison and Caitlin will agree to come along, if only out of curiosity—or so they claim. Actually, Theresa Cross has asked them both to keep close to the group at all times, so they have little choice but to come along.

Naturally, the players aren't required to undertake this mission, and if they don't, Alison and Caitlin are off the hook. Colonel Schmidt will just find someone else willing to take on the challenge, expressing his disappointment. The players will never learn if he did find another group, or if they were indeed successful. If the players do agree, however, they are directed to the docking bay, where the corporate escort *Liarbane* awaits.

Launch occurs normally, under Caitlin's careful control. However, once the ship enters hyperspace, Caitlin discovers that the ship's navigational systems have taken on a life of their own and are flying the vessel on autopilot. (If they are using the *Liberty's Fortune*, this doesn't happen, so modify the box text appropriately.) A pre-recorded message then plays, explaining their mission.

The image of Colonel Schmidt appears, dressed in the same uniform you saw earlier. He begins to speak. 'Sorry to keep this all a secret, but you know how things are with us military types. (He laughs.) You'll be going to Streib space. You probably remember them—they were all over the media recently. They like to kidnap people and do medical experiments, so keep away from them at all costs. You'll be dropping out of hyperspace at a small temporary jump gate we left behind well outside the Streib system. We want you to unload the listening post in the cargo bay and set it up on the fifth moon of the gas giant marked in your nav computer. The whole thing's totally automated, but you need to set it up yourself. All the instructions are in the cargo bay—just make sure you put the equipment on the right side of the moon, or it won't be of any use to us. Oh, when you're ready to come back, just head back to the jump gate. Once you're in hyperspace, the ship flies back here on its own. I wouldn't try to steal it, if I were you. Not that such fine, upstanding citizens as yourself would ever do such a thing. See you when you get back!'

After this announcement, the screen goes blank. Caitlin checks it and discovers that the message has since been erased. She then does some further verification, and announces that she can't alter the ship's course. You're on your way, and there's nothing you can do about it.

The trip to the Streib system takes two days. It's actually surprisingly close to Babylon 5, considering how dangerous and unknown this alien race is. The system lies far off any established jump routes. Were it not for the presence of the temporary jump gate, left behind by the EA following the destruction of the raiding ship, Caitlin can't be sure she'd ever be able to find it. This is a sobering thought—if the gate were to be discovered and destroyed prior to the end of the trip, the players would be lost forever in hyperspace.

Fortunately, nothing of the sort happens. The ship arrives in the vicinity of the Streib system without incident, and there are no patrol ships hanging about. In fact, there are no ships at all on the *Liarbane's* sensors. The way seems clear to the gas giant, but let the players take charge here. They know nothing at all about the Streib system, or where they're going. Fortunately, a Technical (space travel) check (DC 16) will discover a database within the ship's

computer that describes what is known about the system. See the sidebar.

The Streib System: The actual name for this system isn't known; the official term is 'the Streib system' while the sun has the rather inauspicious moniker of 'Star M-16533-AR.' The Minbari know a route to this system, but until they shared this information with the Earth Alliance, they kept that information to themselves, because they considered the Streib an isolated and dangerous race that needed to be kept apart from the rest of the civilised galaxy.

Star M-16533-AR is a blue-white dwarf with six planets and the usual array of scattered asteroids, comets, and other inter-system debris. The second planet, which is about 50% water, is home to the Streib race. It's located on the extreme edge of the system's life belt and is covered with clouds, so sunlight is a rare sight on the surface. In addition to the home planet, the system has two airless rocks and three small gas giants. The last of these has eight moons, the fifth of which is the choice for the automated listening post in the *Liarbane's* cargo bay. Presently, the sixth planet is nearing perihelion (the closest approach to the sun) and is also almost in direct conjunction with the Streib homeworld. Thus, it is actually nearer to the Streib than any other planets in the system except the first—which is much too risky to approach.

Eventually—if the players proceed with the mission—they will take their ship towards the gas giant, with Caitlin at the helm. Presumably, they will approach by swinging wide around the outskirts of the system and approaching from the Oort cloud (the area where comets are born). They may even think to close while on silent running. As they move in, they activate a number of magnetic mines that Caitlin immediately detects. The mines seem to have their own thrusters, as they angle towards the ship of their own accord. Should they hit, they attach with a clang that reverberates throughout the entire length of the hull. Fortunately, the mines are ancient and don't go off immediately, but they could blow up at any time—or so Caitlin warns.

Streib Magnetic Mines: These are captor mines with 10 hit points, DR 5, stealth 15, speed 3, and fuel 5. They are arranged in a spread as the Games Master wishes, in such a way that at least several will be encountered as the players approach the planet. The players can elude them by accelerating through the field, or by going in a straight line slowly while blasting away at any that approach. However, even if one hits, it doesn't explode. These are very old mines, so their triggers don't go off immediately upon impact.

Once attached, a magnetic mine can only be removed with an EVA. This requires a spacewalk and a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 20). The mine can then be removed and discarded. If the players wish to keep a mine for examination and/or sale, this requires a Technical (mechanical) check (DC 27). Failure activates the mine, which will explode in 2 rounds, scoring 10d6 blast damage to anything within 50 feet. The player will instantly be aware of the mine's activation and has one more chance to deactivate it. After that, he'll have to fling it into space or otherwise get rid of it before it goes off. If the explosion occurs aboard ship, this could be disastrous!

Should a mine attach and the players leave it on board, it explodes if the ship attempts to land, or if they go into hyperspace. After this, the players should be more than motivated to go extra-vehicular to try removing any others that are on the hull!

After the players deal with the mines, they then have to get to the moon. As they approach, Caitlin detects an energy signature on the surface and slows the ship before entering orbit. Sure enough, a ground-based turret starts firing a moment later, but it's out of range. The turret has range 5, damage 10+2d10, critical 20, attack +2, DR 10, and hit points 20. It also has only a 180-degree field of fire, so if the *Liarbane* flies to the other side of the moon, it can land without any further incident.

The problem is that, according to Colonel Schmidt's pre-recorded instructions, the automated listening post must be placed on the same side of the moon as the turret. The obvious worry is that whoever's manning the turret will spot the equipment. Therefore, Alison recommends the players mount a mission to destroy the structure.

How the players proceed is up to them:

Direct Assault: They can, of course, attack the turret directly (from orbit), giving it a couple of pot-shots before they get close enough to use the ship's weapons. Unless they took a lot of damage from mines, they have enough firepower on the corporate escort to take care of the turret fairly easily. If they're hurt or didn't bring the *Liarbane*, this option is right out.

Walking to the Turret: If the players avoid the turret and land on the other side of the moon, they can move to within a half-mile of the outpost by hugging the ground. Caitlin eventually lands, afraid to get too close without getting blasted. The players can then walk across the moon's rocky, airless surface using the ship's pressure suits for protection. Note that the moon has very low gravity, although this isn't likely to come into play as there are no encounters on the surface. The turret, which is automated, can be destroyed with demolitions charges, or deactivated with a Technical (engineering) check (DC 28). If the players aren't able to do either of these things, they can spike the guns with rocks or any other handy materials. When the ship flies away later, the turret blows itself up trying to shoot at them.

Ignoring the Turret: If the players want to be sneaky, they can just set up the listening post without bothering with the turret. If they get within 100 yards, a Knowledge (structural engineering) check (DC 17) allows a player to recognise that this can only be an automated facility. Not only that, it's very old—it may have been here for decades. With this knowledge, the players can rightly conclude that there's no reason to even worry about the turret. They can set up the listening post right under its guns if they wish.

Once the turret is dealt with, the players can unload the ship and set up the listening post. Doing so isn't as easy as Colonel Schmidt suggested—it requires a Technical (engineering) check (DC 28). However, the players can take 20 on this check, as nothing is threatening them at present.

Once back in space, the ship can leave the system without incident. If the players took the time to note their cleared passage through the minefield, they can get back that way without trouble. Otherwise, they may have more run-ins with mines, but even these don't attract the attention of the Streib.

Just as the players are getting ready to leave the system, though, Caitlin reports she's picking up something on her long-range scanners. As the players watch the scope, read this:

As you watch, dozens of very large blips appear in the vicinity of the Streib homeworld. They form into a huge armada, appearing as if out of nowhere. No, not nowhere. You soon realise they're rising off the surface of the planet, collecting near a single blip that's much larger than the others. Then, after about ten seconds, a jump point begins to form. The huge fleet begins to make the transition into hyperspace until only the huge battleship-sized spot remains. Then, it too slides into the vortex and disappears.

They players would be wise to hang out for an hour or so to make sure they don't bump into that mighty host while they're in hyperspace, but it doesn't matter. The Streib fleet has departed for Z'ha'dum, although the players will have no way of knowing that.

After the players get back, they receive their pay from Colonel Schmidt, who tells them their mission will have to remain a secret for now. If the players also brought back some intact mines, Schmidt pays them 500 credits for them, saying they're obviously old but could still provide some useful insights on Streib technology. He'll give a similar bounty if the players collected a significant amount of the Streib ground turret. The players can sell these items for twice this value on the black market, if they so wish.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 300

Link to 'Acts of Sacrifice'

In this episode, a Lumati delegation arrives on Babylon 5 to set up diplomatic contact between their people and the Earth Alliance. Susan Ivanova is given the task of making the arrangements, only to discover the Lumati have an… ummm…*unique* requirement before agreeing to any treaty. She escapes without any real difficulty, but will the players be as lucky?

This side scenario should be played mostly for laughs. Alison Fernandez asks the players to meet with the Lumati on behalf of Theresa Cross—at this point she's still putting out feelers, trying to acquire new allies and learn everything she can about what IPX has really been up to. In particular, she wants to know what deal the Lumati made with the Earth Alliance, and whether or not the Lumati have ever had any dealings with humans in the past.

To do this, the players must prove to the Lumati that they're worthy of consideration. After talking with Ivanova, the Lumati delegates decide that the Earth Alliance in general has 'moral standards' that are acceptable. However, that doesn't mean every group of humans is worthy. Therefore, the Lumati ambassador, Correlilmurzon (speaking through his aide, who acts as a translator) insists that before he'll speak to any other representatives of humanity, the players will have to prove themselves. No matter what accomplishments the players point to, they'll be unable to convince him without taking action—Correlilmurzon isn't interested in the past, only the present.

This scenario is highly improvisational. The players will have to come up with their own challenge and then meet it. The 'mission'—or whatever else they come up with—can be simple or complex, but must adequately impress the Lumati ambassador. When adjudicating the results, the Games Master should keep in mind that the Lumati are aliens and don't think like humans do. For example, in 'Acts of Sacrifice,' Correlilmurzon was impressed by Downbelow because it showed how humans were willing to house their superior citizens apart from the lesser ones. The players could take a similar tack—a perfect solution to the problem would be to arrange some sort of contest to prove they were superior to everyone else. Let the players be as creative as they can get.

Naturally, once the Lumati are impressed, they want to seal their deal the same way they did with Ivanova—with sex. This time, though, they're wise to the 'human way' and insist on their own methods. If none of the players want to agree—and they almost assuredly won't—Alison Fernandez grits her teeth and 'throws herself on the grenade.' She disappears into Correlilmurzon's quarters for about half an hour, and when she comes out, she goes straight to her quarters, alone. She never talks about that half hour again—ever.

She does, however, succeed in her mission, gaining the information Theresa Cross wanted, while setting up a line of communication between the ex-IPX agent and the Lumati. Whether or not this will come in handy in the future is anybody's guess.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 100 (plus 100 for any player who accedes to the Lumati ambassador's final 'test')

Link to 'Hunter, Prey'

In this episode, Dr. Everett Jacobs is on Babylon 5, hiding out from Earth Special Intelligence. He supposedly has on his person top-secret information that could 'bring down the Earth Alliance.' What he actually has is medical data that proves President Clark had foreknowledge of the destruction of EarthForce One. Eventually, Sheridan is able to hide him from the ESI agents and recover the data crystal that contains the vital information.

If the players have reason to hear of this developing story, Alison Fernandez's ears perk up. This is exactly the sort of thing she's been warned to watch out for. The information Jacobs possesses could be invaluable to her cause. Therefore, Alison attempts to convince the players to join in the hunt for Jacobs and try to acquire the information for her employer.

During the course of the episode, two human lurkers named Max and Tyrell kidnap Dr. Jacobs. Upon discovering the data crystal, Max takes it and Jacobs's antique pocket watch. He sells the watch to a shady merchant and uses the crystal to bargain with Agent Derek Cranston of ESI. Meanwhile, Garibaldi and Dr. Franklin are able to retrace Max's steps to rescue Jacobs.

This leaves a period of about 20 minutes during which the data crystal can be examined and possibly copied. If the players have any connections in Downbelow, they can potentially use them to track down Jacobs before Garibaldi does. The two lurkers have to pass through Brown Seven to get to their hidden lair, so if the players are on good relations with Frankie the Rat, they can potentially use that relationship to locate Max and Tyrell. Another way is to intercept the communications between Max and Agent Cranston, determining his location by either tracing the signal, or by calling him themselves to make a private offer.

If the players are able to get to Max before Garibaldi or Cranston do, they can either take the crystal for themselves, or just make a copy of it. If they don't want a showdown with Max, they can simply pay him to copy the crystal (200 credits is his asking price). If they take the crystal, they can return it to Security for a similar reward—presumably after copying it for Theresa Cross. Of course, if they do make a copy for Theresa, they had better keep this information secret, as Captain Sheridan will be none too pleased if he learns of their duplicity.

If they do acquire the data for Theresa, she admits that it includes only information she already knew from previous investigations. However, this is the first time she actually has in her hands good, solid proof. With this, she can surely attract new allies to her cause. She adds a bonus of 500 credits to the players' joint expense account as a bonus.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 100

Link to 'There All the Honour Lies'

In this episode, the station is forced by dwindling finances to sell Babylon 5 official merchandise in Zocalo stores and elsewhere. Although this effort is to be short-lived, some of the merchants come up with surprisingly effective ideas for making money, including such things as baseball caps, alien (and human) masks, teddy bears, and of course the controversy-stirring anatomically incorrect dolls. Another seller takes all of this a step further—he arranges to sell a set of collectible 'Babylon 5 Personalities' trading cards.

The cards are sold individually, in foil packets that contain a random assortment of cards. A complete set consists of 40 individuals, ranging from Lt. Keffer, Na'Toth, Vir and Lennier all the way up to the top ambassadors, including Kosh. At the top of the list is Captain Sheridan. If any of the players are significantly important, they may have a card of their own!

Immediately after the Babylon 5 Personalities release, the common (low-level) cards start showing up in the trash, while the rare and ultra-rare top cards start commanding high prices. As word begins to filter through the station that all official B5 merchandise will soon be cancelled, the cards begin to appreciate ever higher in value, with a Sheridan card selling for over 100 credits, and many others going for 50 credits or more.

Soon the very last of the card packs is gone, less than two weeks after the craze began. In some parts of Downbelow, the rare cards are worth more than credit chits. There are even cases of violence and even a murder attributed to the collectibles.

Naturally, the players can get involved in the speculating if they so desire—and yes, this is a blatant parody of the collectible card game market! Acquiring a complete set should be incredibly difficult. Yet, as the craze reaches its peak, a speculator approaches the players with an offer they can't refuse. The individual in question will be someone the players have met previously—perhaps Frankie the Rat, or someone else with good money and connections. He says he's managed to get his hands on a complete set of 'B5P' cards and wants to make the ultimate collectible item out of them. He wants the players to get every single card personally autographed! In response, the players will receive 50% of the profits once the set is sold at auction following its completion.

Acquiring the autographs will be easy for some, difficult for others, and near impossible for several. All of the low-level cards are easy to take care of, as long as the individual in question is still alive—e.g., if the players wait until after 'Divided Loyalties,' they lose their shot at Talia Winters, and after Season Two ends, Lt. Keffer is lost as well. The players may have to jump through hoops to get some of the others, however. Here are some suggestions:

Ambassadors Mollari and G'Kar: Since the Centauri and Narns are now at war, these two will probably ask the players to do something against the other. G'Kar may ask the players to fasten a listening device near the Centauri ambassador's quarters, while Mollari may try to convince the group to investigate Narn 'food' shipments passing through Babylon 5. The shipments may turn out to indeed be food…or they might be weapons instead. Another option is to have the players *plant* weapons in Narn food crates so they can be 'discovered' later by customs officials, thereby creating a diplomatic incident on the supposedly 'neutral' station.

Michael Garibaldi: He only signs a card if the players are friendly to Security. If they've been a pain in Security's neck, he refuses, unless they prove themselves worthy of his trust. Why should he reward those who are obviously troublemakers? Getting his signature in this case could be an entire side scenario in and of itself.

Captain Sheridan: Unless the players have done something for him lately, they won't be able to get his autograph for any reason. He's just too busy. If the players ask him for the autograph during the events of 'And Now For a Word,' he agrees on the condition that the players escort Cynthia Torqueman around the station to make sure she doesn't get in any trouble. This is a particularly appropriate mission if the players were of help with the pushy Tania Lancaster between Modules Two and Three.

Susan Ivanova: Ivanova absolutely loathes all the commercialisation on the station, so if the players try to get her signature, she's going to start screaming to get the hell away. The only way they're going to get her autograph is by doing her a really big favour. If they continue to bother her about it, she eventually becomes exasperated enough to agree to sign—if the players will sweep the station to ensure that all the Susan Ivanova plush dolls are collected and destroyed. This takes several days and about 500 credits in 'kill fees,' but it can be accomplished, and she eventually signs the card in frustration.

Ambassador Kosh: Kosh, of course, doesn't have a signature. If the players visit him and ask for some kind of mark, he will say something appropriately cryptic, like, 'We all carry our own marks within.' After that he just glides away without any further response. The players may leave that card blank, or come up with some other solution, like forging a Vorlon mark on the card. A Forgery check (DC 15) succeeds in this case.

Others: The Games Master should feel free to introduce any number of small side scenarios to acquire other signatures. Even a personality who appeared in only a few episodes (such as the aforementioned Lt. Keffer, or someone like Na'Toth or Zack Allen) might ask for something unique in exchange for his autograph. Some might want money, or even a share of the profits from the sale. Another might ask that his share be donated to a charity, or for the players to directly aid that charity in some way. The possibilities are endless.

The players can also attempt to forge the autograph of any individual they can't convince to agree to sign the card. However, they should be careful. If they claim, for example, to have Mollari's signature when they really don't, he'll be quick to point out that the autograph is a forgery. Also, although the buyer may not recognise the signatures as forgeries, whoever eventually winds up with the set may be able to do so, and may come looking for a refund.

The amount of money the players make off the sale depends entirely on the difficulty involved in collecting the autographs and the amount of time they take to do so. They may still be trying to gain all the signatures when the events of Module Four overtake them. However, the offer will still stand upon their return. After all, the autographed complete set of cards is going to be a unique item, the likes of which no one else on the station could possibly acquire.

Suggested experience for this scenario: Varies depending on difficulty

Link to 'Confessions and Lamentations'

In this episode, the Drafa plague comes to Babylon 5, killing the entire Markab population and threatening other races that have similar blood composition. Dr. Franklin synthesises a cure, but the rest of the Markab race is virtually wiped out by the fast-moving plague. If there are any Markab players, they're in serious trouble…they'll need to take regular doses of Dr. Franklin's cure or else they'll perish within days.

After the Drafa plague wipes out most of the Markab people, Dr. Franklin remembers something about the spirituality of that race. Upon investigating further, he discovers what he was looking for. In various places about the galaxy, the Markabs have established Shadrak shrines—small bases used as spiritual centres for meditation on the beauty of the Universe. Most of these shrines are located around gorgeous stellar and nebula formations, and some may have escaped the Drafa plague.

Calling upon his own contacts in the Earth Alliance, Minbari Federation, and other sympathisers, Dr. Franklin summons a hodgepodge fleet of ships to take the cure to every Shadrak shrine shown in the computer's records. If the players have helped Dr. Franklin before, or are known to take on such missions, they get an invitation. Otherwise,

they discover an advertisement in the Universe Today asking for ship owners willing to make a humanitarian 'medicine run.' Those who respond will be given compensation for their time and fuel.

Since the players have access to the *Liberty's Fortune*, they may well take Dr. Franklin up on his offer. He agrees to pay 1,000 credits for the four-day round trip to the Valdora Nebula, where a Shadrak shrine orbits this majestic stellar nursery. All the players have to do is deliver a briefcase full of medicine, data crystals explaining the nature of the cure and how to make more vaccine, and ensure that the Markabs on the station understand what's at stake. For all Dr. Franklin knows, the Shadrak shrines may already be victims of the plague, and if so, the players should return at once.

The Valdora Nebula: This isn't a nebula in the true sense of the word, as most such formations are made of nothing but gas and dust. Valdora is, in fact, a star system under construction. A whirling accretion disk is in the process of forming, with one star growing in the centre and at least two other potential stars in orbit nearby. Other planet-like structures are also beginning to take shape. The Shadrak orbits one of these, passing through the dust cloud once per year, and otherwise staying high enough above the ecliptic that viewers are treated to a spectacular, awe-inspiring sight. Markabs from all over the galaxy make regular pilgrimages here to renew their faith, so it seems very unlikely that the plague hasn't stretched this far.

After getting their instructions and the supplies in question, the players set off for the shrine, which is two days away and off the beaten jump paths. The journey is uninteresting, but upon their arrival in the Valdora system, they get a surprise. A voice contacts them at once, coming from the shrine. 'Unidentified ship,' comes the warning, 'you are not wanted here. Depart immediately or we will open fire!'

Shadrak Shrine: These small bases are found scattered throughout Markab space, as well as nearby neutral territories and anywhere else an awe-inspiring stellar formation can be found. The purpose of a Shadrak shrine is strictly for meditation, insight, and prayer. Most are open to all religions and sects, particularly pilgrims seeking enlightenment and purity. At any given time, Markabs of all stations and classes could be found at a Shadrak shrine, studying their gods through the beauty of the universe that surrounds them. Even members of other races, and especially True Seekers, are permitted access to these stations.

Shadrak shrines are armed, but only to make them a difficult target for raiders. Pirates were known to attack such places, or vessels approaching them, looking for religious artefacts or other treasures. Sometimes a high-ranking priest might be kidnapped for ransom. In troubled times, Shadrak shrines were often guarded by any number of defensive vessels, especially if someone of high rank was present at the site.

Because they are used by the faithful to study nearby interstellar phenomena, Shadrak shrines are equipped with powerful sensor arrays. In a combat situation, these can be used for ELINT purposes (see the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*, p.115), a fact which also made them easier to defend.

Statistics:
Colossal III Starbase; hp 600; DV -2 (–12 size, +0 agility); DR 16; Spd N/A; Acc N/A; Dec N/A; Han N/A; Sensor +8; Stealth 2; SQ Immobile, Artificial Gravity (Rotating), Long-Ranged, ELINT; Cargo 200,000 lb.; 4 Officers, 12 Sensor Operators, 100 Crewmen, 500 Passengers

Weapons:
8 Heavy Plasma Cannon; 2 Front, 2 Left, 2 Right, 2 Rear; Attack +4 (targeting computer); Damage 35+4d10; Critical 19-20; Range 3
8 Scatterguns; 2 Front, 2 Left, 2 Right, 2 Rear; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 1; Rapid Fire
4 Stun Beams; 1 Front, 1 Left, 1 Right, 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 1d6; Critical 20; Range 5

Craft:
6 fighters, 2 shuttles

Stun Beam: The stun beam is designed to degrade enemy ships and fighters, making them unwilling to press the attack. If a stun beam hits an enemy craft, the weapon creates electromagnetic disturbances that last 1d6+1 rounds. For ships, one random weapon is knocked out, sensors are reduced by 1, all crew skill checks suffer a –2 penalty, and all to-hit rolls are reduced by 1 for that period of time. For fighters, the pilot suffers a –2 penalty to all Pilot checks for the duration of the effect. On a critical hit, these effects last 1d6+1 minutes instead of 1d6+1 rounds. On a critical hit against a fighter, the pilot also suffers 1d6 real damage from electrical shocks.

If the players attempt to approach, the Shadrak fires a warning plasma shot across the *Liberty's* bow, and stun beams open up against the ship. The voice on the comm continues to shout out a warning, but a player who succeeds in a Sense Motive check (DC 22) recognises desperation in the defender's voice. It sounds like the individual on the other end of the line doesn't really want to shoot. If the players turn around and leave, reporting failure in their mission, a follow-up expedition discovers that the station's entire population is dead.

On the other hand, if the players land anyway, the weapons fire ceases and no attempt is made to stop the *Liberty* from landing. However, as soon as the players disembark, read this:

The hangar is open and empty. You think that perhaps a dozen shuttles or small craft like the Liberty's Fortune might once have docked here. Now, there is nothing but open space between you and the inner airlock. You make your way towards it cautiously, feeling strangely exposed without any cover available. Suddenly the doors ahead swing open, and you behold a horrible sight. At least a dozen Markabs, obviously sick with the Drafa plague, lunge towards you bearing all manner of weapons. They look frenzied as they attack. Roll initiative…

Crazed Markabs

1st Level Markab Workers (14)
Hit Points: 5
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft.
DV: 11 (+11 Reflex)
Attacks: +1 melee or +1 ranged
Special Qualities: None
Saves: Fort –1, Ref +1, Will –2
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 12, Con 4*, Int 10, Wis 6, Cha 10 (* = weakened by disease)
Skills: Climb +5, Computer Use +4, Concentration +1, Jump +5, Listen +2, Spot +2
Feats: Varies (none that apply to the battle)
Equipment: Knives, fists, broken bottles, sticks, improvised weapons of all kinds

These Markabs believe they are impure, and have been marked for death by their gods. They won't listen to any attempt to save them, and in fact, they see the players as demons come to tempt them in their time of trial. They attack until knocked out or killed.

Obviously, these won't be much of a threat to the players, but the challenge is to keep as many of them alive as possible. If the players can subdue them and apply the cure, they'll be able to save at least this small lot of Markabs from certain death.

Elsewhere in the station, a single Markab priest, Loghrem, remains alive. So far, he's proven resistant to the plague, but he knows his time will come. He believes he'll be the very last of his kind and is ready for death. He's the one who fired the base's weapons at the approaching ship, but his doctrine of pacifism prevented him from actually trying to destroy it. The same applies when the players find him in the control room. He rushes them with a staff, swinging to subdue and hoping the invaders slay him quickly. Use the stats for the Crazed Markabs (see sidebar) except that Loghrem has Con 10 and wields a staff (1d6 bludgeoning damage, critical 20).

If the players keep Loghrem alive and cure him of the plague, they can convince him that Drafa isn't a punishment, but an ordinary disease. This can only be done if they succeed in a Diplomacy check (DC 20) accompanied by vivid descriptions of the death of the entire Markab race. If Loghrem accepts their word, he takes the data crystal and reads its message carefully. Then he agrees to set up this shrine as a haven for any Markab survivors who wish to try to find new enlightenment in this time of their people's greatest trial. The players can now depart, sure in the knowledge that they've at least saved a tiny fraction of the Markab population from annihilation.

Suggested experience for this scenario: 25 points for each Markab not killed in the initial attack (max 300)

Encounter One: Assassination Attempt

Theresa Cross arrives on Babylon 5 in disguise. Even Alison and Caitlin don't know she's coming, or that she's even made the trip. Things start off with this bit of box text:

As usual, at the end of a long day, you're hanging around the Nova Nine chatting and talking with your friends. Even Alison is there, sharing a drink with the rest of you and laughing at your stories of the latest bureaucratic snafu in Admin. Then, as you snicker at the latest joke, an old woman shuffles up to your table, hobbling on a cane. In a withered voice she says, 'Do you mind if I buy you all a drink?'

Before you can all decide how to respond to that, Alison's eyes go wide. 'Oh my God!' she exclaims. 'Theresa? Is that you?'

Now your gaze pierces heavy makeup and skilful costuming. The old woman is, in fact, Theresa Cross in disguise! 'Yes, it's me,' she whispers hastily. 'Not so loud! I'm incognito for a reason, you know!'

After a semi-tearful reunion with Alison, Theresa sits down at the table and does indeed buy a round of drinks for the group. Then she explains the reason she's here. Several Narns have come to her asking for help. They are survivors of the very first attack of the Narn-Centauri War—the Shadow strike in Quadrant 14, which set off the entire conflict. The Narn refugees have family members they believe are still hiding out in an abandoned mining station in the captured system, where they remain underground for fear of capture and execution. The refugees fear that their family members will die for lack of supplies if they aren't rescued soon. Theresa has agreed to help them, and wants the players to provide whatever aid they can.

Of course, this isn't just about a humanitarian mission. Theresa knows that the 'abandoned mining station' actually houses a secret ranger training facility that's now trapped behind Centauri lines. She feels that by rescuing any rangers she can find, she'll earn their trust and be invited into their organisation. Naturally, the players will also be perfect for the ranger team—even if some of the group's members are a little unorthodox in their methods. However, she's afraid

to tell the players the whole truth about the mission. If she's wrong about anything—the presence of the rangers, their willingness to trust Theresa, the ability of the players to make the rescue—she could endanger her own future with the rangers entirely. She figures that even if she sacrifices the players and the mission is a failure, she can still come out ahead in the eyes of the rangers, because to them, just making the attempt will show she's a worthy ally.

As usual, the players can ask any questions they like. Some possible answers follow. Items marked with a * indicate lies or half-truths that can be detected by a contested Sense Motive check against Theresa's formidable Bluff skill (+17).

'Who are these Narns we're rescuing?' 'None of them have any real rank of which to speak, but some are members of G'Trokk's family. He knows there were efforts being made in Quadrant 14 to establish an underground colony on the fourth planet in the system, and his family was one of the first settlers. There may be as many as a hundred Narns there. You'll be able to talk to G'Trokk later—he'll be going with you on the mission—so you can wait for his briefing.'

'Who is this G'Trokk?' 'He's a Narn official of not much influence, I'm afraid, but he does happen to be wealthy,* and he's also just the sort of ally I need in the Narns. I have…my own reasons for wanting to enlist the Narns, but I'm not going to trouble all of you with that right now. Suffice to say that if the Narns win the war, I expect G'Trokk to move up in the hierarchy, and I'm going to need all the help I can get considering what's coming.'

'What do you mean? What's coming?' 'Nothing.* Never mind.' (She's obviously concerned about something here. A Sense Motive reveals she's much more upset than she lets on.)

'Why do we have to do this? Why not the Narns?' 'The Narns have tried several times to retake Quadrant 14, but they can't. There's not much there, anyway—just a ruined colony the Centauri have picked clean by now. The Centauri seem to be building a base of some kind, but the Narns keep going in and destroying it before it's finished. I don't think either of them know about the underground colony.'

'Why don't the Narns know about it?' 'Because it was local to Quadrant 14, and nobody else from that colony survived to send in a report. Besides, maybe the Narns do know. If they do, though, they can't afford the time it'll take to undertake a rescue mission. The Centauri will be on them like flies on dung.'

'So how the hell are we supposed to get in?' Theresa smiles. 'Because I have a secret weapon. I have a ship. You'll see what I mean later. G'Trokk will brief you once you're under way.'

'How much does this pay?' 'Nothing from me…but I'm told G'Trokk will happily reward you each with 1,000 credits if you rescue his family. He can afford it, after all. Not only that, but I'm pretty sure he has plenty of equipment for you aboard the ship. You'll see what I mean once you're under way.'

'Anything special we need to take?' 'Not that I can think of. The colony was underground, and if it's still functional, it should have normal gravity and plenty of air. I'm pretty sure there's pressure suits and weapons for you on the ship. Ask G'Trokk later. You need to be at docking port A-19 in an hour. Caitlin's already there in the *Liberty's Fortune*, waiting to take you to the rendezvous.'

'How long do you think this mission will take?' 'Maybe a couple of weeks. The ship we need isn't exactly docked to Babylon 5, so you'll need to use a circuitous route. Plan for three weeks, just to be safe.'

'What if we don't go?' She shrugs, but seems very disappointed. 'Nothing. I'll just find other resources.* Alison, of course I'll need you in either case.' (If the Sense Motive check succeeds, the player realises there are no other resources. Theresa was banking entirely on the players taking this assignment, as she has no other options available.)

Others: The players can interrogate Theresa all they want, but she won't reveal that there's anything else going on, other than a simple rescue. They might get the occasional Sense Motive tweak, but she's not outright lying—just hiding the fact that there's more to this mission than meets the eye.

Meanwhile, as the conversation turns to less important matters, have everyone make a Spot check (DC 30). If anyone succeeds, they can act normally during the surprise round that follows this box text:

You're continuing to talk things over with Theresa, asking for more details about the mission she's planning, when suddenly a Narn walks past. You don't see a lot of Narns in the Nova Nine—apparently British pubs aren't a big draw for members of that race—but they do show up occasionally. This one stops, though, and before you can react, he draws a pistol and aims it directly at Theresa Cross's chest!

The assassin doesn't say a word as he pulls the trigger. His first action is to fire the gun once (with complete surprise over Theresa Cross), and his second is to drop a flash-bang grenade as he rushes out of the Nova Nine. Patrons scream and rush every which way during the confusion. If not pursued, he quickly disappears into the station and is lost to sight. Meanwhile, Theresa lies bleeding and unconscious on the floor, barely clinging to life. She took 28 points of damage in the Narn's cowardly sneak attack.

R'Shon
8th Level Narn Agent/2nd Level Thenta Makur Assassin
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +4 (+4 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 22 (+12 Reflex)
Attacks: +8/+3 melee or +12/+7 ranged
Special Qualities: Low-Light Vision, Damage Resistance 3 (armour), Security Systems, Sneak Attack +2d6, Skill Mastery (Escape Artist, Move Silently, Spot)
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +12, Will +3
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 19, Con 16, Int 15, Wis 12, Cha 10
Skills: Computer Use +15, Concentration +16, Disguise +13, Gather Information +13, Hide +17, Listen +16, Move Silently +17, Survival +5, Speak Language (Centauri), Spot +16
Feats: Alertness, Combat Reflexes, Point Blank Shot, Weapon Focus (Multi-Part PPG), Weapon Specialisation (Multi-Part PPG)
Equipment: Multi-Part PPG, Narn battle suit, 2 flash-bang grenades, 1 smoke bomb, suicide tooth

R'Shon is an assassin hired to kill Theresa Cross over a month ago. Unable to locate her anywhere else, he came to Babylon 5 to wait for her eventual return to the station. He's been waiting here, watching Alison Fernandez, waiting for his opportunity. If pursued, he employs flash-bang and smoke grenades to cover his escape. If chased, he fights a running battle. If cornered, he kills himself to avoid interrogation.

After the attempt on Theresa's life, R'Shon disappears into the bowels of Babylon 5. Theresa is rushed to Medlab, where Garibaldi puts her in a private room. Alison accompanies her, along with any players who want to go with them. In Medlab, Theresa stirs. 'Go,' she gasps. 'I'll be better when you get back.'

At this, Alison wants to leave within the hour, as originally planned. The players may insist on staying to hunt for R'Shon (assuming he escaped). If they do, she agrees to go talk to G'Trokk at Docking Bay A-19 and try to delay the flight as long as she can. Meanwhile, an all-points bulletin has been issued for the Narn assassin, but no one has seen him since he vanished into the lifts. He's actually in disguise, hiding in Downbelow in the guise of the same out-of-luck Narn lurker he's been for the last month. The players have almost no chance to locate him in the scant hours they have available, unless they call upon all their contacts and helpers in Downbelow and get lucky in a Gather Information check (DC 31). In that case, they can track R'Shon to a corner of Downtown, the unfinished, mostly uninhabited section of Brown Sector nearest the waste reclamation machinery. He'll initially pretend to be shuffling along in a ragged cloak, but as soon as he's challenged, he opens fire and dives for cover. If seriously challenged and unable to escape, he commits suicide. Even in the unlikely event that he's captured, which is all but impossible considering his combat skills, he won't reveal who hired him, even if probed by a telepath. That section of his mind is totally blank.

Should the players be unable to find R'Shon within a couple of hours, Alison calls to say the *Liberty's Fortune* has to leave straightaway. Mr. Garibaldi and Dr. Franklin decide to deal with the assassin by issuing a statement that a woman named Theresa Cross was brutally attacked and murdered in the Nova Nine Pub. They then carefully hide Theresa in a nearby cabin, so that if the assassin comes back, he finds no trace of her in Medlab. Furthermore, her 'coffin' will be shipped back to Earth the next day on a fast shuttle, with security forces arrayed to catch the assailant if he tries to verify her death. Garibaldi insists he'll be able to catch Ms. Cross's attacker, and keep her alive while she recovers in secret. Finally, to drive the final nail in the coffin, Theresa awakens one more time and begs the players to proceed with the rescue attempt. 'This is more important than you know,' she mutters before dropping back into unconsciousness.

Should the players attempt to telepathically contact her while she's out, they detect only that she's sincere in that final statement. Her emotions reveal that she desperately wants the mission to be a success. On a deep scan, through a haze of sedative-induced dreams, the telepath sees visions of a great rain of fire cutting a swath across Earth. Against them stand a few ships, and at the helm of one is Theresa Cross. The overwhelming feeling is that if this mission fails, there may be nothing left to stand against this darkness.

With this in mind, the players should proceed to the *Liberty's Fortune* and set off, leaving Theresa to convalesce in her secure room.

Encounter Two: Occupied Territory

Aboard the *Liberty*, the players find not only the pilot Caitlin Schulz, but also the Narn named G'Trokk. He introduces himself and stays on the ship as it takes off, but asks the players to hold their questions until the vessel is under way. After that, he sits down and makes himself available. (Since G'Trokk will be available as a non-player character throughout this module, his statistics are found in the back of this book in Appendix B.)

'What's your story?' 'My name is G'Trokk. I was an officer stationed at our starbase in Quadrant 14 up until a year ago. Then, I was assigned as adjutant to T'Kron—you would call him a general—in the new effort to colonise the fourth planet of the system. We called it S'hanthus, which means 'Place of Caves.' We were sinking a geothermal power tap when I was called away—and then the treacherous Centauri assaulted Quadrant 14! Now my family is trapped underground, in hiding, praying for rescue.'

'How do you know they're still alive?' 'I don't know for sure, of course, but I know there were enough supplies to hold out this long. If the geothermal power tap was installed correctly, they should have virtually unlimited energy. Also, since there hasn't been a single word about S'hanthus's discovery, I can only hope they haven't been discovered.'

'So you really don't know?' 'No, I don't know for sure, but I am confident.'

'Have you tried to get to them before?' 'Yes, twice. The first time, I tried to sneak into the system in a civilian vessel, but was challenged at the border and forced to retreat. The second time, I accompanied a small Narn reconnaissance-in-force unit that was severely mauled by a patrol. We barely escaped with our lives.'

'So how are we going to get in this time?' 'Easily. This time, we have a Centauri ship. I couldn't tell you on the station, of course, for security reasons. However, very shortly we will be docking with a Haven-class patrol ship which will slip into Centauri space using codes provided to me by your friend and mentor, Ms. Theresa Cross.'

'What can you tell us about this S'hanthus place?' 'It's on the fourth planet, a corrupted world with a very toxic atmosphere. There is life there, and much of it is underground, in the extensive cave network. We will take a shuttle into one of the larger caves, where we can stay hidden from passing Centauri patrol vessels. Once there, it should be a simple matter to make our way into the caverns. In fact, there will probably be sentries, but as soon as they see me, they'll let us in without any trouble.'

'How many people are in the colony? A Haven can't carry that many people.' 'At the time I departed, no more than a few dozen. Unless a great many more were added later, I don't anticipate any problems.'

'Who's flying the ship?' 'A number of Narn volunteers. They have seen many atrocities committed by the Centauri, and they know what will happen if my family is discovered. They will be tortured and executed as spies. We must save them!'

'Why do you need us?' 'Mostly because I need a team of troubleshooters to handle any potential problems. However, if you want to know the truth, it's because Theresa Cross insisted that you come. That was one of her conditions for aiding me.'

'And what kind of aid is she giving you?' 'Isn't it obvious? She's the one with the ship!'

'Where did she get a Centauri Haven?' 'I don't know, and I don't care. It doesn't matter, as long as it gets the job done.'

Other: The players can ask other questions as well, and G'Trokk will answer to the best of his ability. The only time he lies is if they ask directly about his 'family.' In that case, he claims he has a mate and two children. Otherwise, when he says his 'family,' he's always talking about his friends in the rangers now marooned on S'hanthus.

If the players have any Centauri among their group, G'Trokk is surprisingly unconcerned with their presence. He trusts Theresa Cross not to betray him, and assumes the players consider their loyalty to her above that of their race. In this, he's trusting somewhat blindly, but at this point he's quite desperate. Should anyone ask why he's so willing to trust a Centauri, he replies that he never judges anyone by their appearance, only their deeds.

After a day's flight, the *Liberty's Fortune* arrives in the Sigma 957 system, an out-of-the-way place where travellers are instructed to stay close to the jump transfer point. Strange sights and storms are frequently reported in the area, and the number of ships going missing in this system is extremely high. Nonetheless, G'Trokk wastes no time asking Caitlin to fly the ship towards an asteroid an hour's flight away. Caitlin agrees, but keeps her eyes on the control panel worriedly.

The flight is without incident. As the players approach the asteroid, a tight-beam signal is received by the *Liberty*. G'Trokk sends a reply, and a Centauri Haven lifts off the surface of the rock, quickly rendezvousing with the players' ship. The Haven is too small for anything larger than a shuttle to land aboard, so the *Liberty* docks externally. G'Trokk invites the players to follow him through the airlock, but warns them that this is their last chance to change their minds. As soon as they follow—assuming that they do—he orders the doors closed and the two ships separated.

Caitlin Schulz stays behind in the *Liberty's Fortune* to await their eventual return. She agrees to stay for up to two weeks. If the players don't come back, she'll be forced to consider them lost. Under no circumstances is she to attempt a rescue trip. With a heavy heart, she says farewell and lands the *Liberty* on the same asteroid where the Haven was hiding.

The Haven Patrol Boat *Nemesis:* The Centauri Haven was originally designed as a fast border patrol ship, but has since expanded into a number of other missions within the Republic. Havens are used as picket forces, police vessels, light transports, training vessels, and just about any other task that doesn't require a capital ship. This particular Haven, named the *Nemesis*, has clearly seen a number of fights, for its hull is scarred and blackened with weapons fire. Where it came from is anybody's guess.

Statistics: Colossal Spacecraft; hp 180; DV 12 (-8 size, +10 agility); DR 15; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 4; Han +2; Sensor +6; Stealth 17; SQ Long Ranged; Cargo 15,000 lb.; 1 Officers, 3 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 12 Crewmen

Weapons: Matter Cannon; Boresight; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 18-20; Range 5
Four Twin-linked Particle Arrays; 2 Front, 2 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3

The *Nemesis's* crew of twelve is made up of nine Narns, two humans, and—surprisingly—one Centauri. G'Trokk is clearly the ship's captain, and the others defer to him the moment he arrives. His first officer is T'Fen, a very thin Narn with a hawk nose and unwavering dedication to the mission. The Centauri, whose name is Tareen Feraz, is apparently an advisor to the others. He doesn't sit at any of the stations, but seems to linger about, as if waiting for something to do.

Tareen Feraz
3rd Level Centauri Agent
Hit Points: 11
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +1 melee or +5 ranged
Special Qualities: Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +7, Will +2
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 14, Con 13, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 16
Skills: Bluff +11, Diplomacy +11, Disguise +9, Escape Artist +8, Gather Information +9, Intimidate +9, Move Silently +8, Search +8
Feats: Endurance, Lightning Reflexes, Weapon Focus (PPG)
Equipment: Padded armour, PPG pistol, Centauri headdress and officer's uniform

Tareen is one of Theresa Cross's allies, in much the same vein as Caitlin Schulz and Alison Fernandez. He was one of those who discovered the existence of the rangers and brought G'Trokk into the fold. That a Narn and Centauri could work so closely together seems a striking incongruity, but Tareen has proven himself by his secret efforts to rescue hundreds of Narn civilians from threatened systems. G'Trokk trusts him implicitly, as he should, and it's partially their friendship that has taught the crusty Narn to look beyond mere appearances.

Tareen is a bright-faced, excitable Centauri who enjoys a good adventure as much as anyone. He keeps his hair cut short and in the human manner, enabling him to easily disguise himself as a human if the need permits. He also possesses a wig that fastens to his head should the need arise to appear as a Centauri figure. He employs this disguise, as well as a stolen uniform, to act as the captain of the *Nemesis* should the ship be challenged.

Once everyone is aboard and introductions are made, the ship sets off for the Ardun system, a trip that takes a day and a half. During this period, the Narns and other humans keep to themselves, but Tareen makes an effort to entertain the players. He explains that the others are thinking of this as a military operation, so they're trying to keep their distance, but he's not part of the military. Possible questions and answers are listed below.

'What's your story?' 'I don't agree with the war. There's too much going on that's unexplained. The Narns had no reason to attack when they did—it's like they were pushed into it. It's like somebody else is behind the scenes, pulling the strings, encouraging the fighting. I'm one of a few Centauri who don't like where this is going. I've been operating what the humans call an 'Underground Railroad,' helping Narn civilians escape their doomed planets. That's why I agreed to come along on this mission. Plus, I have some connections, so I know some codes that should get us past the sentries.'

'What's your mission on the ship?' 'I'm the token Centauri…I'll do all the talking to any Centauri ships we run across, and as long as none of the codes have been changed in the last couple of weeks, we should get through all right. Plus, if it comes to that, I'm pretty sneaky when I want to be.'

'Isn't G'Trokk putting a lot of faith in you?' 'Sure, but it's justified, I assure you. I could've betrayed him a long time ago. We've been through too much for that. I don't like seeing people mistreated, and what the Republic is doing to Narn civilians makes me sick.'

'This all seems too simple to bother including us. What's G'Trokk hiding?' Tareen sighs and glances about as if worried about being overheard. 'Okay, listen, I'll tell you a little secret. This 'family' of G'Trokk's isn't actually made up of his relatives. They're a group of scouts he was training with—sort of like a military organisation, but much more broad in scope. Not even Narns, actually. Humans, mostly—and Minbari, if you can believe that. Your Captain Sheridan knows about them, although I seriously doubt he told you. Like me, they're opposed to the war, and they share the same convictions as your Theresa Cross.'

'And those convictions are…?' 'That a much greater conflict is coming…one that threatens to overwhelm all our people. Not just humans, or Narns, or Centauri, but everyone.'

'What conflict is that?' 'Oh, I'm afraid it's not up to me to explain any further. I may have already said too much. We must change the subject, yes?'

Other: Tareen answers any other questions to be best of his ability, but won't explain anything more about the coming war, and never uses the term 'rangers' to describe the group

G'Trokk has come to rescue. (Remember, at this point in the Babylon 5 storyline, very few people on Babylon 5 actually know about the existence and purpose of the rangers. Unless the players have encountered a ranger before, or have been told about them by a high-ranking ambassador or member of the command staff, they're likely to be entirely ignorant of the rangers.)

After the *Nemesis* reaches the Ardun system, it are held up at the jump transfer point. Ardun was once a Narn system, but was captured early in the war. Unwilling to put any significant military forces in Sigma 957—a kind of 'Bermuda Triangle' of space—and unable to conquer Kotok in direct assaults, the Centauri have instead withdrawn to Ardun while their spearheads advance on Homeworld through other routes. Thus, Ardun now contains a large military base and a garrison of more than a dozen warships.

When the Haven arrives, it is naturally challenged, and here Tareen takes over. He replaces G'Trokk in the command chair and the other Narns are carefully kept out of sight. Furthermore, the two human crewmen are fitted with false Centauri hairstyles and other costumes, staying in the background to appear innocuous. Tareen gives the password, and there's a worrisome moment as the Centauri ask the *Nemesis* to stand by for boarding. However, Tareen doesn't flinch, and after a few seconds they get clearance to continue on their journey. He then explains that the boarding thing is a standard trick…anyone trying to slip by would likely panic at that point. His calmness only served to convince the border guards that everything was all right.

After that, the ship proceeds on to Quadrant 14.

Encounter Three: A Question of Obedience

The trip to Quadrant 14 takes almost two days. At the conclusion of the trip, the *Nemesis* drops through the jump gate in the middle of a battle. Close to the former colony world, the Centauri have begun building a Kraken-class starbase. A Narn fleet has dropped into the system to knock out the base before its construction can be finished. Dozens of Narn vessels are circling the area, darting in to fire long-range lasers or energy mines, sometimes making forays in amongst the defenders to knock out mines or blast orbiting satellites. A force of 10 Centauri ships, including one Primus-class battlecruiser, has circled the wagons around the base and is trying to hold out until relief arrives.

The Games Master shouldn't explain all these details at once, though. He should only explain that dozens of blips are crowding the sensors, and the distant flashes of weapons fire and explosions can be seen on the starfield ahead. Then read this box text:

Within minutes of your arrival, an anxious Centauri voice comes over the intercom. Those of you who can speak Centauri hear the following—the rest of you can translate later. 'This is Admiral Priya of the Royal Furor, commanding the Quadrant 14 garrison. I am assuming command of your ship, whoever you are. Upon your right flank you will note three Frazi-class fighters picking at the fringes of our minefield. All of our own fighters have been destroyed, and none of our other ships can be spared to deal with this threat. Destroy those fighters for the glory of the Republic, and then report to me for further instructions. You have your orders, Captain! Royal Furor out.'

Tareen tries to respond, but gets no answer, for the fight is continuing in earnest. He suggests that the players agree to fight the Frazis, and notes that a Haven is more than a match for those three fighters. G'Trokk demurs, for he doesn't want to make war against his own people. 'These are trying times for everyone,' Tareen reminds him, but G'Trokk finally looks to the players for advice. If they fight the Frazis, they'll surely take damage, and may still wind up involved in the main conflict anyway. The alternative, of course, is to ignore Priya's orders and let the fighters continue blowing up mines. Every minute or so, the fast-moving vehicles take aim and blast another mine, gradually nibbling away at the starbase's flank defences.

Although G'Trokk doesn't leave the decision up to the players, he eventually winds up taking whatever option they recommend. If the players don't make a choice, he goes whichever way they seemed to be leaning—or, if they are completely apathetic, just flip a coin. The two possible solutions each have varying effects on the rest of the module.

If the players avoid the Frazis, G'Trokk flies the Haven out to the fourth planet and passes behind it, where he heads for the surface in his shuttle. Aware that he can't tarry long, Tareen then returns to attack the Frazis, later telling Priya that he had conflicting orders from a higher source. When Priya asks what those orders were, Tareen says he's under strict instructions not to discuss them with anyone—least at all a garrison commander. The defence force then appropriates the Haven, where its fate depends on how long the players waste in the caves.

If the players attack the Frazis, the fighters engage the ship while avoiding the Haven's overlapping fire arcs as much as possible. They also attack at high speed, and from behind where the matter cannon can't track. Still, they shouldn't be a match for the Haven's firepower. If the *Nemesis* does get into trouble, the players are instructed to get in the shuttle and escape. G'Trokk accompanies them, but the rest of the crew stay aboard to fight to the bitter end. After this, the shuttle can 'escape' the battle by running to the fourth planet, where they can at least try to contact the survivors of S'hanthus.

Should the Haven beat the Frazis, Admiral Priya contacts the ship again, thanking Tareen for his assistance and demanding he report to the base for absorption into the garrison fleet. Tareen replies that he has to finish his original mission but will return within the hour. Priya agrees—reluctantly—and Tareen flies the *Nemesis* behind the fourth planet, where the rescue shuttle can be launched. He then reports to Priya, and again, his fate depends on how long the players take to complete their main mission. However, because Tareen obeyed the initial order, he earns the players at least a little bit of bonus time when evaluating what happens during Encounter Seven.

Encounter Four: Attack of the Worms

S'hanthus: The fourth planet of Quadrant 14, known as S'hanthus, is located about as far from the sun as Mars is from Sol. Unlike Mars, however, S'hanthus has a thick atmosphere that's laced with toxic elements. Anyone breathing the acidic gases must make a Fortitude save (DC 15) every minute or lose 1d4 points of Constitution. The planet otherwise has normal gravity, and according to G'Trokk, the poisonous nature of the air has been filtered out in the deeper caves where the 'colony' was constructed.

There is animal life on S'hanthus, but it consists of lower forms that possess thick, hairy hides and interlocking chitinous armour plates. A cross between insects and reptiles, the creatures have no external sensory organs, instead depending upon vibrations, odours, and even radar senses to guide them to their prey. Fortunately for the players, they don't need to spend a lot of time on the surface.

Regardless of what the players do with regards to the Frazi fighters, they wind up being taken by shuttle to S'hanthus, while the *Nemesis* heads to join the battle as ordered by the Centauri fleet commander. Tareen, now in command of the *Nemesis*, promises to wait for a secret signal, whereupon he'll try to break free of the fight and come make the pickup. Hopefully, he says, he can stay on the fringes of the fight, leaving him free to leave when he needs to. Should he fail to return, the players are to try to make the flight through hyperspace in the shuttle, which should—theoretically—be able to make it back to the *Liberty's Fortune* safely, as long as it avoids combat.

In any event, G'Trokk takes the shuttle down, insisting on doing so even if the players have a better Pilot skill than he does. After all, he's the one who knows where the entrance to the colony is. He deliberately waits until the *Nemesis* is out of scanning range behind S'hanthus before concluding landing operations. Any player can make a Pilot check (DC 18) to observe this behaviour. If they notice, G'Trokk explains that keeping the entrance secret from Tareen just ensures that nothing can go wrong if he or his crew fall into the wrong hands.

After some circling, he finally locates the right spot and settles the shuttlecraft inside the entrance to a fairly large cavern. Anyone looking outside through the portholes can see several dark tunnels leading out of the cave's rear. Scans show three passages, but nothing else of interest. Sensors just don't penetrate through the thick rock. 'Of course not,' G'Trokk explains. 'That's why this place would've made such a good colony site. Nobody can scan it.'

G'Trokk also explains that the three cave passageways all come together in a large central cavern, where a heavy door blocks entry into the colony itself. The door will be guarded, but G'Trokk's presence will be enough to convince the guards to let the group through. The risk, of course, is that the Centauri have already discovered the colony and are lying in wait for the players. G'Trokk tells everyone to put on breather masks and be ready for anything.

As the players make their way through the curving, rocky corridors to the colony entrance, a group of tunnelling worms attacks by burrowing through the cave walls. The first tunnel worm attacks with surprise, while five others appear at random locations along the edge of the wall. A worm that grapples its target tries to pull the unfortunate victim back inside, where the prey can be devoured.

Tunnel Worm

Character Level: 4 (12 hp)
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft. (burrow 10 ft.)
DV: 19 (+3 Reflex, +6 Natural Armour)
Attacks: +4 melee (2d6 bite)
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 4, Burrowing, Reach 10 ft.
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +0
Abilities: Str 18, Dex 16, Con 10, Int 1, Wis 10, Cha 2
Skills: Hide +16, Move Silently +20
Feats: Alertness, Tremorsense, Improved Grapple

These mindless worms are covered with interlocking chitin armour plates. Their heads are spade-like, and heavy front claws aid in the creature's ability to tunnel through loose earth and rock. The beast has no eyes or ears, but tracks prey by sensing vibrations in the ground, and then by scent at close range. While underground, it receives a +8 bonus to all Hide and Move Silently checks.

The tunnel worm attacks by flinging most of its body out of the wall like a coiled snake, biting and attempting to establish a hold. Upon any successful hit, the creature makes an opposed grapple check against the target. Success indicates it achieves a hold. Once it has a hold, the creature draws the victim back towards the cave wall, scoring 1d6 damage each round ignoring all damage resistance from armour.

Each round after achieving a hold, the worm tries to tug its unfortunate victim into its underground lair. If the creature wins an opposed Strength check on the round after

grappling, it pulls the target up against the wall, earning itself one-half cover. If it wins an opposed Strength check on the following round, it drags the victim's arm inside the wall, rendering him unable to attack with anything but a light off-hand weapon and earning total cover. Should the worm win a third opposed Strength check, it drags the victim entirely into the wall, pinning him and starting the process of suffocation. The player's breather mask is torn from his face when he's dragged into the wall, and thus he'll suffer problems from the atmosphere when he's finally rescued, unless his allies take great pains to cover his face the moment he's dragged back out of the hole.

If the prey wins an opposed grapple check or Escape Artist check, taken as a standard action, he breaks free of the creature's grip. The beast can immediately attack again on the following round. A tunnel worm reduced to 3 or fewer hit points retreats immediately.

After the players finish with the worms, they can proceed on to the main door that provides entrance to the 'colony'—actually a hidden ranger training facility. Should G'Trokk fall in battle with the worms, the players will have to travel on without him to guide them. Otherwise, he takes the lead once again and heads for the end of the interconnected caves.

Encounter Five: The Complex

The ranger training camp is constructed within a series of caves in which the trainees would be subjected to a variety of tests, such as getting along in total darkness, sneaking and hiding, climbing, squeezing through narrow passageways, and doing battle with a variety of opponents. The facility is quite primitive, but as they say in the Anla'shok, adversity is the crucible within which a good ranger is forged.

What G'Trokk said about the geothermal power tap was true—the rangers were indeed trying to sink just such a power system into the deeper recesses of the virtually endless caves under S'hanthus. By using natural power, they would make their base all but impossible to detect from outside. The Minbari fusion plant they were using for energy was to be kept in reserve, but in fact is still active.

Why? Because the rangers, much like the dwarves in the Mines of Moria, dug too deep and released a great evil. Hidden within the recesses of S'hanthus, creatures of shadow lay in slumber, waiting for the time when they would rise again to fight in the great war. The rangers believe they only face one of the beasts, but there are in fact two, though they are never seen together. Thus, the surviving rangers believe the creature is capable of moving at high speed to virtually any location in the caves. They're now hiding in a fortified cavern that once served as a supply room. They are all on one-quarter rations and are virtually starving. Were it not for the steady dripping of water from the ceiling in one corner of the cave, they would be long since dead.

Of course, the players don't know any of this, but it soon becomes clear that something is wrong. When G'Trokk approaches the huge, sealed door at the entrance to the caves, he calls out to identify himself, speaking first in Narn and then in English. When there's no response, he moves closer. A Spot check (DC 22) notes either of two small automated guns located five feet up the wall, on either side of the door. These guns move to track anyone who approaches the portal, but don't fire. G'Trokk approaches them boldly, calling out a greeting, but no one answers and the door remains sealed.

Once at the door, he types in a command sequence, but again, nothing happens. He frowns. 'This shouldn't happen,' he says. 'They wouldn't change this unless something went wrong. And where are the sentries?'

The players can attempt to pick the electronic lock, but this requires a Technical (electronics) check (DC 30). If they fail by 5 or more, or try to take 10 or take 20 on the check, the guns begin firing at anyone within sight of the door. Each gun acts as a PPG Mark 10. The players can, of course, cover up the guns, but the defences will immediately open fire, blasting first through whatever covered them before proceeding to attack anything moving within their field of fire. The guns have DR 10, 10 hit points, and a Break DC of 25. If the players attack the guns and don't destroy them, this also triggers their firing sequence. The only way to silence the guns without risk is to pick them off simultaneously, or to block them with something so strong it can't be shot through easily.

The door itself has the strength of a bulkhead (DR 20, hit points 80, break DC 35) should the players be unable to get through the lock. Note that the lock itself has only DR 5, 8 hit points, and a Break DC of 20, so attempting to destroy the guns with explosives—other than a shaped charge of some sort—is likely to smash the lock as well.

After the players get through the door, they find themselves inside the small Anla'shok training area. Read the following box text:

Beyond the door, the caves continue. Two corridors branch out to the sides, while a larger open area awaits ahead of you. The natural cave system seems to have been hollowed out and enlarged to provide at least some comfort for the trainees and their teachers. Structural bracings are evident about every five feet or so, and functioning lighting is emplaced along the ceilings in all places. The room directly in front of you appears to be organised for defence, with several stone fixtures in place to act as natural cover for anyone facing the door. The whole area seems empty, except for one grisly sight—a desiccated Minbari body lying on its back about twenty feet ahead.

The various rooms of the complex are described in more detail below.

1. Entrance Room

This was where visitors arrived and were greeted by Anla'shok personnel. Several cut stone blocks serve as cover if anyone wished to defend the door, but there's no one here now. Like all the other rooms on this level, there are power conduits built into the walls near floor level, but all that is left of these are some loose wires. (Actually, there used to be sensor and communication equipment here, used to identify anyone approaching from beyond the wall and to contact any shuttle that might land. All of this has been taken to the fortified cavern on the next level down, to be converted into the force field generator that's keeping the rangers alive.)

There is a Minbari body here, about 20 feet from the main entrance. The body is little more than a dried-out husk. Anyone making a Medical check (DC 21) learns that every drop of fluid has been totally drained away. If the body is cut open, anyone checking will note that all the victim's internal organs are missing. If the players participated in the side scenario that links to 'The Long Dark,' this will sound uncomfortably familiar—but that creature didn't also drain fluids from its prey.

The Minbari is wearing what at first appear to be simple black robes, but these are actually ranger's robes (see *The Point of No Return*, p.134). Clutched in one hand is a weapon that looks like a high-tech, high-quality quarterstaff—actually a masterwork denn'bok, but the players probably won't recognise it as such unless they've encountered rangers before. Attached to the robes is a square-shaped pin made of a white metal surrounding a smooth green stone. An Appraise check (DC 15) shows that the value of this bulky and gaudy piece of jewellery is 50-100 credits. This is, of course, a ranger pin.

2. Fusion Power Plant

This room is rectangular, and across the centre is the one piece of high-tech equipment in the entire facility—a fusion power plant of obvious Minbari make. Anyone making a Knowledge (structural engineering) check (DC 15) identifies it as similar to the sort of power plant used to provide backup energy to small Minbari structures. The machine's nature is such that it could be easily broken down into several smaller pieces and carried into the caves through the path the players took to get here. The power plant is humming along normally, and wires all along the floor and running up the walls into vents and lights testify to what's keeping the air refreshed and the lighting functioning.

Behind the power plant, a human ranger named Tobias crouches, denn'bok at the ready. He is half-crazed from hunger and fear. A day ago, he and a fellow ranger attempted to make a run for the mess hall to gather supplies after the others in the fortress below made a diversionary foray into the deeper caves. He doesn't know there is a second creature, and simply believes the first caught up to him in the Entrance Room, where his friend and teacher fell to the beast's energy-draining attack. He retreated here, and has been afraid to leave the power plant. For some reason, the creature won't approach him, although it does occasionally put in an appearance to unnerve him.

Tobias

5th Level Human Soldier/1st Level Anla'Shok Ranger
Hit Points: 25
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +8/+3 melee or +9/+4 ranged
Special Qualities: Covering Fire, Damage Resistance 2 (robes)
Saves: Fort +3*, Ref +7, Will +3
Abilities: Str 15, Dex 16, Con 8*, Int 12, Wis 13, Cha 10
Skills: Concentration +8* Hide +13, Listen +5, Move Silently +13, Spot +10
Feats: Weapon Focus (PPG), Weapon Focus (unarmed combat), Endurance, Toughness, Lightning Reflexes, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (denn'bok), Improved Unarmed Strike
Equipment: Ranger robes, ranger pin, denn'bok

Tobias has lost 4 points of Con to the Dark Hunter's special attack. Items marked with a * above reflect this loss. If he is healed, his maximum Con is 12 and his skills and saving throws should be adjusted accordingly.

Tobias is a ranger trainee who was inducted into the ranks of the rangers just prior to the attack of the Dark Hunters. Facing dwindling food supplies in the fortress below, he and his teacher Lavonas (the dead Minbari in Area #1) attempted to reach the mess hall to collect more rations, but were ambushed in the Entrance Room. There, Lavonas deliberately gave his own life so that Tobias could escape, but he collapsed in exhaustion by the fusion plant, and now, drained by fatigue, hunger and thirst, he is descending into madness.

Upon spotting the players, Tobias (in his half-mad state) decides they are invaders come to destroy the facility. He doesn't recognise G'Trokk and assumes any player who isn't human or Minbari is automatically 'the enemy,' going after them first. Lacking any such target, he instead blindly lashes out at G'Trokk. Naturally, during the fight G'Trokk tries to convince Tobias that he's come to rescue him, and to stop fighting, but the ranger has totally lost it. The only way to stop him is to immobilise him somehow, or knock him out. G'Trokk insists that everybody use non-lethal means to do battle with the thirst-crazed ranger.

Following the fight, a Medical check (DC 15) identifies that Tobias is—in addition to any wounds he just sustained—suffering from severe dehydration and the beginnings of malnutrition. Anyone telepathically scanning him gets nothing but hazy views of a barely visible beast attacking with glowing claws and burning teeth. These delusions—if that's what they are—overwhelm all other thoughts.

Once Tobias is restrained (or brought back to consciousness after his defeat) he struggles for about a minute before finally breaking down in tears. G'Trokk then asks him what's going on. Tobias tells his story:

The man in front of you lies in a heap, a broken shell. Wearily he looks up at you through eyes that seem halfway dead. With halting words he begins to speak.

'It was a beast,' he says with a shudder. 'A creature straight out of Hell. We freed it when we were drilling the core tap…it killed three of us before we even knew what was happening. You can't even see it, except when it's feeding…draining you…sucking out everything from inside the body like a leech…turning red as it fills up with your blood! We're helpless here…helpless! We couldn't call the Narns for rescue…their base is gone! Blown up by the Centauri! We sent a signal to the others…but they didn't answer…too much communications jamming. I'm sorry I attacked you…I see now you must've come to rescue us…but you'll never defeat that…that thing out there! It won't let you get back to your ship. You can count on that. It's watching the doors. It let you in…but it'll never let you out!'

At this he collapses, gasping, and closes his eyes. You try to ask him more, but he's fallen unconscious again.

After this, Tobias can't be roused for at least an hour. If the players then awaken him with a Medical check (DC 15), or by giving him water or stims, he sits up weakly. Following his desperate struggle with the players, he is clearly exhausted, but if he eats some rations and quenches his thirst, this state reverts to merely fatigued. He remains fatigued until he can eat another meal and rest for 8 hours. In the meantime, he'll help the players as best he can and answer their questions, but he won't leave the fusion room unless the players agree to help him complete his mission—collecting food to bring to his compatriots in the fortress cave below.

If questioned, Tobias tells the players about the facility and the creatures in great detail. Although he admits that his people are called 'rangers,' he won't describe their mission or training procedures in any way.

3. Ranger Quarters

This area contained the quarters for the full-fledged rangers who ran the facility. This is a single hollowed-out cave with five areas separated by thin, moveable wooden walls for some semblance of privacy. There is also a sixth smaller area for storage. Four of the five quarters areas have Minbari-style sleeping platforms, while the fifth has a simple human-style bed with a mattress and one layer of sheets. Each quarters area has a small cabinet containing clothing and toiletry items. Atop each of the cabinets sits photos or holo-crystals that display various human or Minbari individuals—family members of the rangers stationed here at the facility. In the quarters assigned to the human, there is a small pouch containing 72 credit chits. One of the Minbari cabinets includes an unloaded crystal slivergun and 6 rounds of ammunition (see *The Minbari Fact Book*, p.138).

The storage room contains a variety of items that might be expected in such a facility—towels, linens, tools, a hand computer, rope, and anything else the Games Master might feel appropriate. There are also a few exotic items, mostly of Minbari manufacture. These include a bag containing 16 air capsules (in case anyone needs to venture to the surface), a medical scanner, four palmlights, two fire extinguishers, a grappling hook, a set of Minbari specialised mining tools, a PPG Model 10 (no ammunition), and a trioptic visor. This last item might prove of use later in the scenario—anyone wearing it while it's set in electromagnetic spectral imaging mode can see the Dark Hunter as a field of purple in the ultraviolet spectrum, thus negating its partial invisibility.

4. Trainee Quarters

This area includes 12 bunk beds, half of which are of the Minbari 'sleeping platform' style. Each has a small footlocker at the end, but these contain only ordinary clothing—the trainees weren't allowed to bring anything of value with them to the facility.

Desiccated corpses occupy six of the bunks. After the initial attacks, the Dark Hunters withdrew for a short period, sated. The surviving rangers and trainees brought their dead here for what should've been a temporary period, but wound up being semi-permanent. The fact that these individuals didn't die in their beds is obvious because the corpses are lying atop the covers. Furthermore, two of them are Minbari, who wouldn't use human beds anyway. All the bodies are wearing ordinary robes and hoods, and don't have any ranger gear.

Since the corpses were laid here, the vermin native to S'hanthus have tunnelled in through the floor to feed upon the dried flesh. Five 'armoured rats' are currently lurking underneath one of the corpses, remaining silent due to the approach of a potential threat. A player moving into the far end of the room without going directly to the bodies will notice a fresh burrow near the edge of one of the beds on a Spot check (DC 20). From this he may conclude that something has recently tunnelled into the room. Otherwise, anyone inspecting the dead ranger trainees becomes subject to a surprise attack by the armoured rats as they lurch out from hiding.

Armoured Rat

Character Level: 2 (6 hp)
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 20 ft. (burrow 5 ft.)
DV: 18 (+4 Reflex, +4 Natural Armour)
Attacks: +3 melee (1d4 bite + disease)
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 3, Burrowing, Disease
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +4, Will +0
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 18, Con 10, Int 1, Wis 10, Cha 2
Skills: Hide +8, Move Silently +8
Feats: Alertness

The armoured rat isn't a particularly powerful competitor, but its bite can deliver a nasty disease known as bleeding acidosis. The affected creature's organs swell and internal bleeding occurs sporadically as the alien organism's waste products wreak havoc on soft tissues. Bleeding acidosis has an incubation period of 1 day, Fortitude save DC 15, damage 1d4 Con and 1d3 Dex. During the course of the disease, the victim secretes a variety of bodily fluids such as blood and mucus, through which the disease spreads. Anyone contacting these fluids is also subject to contracting the disease.

5. Mess Hall

This area includes a number of tables used for meals. Nearby cabinets include a variety of dried foods and rations, and there are several large water tanks that collect water flowing in from an underground stream running about 200 feet below the cave. These tanks include sterilisation equipment built into the tank interiors, as well as spigots that dispense either cold liquid or water heated almost to a boil. The latter was used to produce warm soup, oatmeal, and other hot foods from the condensed material in the ration cabinets.

Off to one side, there are three small doors upon which hang signs that read 'unoccupied,' written in both Minbari and English. On the opposite side of these plates is the word 'occupied.' These doors lead to lavatories that include toilets, sinks, and dry showers. No one is inside, but the rooms are functional, if anyone needs to partake.

As the players first enter the mess hall area, read the following box text:

You enter what was obviously a mess hall combined with a kitchen. There are several tables and chairs arranged loosely in three rows. Along one wall, you can see several cabinets as well as three tall tanks that reach almost to the ceiling. As you take this in, you suddenly feel very uneasy. Your eyes automatically travel to the far side of the room, where a single hallway extends out of the area, curving to the left. The tunnel seems empty, but then, as you watch carefully, you sense movement. There's something there, but you can't quite make it out. A shape of some kind, at least as tall as yourself, but that's all. An instant later, whatever it was shimmers and seems to retreat, vanishing around the distant corner. The room is silent, marked only by your worried breathing.

The Dark Hunter is now watching the players, but doesn't know them or their capabilities, so it's afraid to simply rush to the attack. It's content to lurk in the distance, studying them, learning their weaknesses. Should the players attempt to pursue, it will retreat, for now…unless the group unwisely separates, in which case it will come around from another direction and attack any stragglers. Note that the Dark Hunter won't move into the room with the fusion power plant, so the players can always retreat there for safety if they need to. For stats on the Dark Hunter, see Encounter Six.

Although there's nothing of any real interest in the Mess Hall, the players may wish to collect some of the rations here for delivery to the cave-fortress below, especially if they already spoke to Tobias and know how desperate things are getting down there.

6. Training Centre

This open cavern was originally used as a training area for rangers in combat. There are a variety of dummies, targets, mats, and exercise machines scattered liberally throughout the room. Most of these appear to be of human design, although the Minbari do have their share. There's nothing here that can be used as a weapon, but there are plenty of obstacles to provide cover for the Dark Hunter as it keeps an eye on the players.

Encounter Six: The Dark Hunter

The creatures called 'Dark Hunters' are intelligent beasts made partially of energy, in much the same way as the Shadows and the Shadow Beasts. They have been hibernating on this planet for almost 1,000 years. Unlike many Shadow allies, they didn't get the call to reawaken like the others, although this may have been simply because of their depth underground. Now that they *have* awakened, they can feel the subtle pull to Z'ha'dum…but first they need to regain their strength. To do that, they're consuming the nearest food supply—the virtually helpless rangers, who unfortunately don't have a lot of energy weapons with them in the caves.

The two Dark Hunters aren't openly hostile to each other, but they avoid each other nonetheless. When one attempts to attack, the other watches from hiding. In this way the rangers are presently unaware that there are more than one of the beasts. On the rare occasion they've scored damage on one of them, it's impossible to recognise as such.

As the players enter the facility, one of the Dark Hunters is down in the caves below, waiting for the rangers to try to escape so it can pounce. The other is up top, watching the arrivals from the shuttle. The one on the upper level, which has fed recently, is willing to let the players wander around for a bit while it takes their measure. The one down below is much hungrier, and won't bother waiting. When the players proceed down towards the cave fortress, it attacks as soon as they come into view of the force fields.

Dark Hunter

Character Level: 15 (52 hp)
Initiative: +11 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft. (climb 30 ft.)
Size: Large (tall) (5 ft. space, 10 ft. reach)
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: +15 melee (slam 1d6+5 plus Con drain) x2, Grapple +24
Special Qualities: Damage Resistance 20/energy and 5/–, Invisibility, Immune to Cold and Acid, Frightful Presence, Aura of Fatigue, Constitution Drain
Saves: Fort +14, Ref +6, Will +6
Abilities: Str 20, Dex 16, Con 30, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 12
Skills: Hide +12, Listen +20, Move Silently +24, Spot +20
Feats: Alertness, Lifesense, Improved Grapple, Combat Reflexes, Superior Initiative

Dark Hunters are ferocious, cunning creatures that prefer to locate weaknesses in their opponents before attacking. They prefer to attack lone targets, assaulting a group only if they feel victory is assured, or if desperate for food.

If the Dark Hunter hits its target in melee, it can attempt to grapple its opponent. If the grapple succeeds, the target is held and suffers 1d6 Con drain every turn unless it breaks free. A victim whose Constitution is reduced to zero in this manner dies, while his fluids and internal soft tissues are drained into the Dark Hunter's body. The Dark Hunter turns briefly reddish-coloured for the next 5 rounds, negating its invisibility. Meanwhile, the subject becomes a dried-up, wasted shell.

The Dark Hunter also has the following traits:

Damage Resistance: A Dark Hunter is vulnerable only to energy attacks, such as from a PPG, but even these reduce damage by 5 points. All other attacks are affected by Damage Resistance 20.

Immune to Cold and Acid: The Dark Hunter takes no damage from these attack forms.

Invisibility: Dark Hunters normally move about in a state of near invisibility, receiving a +12 bonus to Hide checks. Anyone who spots the creature sees only a vaguely shimmering humanoid shape hanging in the air. As soon as the Dark Hunter moves, it disappears again. However, while moving, it can be spotted with ultraviolet sensing equipment, appearing as a very tall purple-coloured blob. If the creature stops moving entirely and takes a full round action, it disappears even from this type of sensing equipment. Should the Dark Hunter attack, it becomes slightly visible as a ferocious-looking clawed 'demon' shape. Creatures attacking in the ensuing round suffer a 20% miss chance instead of the usual 50% miss chance granted by invisibility.

Frightful Presence: The sight of the Dark Hunter in its semi-visible state is terrifying. All creatures seeing a Dark Hunter as it attacks must make a Will save (DC 12) or become frightened, fleeing the creature's visage for 1d6 rounds and being shaken for 1d6 rounds thereafter. If the save succeeds by 4 or less, the subject is shaken for 1d6 rounds instead. If the save is made by 5 or more, the subject is immune to that particular Dark Hunter's frightful presence thereafter.

Aura of Fatigue: The Dark Hunter draws off vitality from its opponents through its very presence. Any opponent approaching within 10 feet of the creature must make a Fortitude save (DC 14) or become fatigued for 2d6 minutes. If the victim is already fatigued through some other natural method (hunger, lack of sleep, etc.), it becomes exhausted for that period. Note that this will likely make Tobias useless in the fight if he gets too close to the creature.

Constitution Drain: Any hit from the Dark Hunter drains 1 point of Constitution through bodily fluids sucked into the creature's semi-solid body. An opponent cannot be dropped below Con 1 by this method. If an opponent is at Con 1 and suffers a hit from the Dark Hunter, the unfortunate victim falls unconscious for 1d6 minutes (no saving throw).

If this Dark Hunter drains someone—possibly Tobias, as he's likely to be the weakest potential target—it retreats swiftly into the caves, unwilling to face the rest of the group all at once. However, since draining an opponent requires a grapple, the beast is more likely to fight until most of the players are down before consuming someone. The Dark Hunter won't try to kill anyone if it can avoid doing so—it wants them alive as potential food sources later.

The Cave Fortress

The rangers on the lower level have retreated inside a centralised cavern with five exits. Blocking each of the tunnels out, they have emplaced a glowing force field originally used in training exercises to provide an obstacle to be overcome. The Dark Hunters, which can't stand violent energy or electricity, are unable to approach the fields. Furthermore, because they aren't willing to touch the fusion plant or the power lines leading from it to the

cave fortress, they can't bring down these defences. This is what has allowed the one surviving ranger and the seven trainees inside to survive, albeit in a severely fatigued state. They are almost desperate enough now that they're considering a mass rush to the mess hall, followed by a dash back to the fortress. They anticipate losing half their number in the attempt, but to stay much longer is to surely perish of starvation.

The sole surviving ranger is Tinthatil, an aging Minbari who was actually in charge of the facility when all this began. The trainees left are Kaneel, Shavani, Paul, Elena, Shauna, Sasha, and Victoria. The first two trainees are Minbari, while the others are humans. All are fatigued from hunger, although there's enough water dripping through the natural cave roof that they've been able to slake their thirst and stay alive. The 'fortress,' such as it is, contains a few boxes (one of which is being used as a makeshift privy), several sheets and blankets, a broken communications relay, and a small quantity of dried meat rations. The skeletons of three dead armoured rats testify to how desperate these survivors are for food.

Tinthatil

6th Level Minbari Officer/4th Level Anla'Shok Ranger
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +3 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +12/+7 melee or +12/+7 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (ground forces), Rallying Call, Fearless, Application of Terror, Die for the One, Ranger's Authority, Denn'Bok (1d8), Damage Resistance 2 (robes)
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +7, Will +10
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 15, Con 11, Int 16, Wis 15, Cha 16
Skills: Concentration +13, Diplomacy +16, Hide +7, Listen +15, Medical +7, Move Silently +7, Pilot +11, Sense Motive +15, Spot +15, Technical (mechanical) +16
Feats: Awareness*, Exotic Weapon Proficiency (denn'bok), Improved Unarmed Strike, Weapon Focus (denn'bok), Intuitive Reflexes*, Denn'bok Master* (Note: A * indicates a feat found in the *Minbari Federation Fact Book*)
Equipment: Ranger robes, ranger pin, masterwork denn'bok, Minbari fighting knife

Tinthatil was in charge of this training facility when the troubles began. He is also the one who arranged for its construction with G'Trokk. It was Tinthatil who set up the power plant, directed the wiring efforts, sunk the wells, and ultimately attempted to drill the geothermal power tap that set loose the Dark Hunters. He blames himself for the results even though he couldn't possibly have foreseen the release of buried creatures of Shadow.

Ranger Trainees

5th Level Soldiers (2 Minbari, 5 Human)
Hit Points: 19
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +7 melee or +7 ranged
Special Qualities: Covering Fire
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +1
Abilities: Str 14, Dex 15, Con 13, Int 10, Wis 10, Cha 12
Skills: Hide +10, Move Silently +10 (plus the humans have Listen +8)
Feats: Endurance, Lightning Reflexes, Weapon Focus (varies)
Equipment: Simple clothing, various hand weapons, one has an empty PPG Mark 10

The seven trainees are presented here as 'generic' fighter types, but the Games Master could expand upon them if he wishes. In the ranger fashion, they use only first names, never family or house names. All were recruited for their stealth, fighting ability, and willingness to work as part of a team. Both Minbari are from the warrior caste. A brief description of each individual follows, but these can be adjusted as the Games Master sees fit.

Kaneel: Thin and wiry, Kaneel is quick to anger but also quick to forgive. He is from Yedor on the Minbari homeworld. Though attracted to Shayani, he is unwilling to make any emotional attachment while still in training and has avoided speaking to her in any way other than as a warrior. Should she perish, he will be quite distraught.

Shavani: A Minbari female from Davala Than, she speaks in a honey-sweet voice that makes her an excellent singer. She seems totally unlike the typical Minbari warrior until she draws a weapon and starts fighting, at which point she becomes a combat machine. She is unaware of any interest from Kaneel and would reject him should he make any advances.

Paul: Paul is a former ground-pounder from Denmark who fought against the Minbari during the Earth-Minbari War and found them to be tough, admirable, honourable opponents. That he should now be standing aside them as friends strikes him as the height of irony. He and Elena are an item, and have promised to get married if they ever get out of their present predicament.

Elena: This dark-haired woman is from the Ukraine. She was in the Earth Alliance fleet, serving aboard a Hyperion that was destroyed by a Shadow vessel. Rangers in the area rescued her from a lifepod and she asked to join them to fight against the creatures that killed her friends and crew. The rest of the EA believes she died with her ship.

Shauna: A dark-skinned woman from Uganda, Shauna is tall and bulky, a true fighting soldier easily the equal of any man in sheer muscle strength. She speaks very infrequently, as though something has been drained from her soul. She watched her two best friends die at the hands of one of the Dark Hunters, so that could be a partial explanation for her present state.

Sasha: Sasha (a man) hails from Moscow and possesses rock-like, craggy features. Easily the oldest of the humans here, he's spent most of his life as a mercenary. During the Earth-Minbari War, he was taken prisoner on Proxima and spent several weeks in a POW camp, where he was treated as a sub-human creature. He doesn't fully trust the Minbari, but understands that the rangers represent perhaps the only chance to survive the coming Shadow War.

Victoria: A 'Marsie,' Victoria is proud of her home colony and learned most of her stealth skills while serving in police forces there. Although she never speaks of it, she also fought on the side of Mars in the last rebellion. She professes no sorrow over this, except that the revolt failed. She believes Mars should be independent with all her heart, but that fight will have to wait.

Once the players arrive in the main cave, notice the force fields, and come under attack, they have three options: fight, retreat, or hurry ahead to the fortress. If they attempt the former, the beast proves a terrifying opponent that seems to be able to shrug off anything but the most powerful blows. The creature doesn't retreat and fights on until dead, or until the players flee, at which point it drains one of the fallen and retreats to lurk in the shadows.

If the players retreat, the beast dogs their heels until they get to the fusion power room, which is the only place they'll be safe from its attacks. After that, it feeds on anyone who fell in the fight. During the retreat, G'Trokk will sacrifice himself to save the players if he must, battling on as though possessed.

If the players escape into the fortress, the beast hides again and waits to ambush them as they depart. It strikes in a narrow hallway if it can, and if not, it comes up on the rear of the group as they approach the exit. Meanwhile, the second Dark Hunter awaits at the final door, producing a fight in which the players are sandwiched between both of these horrible beasts. If they brought enough weapons and arm the rangers, they can probably win this fight, but it should be devastatingly tough. If one perishes, the other will likely retreat if the defenders appear to have the upper hand, following the same path described in the next paragraph.

Should the first Dark Hunter die in the lower caves, the second—watching from the shadows—realises it's out of its league. Instead of attacking such a well-armed group, it instead follows them out of the caves and sneaks aboard the shuttle. Even here it won't attack, afraid that it'll be overwhelmed in such close quarters. Since the players believe they killed the 'lone' Dark Hunter and are now home free, they'll have no clue that a second one is being carried along with them into the next encounter.

However, depending on what happens next, this could be a good thing…

Encounter Seven: Captured!

While the players were in the caves, Tareen has been busy with the *Nemesis*. Just exactly how busy depends entirely upon how much time the players took to accomplish their mission. As a basic synopsis, what happened to Tareen is this: He reported to Priya, the Centauri fleet admiral, and was given an assignment to hunt down rogue Frazi fighters. To avoid becoming decisively engaged, Tareen stayed near the minefield and tried to escape combat. Unfortunately, a flight of 6 Frazi-class fighters engaged the Haven while attempting to penetrate the starbase's defences. This left the Haven with 10 points of structural damage and a ruined matter cannon.

Unfortunately, after the fight, Tareen mollified his Narn crewmen—who were miffed at having to fight more of their own countrymen—by spending time scooping up escape pods instead of moving to engage more fighters. Admiral Priya took notice of this and ordered the *Nemesis* to report to him at once. Tareen knew the game was up, so he tried to flee, but was intercepted by two other Centauri ships. The *Nemesis* was boarded, and the Narn crew (and surviving fighter pilots) were taken aboard another ship as prisoners.

Next, the Centauri interrogated Tareen, but he remained silent. With no telepaths available in this military force, Admiral Priya was unable to get any information. He did, however, observe the launch of the shuttle earlier and now suspects there's a secret Narn base hidden on S'hanthus. Furthermore, Tareen is obviously a spy, so he deserves execution—but first, he's going to do one final task for the Republic. He's going to lure out the rest of the Narn insurgents when they return in their shuttle.

All of this took a while, of course. Depending on how much time the players took, they could emerge from the caves at one of three points.

Option #1: The Players are Quick About It

If the players were lightning fast, rescuing the rangers and hurrying back to the shuttle with all due haste (in the Game Master's opinion), they arrive as the *Nemesis* is engaging the six Frazi fighters. As soon as he finishes them off, Tareen moves to rendezvous with the shuttle after collecting the Narn escape pods. At this, Admiral Priya becomes suspicious and sends a Vorchan-class cruiser to intercept the *Nemesis*. The players are then faced with the painful realisation that the jump gate lies on the other side of a much more powerful vessel that's ordering them to stand down.

In worse news, the Haven has now suffered damage that has weakened its superstructure by 10 points and knocked out the matter cannon. A player with engineering experience can make a Technical (engineering) check to effect short-term repairs that will allow the weapon at least some functionality. The DC he beats in the check determines how effective the weapon is:

DC	Effectiveness of repairs
0-10	The weapon catastrophically fails when fired, scoring 5 additional points of structural damage on the *Nemesis*
11-15	The weapon can fire one time, at a –2 penalty to hit, before failing permanently.
16-20	The weapon fires once at no penalty, and a second time at a –4 penalty to hit. After that, it is useless.
21-25	The weapon fires once at no penalty. Successive firings suffer a cumulative –1 penalty to hit.
26-30	The weapon is repaired well enough to fire normally for the next few minutes, but it will still eventually fail unless repaired at a starbase or other facility.
31+	The weapon is fully repaired. Apparently the damage wasn't as severe as it first appeared!

The players do have surprise on their side, but the Vorchan's plasma accelerator can easily make mincemeat of the Haven. If the players don't elude the pursuing cruiser quickly and escape into the jump gate, they'll be disabled and forced to surrender. Move on to Encounter Eight.

Should the players escape this challenge and return to Babylon 5, they appear to have succeeded in their mission. However, they may well have an unknown hitchhiker—the second Dark Hunter! In this case, the creature waits until it can get loose on Babylon 5, where it begins a reign of terror on the station. The players will have to hunt it down and destroy it, in much the same way as the creature in 'The Long Dark.' If the Games Master wishes to prolong this hunt, the beast—which feels the pull of Z'ha'dum—will eventually try to escape the station on a ship heading in that direction. The players may then be forced to chase after it, leading to a final showdown with the Dark Hunter somewhere in the dark void of space.

Option #2: The Players Moved at Moderate Speed

If the players moved reasonably well on S'hanthus, but took at least some extra time—perhaps exploring the side rooms or tunnels, waiting for injured players to recover from wounds, or wasting a lot of time debating on how to escape the cave fortress—their shuttle emerges from the caves to find no sign of the *Nemesis.* This is the point at which that ship has been captured and Tareen is being interrogated. As long as they stay reasonably close to S'hanthus, the players won't be detected and can wait to see if the *Nemesis* returns. However, there's no way to get out of the system without using the jump gate, which is perilously close to the Centauri defence fleet.

If the players move towards the jump gate quickly, a Vorchan intercepts them as described under Option #1, except this time they're in an unarmed vessel. They have no choice but to surrender or be shot down. Move to Encounter Eight.

If the players wait a short period of time to see what happens, the *Nemesis* eventually reappears and moves off to the edge of the fleet. By this point, the Haven's crew has been replaced by loyal Centauri and Tareen is being forced at gunpoint to sit in the captain's chair. When the players contact him, he tells them all is well and that he'll rendezvous with them at once. The message then cuts off and the *Nemesis* begins moving towards S'hanthus.

The players now have two chances to realise something's going on. If someone scans the approaching Haven, he'll notice the recent battle damage on a Technical (space travel) check (DC 20). This check reveals that the ship has more damage than before (if it had any before). If the players try to contact Tareen to ask about this, they receive only a curt reply to keep radio silence.

The other chance is to recognise that Tareen is under duress. He uses a slightly different inflection in his voice that can be noticed on a Sense Motive check (DC 26). Success means that the player in question detects only that Tareen seems worried about something. Again, if the players try to ask, they're told to keep radio silence.

If the players don't notice these slight clues, or choose not to act on them, they can land safely aboard the Haven—only to be immediately surrounded by Centauri guards after they emerge from the shuttle. Proceed to Encounter Eight.

If the players want to hide from the approaching Haven, they can do so by simply returning to their previous landing spot. Tareen, after all, doesn't know exactly where that was (remember, G'Trokk waited until the *Nemesis* moved away from S'hanthus before landing for just this very reason). If they do, Tareen is executed and another Centauri, Lieutenant Nevia, takes command. He orders the players to give themselves up or starve on their lonely rock. What happens now is up to the players—they can give up, or wait in the vain hope of rescue.

Within a few hours, however, the shuttle's position is detected and another shuttle filled with Centauri guards is sent down to capture the group. The players and their ranger allies will have to defeat 20 Centauri soldiers in a pitched battle, or simply surrender. If they retreat into the caves, they face starvation. Even the rangers among them will recognise this. Their best bet is to ambush the soldiers leaving the shuttle, and if they win, they can potentially—with the right prisoners and a good plan of attack—return to the *Nemesis* to turn the tables on their would-be masters!

In this case, the players can basically bypass Encounter Eight. Instead, the players will attempt to retake the Haven, fighting at least one group of surprised guards with the stats shown in that encounter. However, midway through the attempt, the Haven will come under attack by a Narn Thentus. An announcement by the Haven's commander, Lieutenant Nevia, warns his crew of this, and the players will be forced to realise that retaking the Haven just isn't possible. They must return to the shuttle and try to get away before the much more powerful Narn ship defeats and destroys the *Nemesis*. Move to Encounter Nine.

Option #3—The Players Take Their Sweet Time

If the players wasted a lot of time on S'hanthus, they will find the *Nemesis* already waiting for them above the planet when they emerge from the caves. Tareen greets them gladly as they rise to orbit and tells them to make haste, as he doesn't know how long he can stay here before Admiral Priya gets suspicious. By now, he's been thoroughly tortured and then promised amnesty if he lures in the players—a lie, but he's grasping at straws in the face of certain execution. Detecting his worries requires a Sense Motive check (DC 31), and even then it's only a slight note of concern. This time, if the players turn about and try to duck back into the cave, the shuttle filled with guards to collect them comes much more quickly, giving them little time to prepare a defence.

Naturally, if the players press on without noticing anything is wrong, they are easily captured after emerging from the shuttle in the *Nemesis's* hangar bay.

Encounter Eight: Rescuers, Save Thyself

Should the players wind up captured by the Centauri—a very likely possibility—they are thrown in a 'brig'—actually the ship's conference room—to await questioning by Admiral Priya. Everyone is disarmed in the process, and anything electronic or potentially dangerous is seized. However, the Centauri guards aren't well trained in the searching of rangers or troubleshooting teams. They may very well miss well-hidden weapons, for example. They also leave any medical supplies with the players to tend to their wounded. Food and water supplies are also left with the group.

If the ranger leader Tinthatil survived the fighting on the planet's surface, he mysteriously doesn't show up in the makeshift brig. One way or another, he manages to hide somewhere on the shuttle before anybody noticed he was missing. The players won't realise this until they are left locked inside their prison, but the ranger trainees know—as does G'Trokk. Tinthatil can thus be used as a 'secret weapon.' However, if he didn't make it through the fight with the Dark Hunter, another of the ranger trainees can take his place in this role. Alternately, G'Trokk can also take his place, as he's schooled in the arts of hiding and moving silently. (Note: Should one of the players come up with this plan when capture appears inevitable, and suggest it out loud, he can join Tinthatil in executing it. In this case, he'll participate in some of the events below. However, this isn't necessary, and Tinthatil won't invite any player to do this on his own.)

The players should be allowed to come up with any reasonable escape plan and put it into motion. If they have any weapons or skills that can force a locked door from the inside, they can try that, but the guards outside will surely notice any such attempt unless it is very swift. The players could also try cutting their way into one of the cabins next door, if they have anything capable of slicing through solid metal. Moving through ventilation shafts isn't possible because the corridors are far too small. The old standby of calling the guards for help won't work, as the soldiers outside have been instructed not to let the door open for *any* reason.

There are four guards, three of whom will attempt to subdue any escapees while the fourth sounds the alarm. Should the alarm be sounded, guards armed with energy weapons arrive from both directions down the corridor within a couple of rounds. The players may well lose this fight, in which case they'll be returned to their jail and searched much more carefully this time. Furthermore, additional guards will then be posted, with heavier weapons, including grenades.

Centauri Guards

1st Level Centauri Soldiers (4)
Hit Points: 8
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee or +4 ranged
Special Qualities: None
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +2, Will –2
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 14, Con 12, Int 8, Wis 6, Cha 12
Skills: Climb +4, Jump +4
Feats: Weapon Focus (PPG), Point Blank Shot
Equipment: Centauri PPG, Centauri armour

These guards are typical mindless drones who obey their instructions to the letter—guard the door and sound the alarm if anyone tries to escape.

In any case, as the Haven flies back towards the fleet, several things happen. First, Tinthatil sneaks around in the ship, locating the storeroom where the players' equipment is stored. He then gathers up some explosives—from the players' supply, if any, or stolen from the Centauri if not—and plants a few charges in various spots aboard the ship. Setting remote activation triggers on these, he then hurries to the brig where he intends to try to break the players out of their cell. Before he gets there, though, the *Nemesis* comes under attack by a Narn Thentus-class frigate.

When the alert sounds, the ship erupts into battle stations, forcing Tinthatil to hide himself. Then, when the ship starts shuddering from weapons hits, he decides the time is right to blow the charges. He triggers the blasts, distracting the guards, and attacks. If the players have been listening and have a way to break out, they can join him in the attack on the Centauri defenders. This time, even if they do sound the alarm, there will be no response, with most of the crew gone to battle stations to help fend off the Thentus.

Tinthatil then leads the players back down the corridor to the storage room where their equipment is locked away. The players will have to hurry—if they delay too long, the Haven could be destroyed in combat. Tinthatil leads them towards the shuttle bay, where the last battle of this module takes place.

Encounter Nine: Showdown in the Shuttle Bay

As the doors slide open, you see that the shuttle bay is in chaos. Smoke is everywhere and Centauri crewmen are running about in obvious distress. Soldiers are firing wildly at nothing, which confuses you for a moment until you see the all-too-familiar demonic shape outlined by billowing vapours. As you watch in horror, the creature—an exact duplicate of the one you fought on S'hanthus, picks up a Centauri and sucks the life out of his drying husk. Before you can react to this, however, one of the panicked guards sees you standing there and opens fire!

The final scenario is a wild melee involving 18 Centauri soldiers (use the statistics provided in Encounter Eight), the cowardly Lieutenant Nevia, the second Dark Hunter, the players, G'Trokk, and any rangers the players rescued on S'hanthus. The ultimate objective is one of the two shuttles crammed tightly on the Haven's crowded deck.

Lieutenant Nevia

5th Level Centauri Officer
Hit Points: 17
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +6 melee or +8 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Rallying Call
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +5
Abilities: Str 13, Dex 16, Con 11, Int 10, Wis 12, Cha 15
Skills: Bluff +8, Concentration +8, Diplomacy +6, Pilot +11, Sense Motive +4
Feats: Spacecraft Proficiency, Veteran Spacehand
Equipment: PPG rifle, Centauri officer's uniform

Lieutenant Nevia is trying to get aboard one, along with two of the other Centauri guards, so he can fly to safety. Should he succeed, he overrides the hangar bay's door controls and opens the entire bay to space some time after the fight starts. He doesn't care who dies when this occurs, as long as he saves his own skin. When the battle begins, he and his two bodyguards are positioned opposite the Dark Hunter, so he has to wait until it moves before he can rush the shuttle. This happens on the second round when the creature moves to attack another Centauri soldier. Nevia and his bodyguards shoot on the run, aiming at the players, and rush into one of the shuttles, sealing the door behind them. On the 6th round thereafter, the engines of that shuttle activate, and on the 12th round, the hangar bay doors open, exposing everyone to explosive decompression.

The Games Master has incredible latitude running this fight, which should be carefully tailored to the firepower and health of the surviving players. If the players are on their last legs, the Centauri in the bay will spend most of their time shooting at the terrifying creature in front of them. If instead the players are still strong, the Centauri will prefer to shoot them—a known enemy—instead of the ghostly creature rampaging about the bay. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Nevia's actions put an effective time limit on the scenario, adding to the excitement.

There are several possible outcomes of this fight.

If the players fight their way to the other shuttle, they can escape the ship when Nevia blows the doors open. The Thentus outside pays the players no heed while it methodically cuts apart the Haven from medium range. Whoever is piloting the shuttle can easily move into the jump gate and get away, bringing the module to a successful conclusion.

If the players retreat or are forced to leave the bay when Nevia starts opening the doors, they will still be aboard when the *Nemesis* surrenders to the Thentus. Narns boarding the ship are met by G'Trokk, who gives a priority code and appropriates a shuttle for the players and rangers—'victims of Centauri war crimes,' as he puts it. In a hurry to capture the *Nemesis* before Centauri forces can arrive to rescue it, the Narns don't mind letting the players—and their potentially troublesome problems—leave the area. This is also a successful conclusion to the module.

If the players get aboard the shuttle but the Dark Hunter is still alive, the pesky beast sneaks aboard their ship (again) and returns to Babylon 5 with them. The players can proceed to the Aftermath, but will have to deal with the creature somewhere in the station's lower decks. Alternately, it could slip aboard another ship bound for the rim, rejoining the growing Shadow army, and could reappear later in the campaign as a recurring enemy—especially if the players later become enemies of the Shadows. After all, the Dark Hunter is one creature that's encountered these people before, and knows their strengths and weaknesses.

Note that G'Trokk and/or Tinthatil won't allow the players to flee the Haven until all the surviving ranger trainees are brought aboard. Only if there's no way to save them will he permit them to be left behind. Tinthatil will also gladly sacrifice his own life against the Dark Hunter if doing so will permit the ranger trainees—and to a lesser extent the players—to get away safely. G'Trokk will do the same, but only if he's sure his death will have meaning.

AFTERMATH

If the players end the last encounter with Tinthatil among the survivors, he will use the shuttle's communications equipment to send a message on a secret frequency. When the players then reach the *Liberty's Fortune*, he insists that he and his people remain aboard the shuttle while the group departs. If asked, he reports that he's already arranged to be picked up by another group of rangers. Sure enough, as the players are heading to the jump gate for the trip home, a mysterious, sleek ship drops out of hyperspace and collects the shuttle. The ship is graceful in appearance, with a blue tint to its silvery sheen. Anyone making a Technical (space travel) check (DC 15) can note the obvious Minbari influence on its design, but this is a ship never before seen—a White Star, of course, but the players won't know that. The White Star doesn't linger, but heads immediately back into hyperspace and quickly vanishes.

When the players finally return to Babylon 5, they find Theresa Cross has recovered and is being kept in isolation to protect her from any other would-be assassins. Upon hearing the tale of the rescue, she's noticeably pleased and agrees to transfer the players' fee—plus a hefty bonus if they saved a significant number of rangers—into their credit accounts as previously agreed. She says she now hopes she, and the players, have earned the trust of those who would stand and face the coming darkness. Of this mysterious approaching evil, she says only that it involves an alien race known as the Shadows who intend to make war on all the other powers. First, though, they're sowing discontent and chaos to disguise the true threat. The rangers are trying to help put a stop to that. She ends the meeting hopeful that the players will join them, if not officially then at least in spirit.

After this, she departs the station aboard the *Liberty's Fortune*, promising to return. Sadly, it appears this will not be the case. A Universe Today article several days later reports that the civilian ship *Liberty's Fortune* was destroyed by raiders en route from Babylon 5 to Earth. The players can try to investigate, but all they learn is that the *Liberty* put out a distress call reporting attacking raiders, and later the scattered debris of the little pinnace was discovered floating in space in that general vicinity. There were no survivors.

Yet, despite this, the players still receive their payment, transferred into their account by persons unknown. Anyone attempting to trace the transaction comes up empty. Whoever did it was apparently an anonymous benefactor. So are Theresa Cross and her associates dead or not? Or have they been spirited away by their new allies in the Anla'shok? Only time will tell…

Other Possible Post-Module Events

G'Trokk's Next Move: After returning to Babylon 5, G'Trokk is impressed by the players' abilities and teamwork (assuming, of course, that they actually exhibited such qualities during the course of the module). However, he says that the events in Quadrant 14 have shown him that he must return to Narn space to fight alongside his people in the defence of Narn space. He now considers the players his friends, and may return in future scenarios—especially after the Narn-Centauri War meets its inevitable end. For example, the players may learn that he's been captured and set out to rescue him. Or, he may return to Babylon 5 and ask his friends to help him with another rescue—this time of Narns attempting to escape Centauri atrocities.

Possible Ranger Connections: If the players didn't do a very good job keeping the ranger trainees alive, the rangers may be less inclined to see them as heroes and allies. In this case, the rangers may well avoid the players in the future, or consider them 'loose cannons.' However, if the players acted with skill and at least some level of professionalism, they may be approached for future work by members of the Anla'shok. This could involve any number of side scenarios, which would serve not only to further the rangers' goals but also to act as tests to see if the players are indeed worthy of undergoing induction into the rangers.

Ranger Training: Should the players qualify for the Anla'shok, they will need training as described in *The Point of No Return*. Some players may qualify, while others don't—for example, a telepath or heavily multi-classed character may not be selected. This could result in some of the players going off to training for a time while the others remain on Babylon 5. Alternately, the Anla'shok may decide instead to select the entire 'team' to be the equivalent of 'ranger irregulars'—a group that isn't exactly part of the rangers, but is acknowledged as seeking the same goals.

Suggested Experience for This Module

Returning safely to Babylon 5: 1,000
G'Trokk survives to the end: 300
Tinthatil survives: 200
Tobias survives: 100
Each Dark Hunter killed: 300
The players got through the caves at maximum speed: 100
The players caught and killed R'Shon after the assassination attempt: 100
Each ranger trainee that survives: 50 (or 500 if they all survive)

HANDOUT FOR MODULE ONE

Universe Today — Babylon 5 Edition — January 15, 2259

SPECIAL REPORT
Minbari Kamikaze Attack a Colossal Bluff

Babylon 5 (GP)—Earlier today, the citizens of Babylon 5 held their collective breaths as the rogue Minbari cruiser *Trigati* threatened to open fire on the station. The obvious question—asked only after the obligatory gasp in relief that the Minbari were bluffing—is why?

We now know there were several reasons. First and foremost, the *Trigati* went rogue because they refused to accept the Minbari surrender after the Battle of the Line. Thus, according to EarthForce General William Hague, 'They were still fighting the Earth-Minbari War, even after all this time. Now low in supplies and unable to return to their own space, the *Trigati* planned to go out with a bang!'

Second, and perhaps more telling, the captain of the *Trigati*, Kalain, arranged his attack because he learned of the assignment of Captain John Sheridan to command Babylon 5. Captain Sheridan, one of the few heroes of the Earth-Minbari War, is best known for his destruction of the Minbari flagship *Black Star* with nuclear bombs placed in an asteroid field. Kalain apparently still held a grudge against Sheridan for that particular incident.

'Yes, I ordered the bombs planted in the asteroids,' Captain Sheridan stated during a postwar interview on ISN—a particularly scathing interview in which his honour was called into question. 'Of course I did. It was war. They had already destroyed most of my task force through a deception of their own, and now, even though we were crippled, they were coming back to hunt down all survivors. Think of it as somebody sinking a fleet on the ocean, back in the days of the world wars, and then lurking around in a submarine to torpedo any rescue boats. That's what the Minbari were doing. If you were in my shoes, and you knew they'd come back, you would've done the same thing.'

Apparently Kalain didn't agree. He saw Sheridan's act as the ultimate in cowardice, and to punish him, he set a trap at Babylon 5. We asked Susan Ivanova, acting commander of Babylon 5 prior to Sheridan's arrival, to explain the plan. 'He first arranged for his own death in Babylon 5's brig,' Ivanova explained. 'He used poison, but the very fact that he was dead provided provocation enough to allow the *Trigati* to attack. But even then they wouldn't take the first shot. Instead, they rushed the station with weapons ready, assuming we'd fire. We weren't fooled, though. Guess what? They weren't using those jammers of theirs. That's how we knew it was a trap. We let 'em sail right by. Meanwhile, the Captain sent a message to a Minbari cruiser waiting in hyperspace. They showed up and disabled the *Trigati*, without us having to get involved. That's when the *Trigati* blew itself up. End of story.'

Is it really the end, though? Captain Sheridan's assignment to Babylon 5 isn't exactly favourable to everyone. The Minbari aren't the only one who question his presence here. Will he prove to be the right choice? Only time will tell.

Further analysis of the Trigati incident: Pages A10-A11
Captain Sheridan's war record: Page A8
Editorial commentary: Page A14

COVER STORY
New Commander Takes His Seat on B5's Command Deck

Babylon 5 (ISN)—Residents of Babylon 5 received a new surprise yesterday when a new commander was assigned from EarthForce: Captain John Sheridan, decorated hero of the *Black Star* Incident and veteran of the Battle of the Line.

Captain Sheridan arrived immediately as a new crisis unfolded. The Minbari warship *Trigati* (see related story, this page) attempted to trick the station's defenders into opening fire, only to be thwarted by the arrival of another Minbari ship. In the end, the *Trigati* self-destructed, eliminating the threat.

'I'm glad to be here in this important post, but I would've felt much better if I hadn't started the job with such a baptism of fire,' Captain Sheridan quipped after the crisis was over.

'I just wish I would've had time to deliver my usual introductory speech,' he added with a grin.

Please see Cover Story, next page
Captain Sheridan's war record: Page A8

Destruction of the *Trigati* Litters Near-B5 Space With Debris

Babylon 5 (GP)—The recent explosion of the huge Minbari warship *Trigati*, along with the ship's entire complement of fighters, has left the space around Babylon 5 filled with chunks of dangerous, spinning debris.

Cleanup crews are already active collecting the larger pieces, but several ships have already reported collisions with sections of fuselage, canopies, armour—and even bodies.

Travellers into and out of the station are warned to fly slowly and keep the sensors busy to avoid further accidents. Some pieces of debris could enter orbit around the planet, in elliptical orbits that bring them back even days after the incident.

Anyone encountering a piece of wreckage should report its position and vector to the command deck at once. Do not attempt to capture debris on your own. Some of the pieces may contain dangerous radioactivity or even war material, such as explosive devices. Babylon 5's collision insurance will not pay for any accident resulting from the attempted collection of *Trigati* debris or that of its fighters.

Photos of large debris pieces: Page A-12

Technorap Band Coming to Babylon 5

San Francisco, Earth (EAN)—The spokesman for the highly popular technorap band 'Fear of Fame and Fortune,' also known as 'F-Cubed,' announced today that Babylon 5 was their next stop.

F-Cubed has become known not only for its wildly jabbering but nonetheless entertaining music and singing style, but also the way the band hops randomly about the galaxy—even to places that have never heard human music before. Playing as often to wildly cheering crowds as to curious aliens that clearly don't understand what they're hearing, F-Cubed on the surface seems ill-suited as the messenger of Earth's culture to the stars. Yet they remain one of the highest paid bands in the entire Earth Alliance.

'We're going to Babylon 5 to reach as large a potential new audience as we can,' explained Mortimer Pendgrass, the spokesman and agent of Fear of Fame & Fortune. 'We're going to set up right in the middle of their open-air restaurant area, and it's totally free. No charge at all. We're going to rap the socks off Babylon 5!'

Mr. Pendgrass then announced the date of the concert—February 14. Security forces on Babylon 5 immediately expressed alarm, claiming that they were understaffed to protect F-Cubed before, during, and after the concert. 'One month isn't nearly enough time to get ready for something like that,' complained one member of Security, who asked that he not be identified by name.

'Don't worry,' Pendgrass went on. 'We'll bring our own bouncers!'

For more on this developing story, see the Cover Story on page D-1.
Who is F-Cubed? Page D-2

Mysterious Techno-Mages Spotted on Babylon 5

Babylon 5 (ISN)—The Techno-mages, mysterious monk-like individuals who command highly advanced technologies that resemble magic, have started cropping up on Babylon 5. At least three different ones have been spotted, although the exact number isn't clear—the mages can disguise themselves, and may even be able to appear as each other. Experts are at a loss to explain their presence here.

'We have no idea what they're doing on the station,' said Security Officer Zack Allen. 'None at all. This is the first time one has ever been positively identified on Babylon 5. These guys are weird, you know? To hear the rumours, they're like walking demigods. I've never seen any of their powers, but I've heard the stories. We all have. So far, though, they've been model citizens. If you want the truth, I'm not worried about them at all—as long as no more of them show up.'

Reporters have tried to approach the Techno-mages for interviews, but have always been turned away. Even secret attempts to film them come up a failure—recordings are always blank, or even more mysteriously, the faces and voices of the mages are blurred or muted in the tapes.

We asked Dr. Carl Wittenberg, a professor at the Byelorussia Institute of Xenosciences, for his explanation. 'The beings known as Techno-mages are really ordinary people at heart,' he explained in an exclusive interview. 'They are humans, Narns, Centauri…but inside their bodies, they carry highly advanced technologies, wound in amidst their central nervous system. Using these implants, a 'mage' or 'wizard' can produce flame, manipulate electricity, create illusions…just by pointing their hand and maybe uttering the words to a 'spell.'

'Yes, it sounds like the subject of fiction, but I assure you, the Techno-mages are real. No one is sure how many of them there are, or what their real motives might be. Most seem to be wanderers, although some are known to live in specific places, where they are revered or at the very least treated as local authority figures. Curiously, although records exist to show they once interfered with governments across the galaxy—including the Centauri Republic—they don't seem interested in such things any more. My advice? Give them a wide berth.'

For someone who can throw fire from his empty hands, this sounds like good advice indeed.

Firsthand accounts of Techno-mage encounters: Page D-3
Artist's rendition of one of the Techno-mages currently visiting Babylon 5: Page D-4

Security Chief Garibaldi Still in Coma

Babylon 5 (B5N)—After the brutal attempt on his life several weeks ago, Security Chief Michael Garibaldi remains in critical condition in Medlab.

As readers of this paper know, Mr. Garibaldi was attacked by an unknown assailant while working on an important case. Security has offered a reward of 500 credits to anyone with information leading to the arrest of his attacker.

'We are hopeful he'll recover,' said Dr. Stephen Franklin, 'but as of now he's still in a coma. I've done everything I can with the medical technology at my disposal. Now it's up to him.'

As he spoke, however, Dr. Franklin seemed to remember something. 'There may be one other way,' he said, as if talking to himself. 'Maybe one other way. I can't explain right now.'

When asked for more details, Dr. Franklin said simply, 'No comment.'

Mr. Garibaldi's injuries in detail: Page A-15

HANDOUT FOR MODULE TWO

Universe Today — Babylon 5 Edition — February 26, 2259

Ancient Earth Ship Appears at Babylon 5

Babylon 5 (GP)—The *Copernicus*, an exploratory ship that launched from Earth in 2144—prior to First Contact with the Centauri—made a surprise appearance at Babylon 5 yesterday. The vessel was last seen exiting the Sol system with a crew of two, kept in suspended animation for the deep space survey mission. They were to be awakened upon detecting an intelligent signal, but despite the fact that the ship has passed through the fringes of several systems en route to Babylon 5, its occupants never awoke.

'One of them, Mariah Cirrus, is still alive,' explained Dr. Stephen Franklin, chief physician of Babylon 5. 'However, she's still recovering from the after-effects of cryogenic suspension. I'm afraid I can't authorise any interviews just now.'

Although he wouldn't reveal the name of the other occupant of the *Copernicus*, it's widely rumoured that he was Mariah Cirrus's husband. The method of death appears to be a failure of the cryogenic capsule in which he slept during the long voyage. However, a medical technician who asked not to be identified told us this wasn't the case. 'Whatever killed that man wasn't a mechanical failure,' he explained nervously. 'He was murdered, and his internal organs were literally torn from his body.'

What could've done something like that wasn't clear. The *Copernicus* had no other occupants, and its external seals hadn't been broken prior to its arrival on Babylon 5.

The ship is a veritable museum—a flying relic from Earth's early space exploration days, prior to the discovery of hyperspace. Designed for flight at speeds approaching 0.2c—two-tenths of the speed of light—it literally took a hundred years to reach Epsilon Eridani. This wasn't a direct route, as the vessel's flight path took it to a variety of systems. In one case, its own internal records reveal that it passed through territory already occupied by the Earth Alliance, but for reasons unknown, never made contact with any outposts or ships. Most of its travel time has been spent in deep space, where few ships travel.

'We really won't know more about what happened to the *Copernicus* until we've gone over the ship's computer logs with a fine-toothed comb,' explained Captain Sheridan, commander of Babylon 5. 'Hopefully they'll shed some light on this mystery.'

Blueprints of the *Copernicus*: Page A4
The ship's route in pictures: Page A5

Another Mars Rebellion Imminent?

Mars Dome One (ISN)—Amid rumours that another Martian rebellion was approaching, stocks plummeted over 200 points on the Earth Alliance Stock Exchange (EASA), and another 100 points on the Mars Colony Stock Index (MCSI).

'In the past week we've arrested half a dozen would-be saboteurs and terrorists,' said Jacob Simmons, Assistant Chief of Mars Dome One Security. 'Each one had unprecedented numbers of weapons and explosives in their homes. As you know, the last rebellion included weapons of all kinds apparently smuggled into the hands of rebels by persons unknown. Well, this time, we're cutting off their supplies. Soon, we'll track these back to whoever's supplying these terrorists, and there'll be hell to pay!'

Despite Simmons's confident statements, very little has actually been accomplished towards tracking the terrorists' suppliers. 'The problem is, they're arranged in cells,' explained Sharon Navarre, telepathic advisor to Mars Dome One Security. 'I've scanned every one of the terrorists, in accordance with the law, which is how we captured so many. They were all supplied by an unknown agent they knew only as 'Number One.' Unless we have another break in the case, the only thing we've managed to do so far is knock out one cell of guerrilla fighters.'

Add to this the political problems surrounding Mars, and the planet seems ripe for rebellion. The departure of several large companies to other colonies and to Earth have set Mars's unemployment rate at near record highs. Meanwhile, food prices continue to rise, and power companies have lowered production to increase profits. The results are rolling blackouts that have much of Mars grumbling and protesters out in droves.

'All we know is something has to be done, and done quickly,' Simmons said. 'Sooner or later, these people will reach the breaking point. I don't know where that is, but it's coming. When you hear your own friends and family talking about how good things were during the Earth-Minbari War, you know how far things have fallen.'

Other Mars grievances: Page A8
Mars Colony's effect on the financial situation: Cover Story, Page B1

Cortez Departs Without Incident...This Time

Babylon 5 (B5P)—This time, the departure went without a hitch. The Explorer-class survey ship *Cortez* made its second attempt to set off on its new mission, proceeding through the widened jump gate without a hitch.

Only a few days ago, the ship suffered a catastrophic reactor breakdown that set it adrift in hyperspace. Only the quick thinking of Babylon 5's Starfury pilots, including the redoubtable Lt. Warren Keffer, brought

the ship back safely—a kind of rescue that would normally have only the barest chance of success.

'It should've been easier,' Lt. Keffer explained, making no attempt to take any glory for his role in the rescue. 'We had enough pilots and enough fighters, so all we had to do was set up a chain back to the jump gate. I'm telling you, something in hyperspace literally knocked one of the Furies out of the sky. I don't know what it was, but I swear, I'm going to find out.'

Despite his attempt to turn the focus of the discussion away from himself, the humble Keffer was truly the hero who saved the *Cortez*. By staying cool after the destruction of his only link to Babylon 5, he provided the path home by firing his fighter's guns in the right direction. Thus, by this simple act, he saved hundreds of men and women and one of the Earth Alliance's largest ships from disaster.

'We're going to give him a medal,' Captain Sheridan said afterward. 'I'm not sure which, but he's definitely getting one, I can assure you of that.'

Explorer-class ship statistics: Page A11
Bio of Lt. Keffer: Page A15

Latest Winner of B5 Lottery Claims Ticket Stolen

Babylon 5 (B5P)—Tor Lashan, the Centauri who claimed the 2-million-credit jackpot in last week's B5 Lottery, now reports his ticket has been stolen.

'I should've turned it in right away,' Lashan said in disgust, 'but no, no, I had to show it off to all my friends! When I finally did take it to the lottery claims office, I found to my surprise that it was no longer in my coat pocket. I know it was there when I left my quarters. Someone must've picked my pocket! Can you imagine such a crime? And I thought the people on this station were paragons of law and order!'

Lottery officials say that even though Lashan made a copy of the winning ticket and showed it to numerous witnesses, the one who turns it in will still be awarded the money. 'It's the responsibility of the ticket buyer to ensure its security,' explained Chris Ramon, the station's lottery coordinator. 'It says so right in the rules. However, this does not mean Mr. Lashan cannot bring suit against the claimant for ownership of the ticket.'

Tor Lashan says he intends to do just that. 'In the meantime,' he went on, 'I'm offering a reward for information leading to the return of my property. Anyone who recovers it will receive 10,000 credits—which I'll hand you in cash, as soon as I turn in the ticket. As the humans say, no questions asked.'

So far, this has borne no fruit. The ticket remains at large, and the deadline for claiming the lottery prize is only a week away. Meanwhile, security guards are in place about the lottery offices, ensuring there will be no violence should anyone arrive to make the claim.

'I'll be waiting there, too,' said Lashan. 'Anyone who wants to claim the reward, you know where to find me.'

Actual text of the lottery rules: Page A13
Previous similar cases in Earth Alliance history: Page A14

'Blip' Found Dead in Downbelow

Brown Five (B5P)—The body of a man found yesterday morning has now been positively identified as that of Adolph Renfrew, a known 'blip.' Blips are telepaths who flee from Psi Corps, keeping their dangerous abilities to themselves instead of registering them within the law.

'We've been searching for Mr. Renfrew for quite some time,' said Talia Winters, Babylon 5's resident commercial telepath. 'His telepathic abilities weren't particularly powerful, but it's believed that he was using them for personal gain. He was a criminal, plain and simple. My only regret—Psi Corps's only regret—is that we couldn't bring him back into the fold. He was one of us once, and would've been again, if only we could've found him before he got into such trouble. A true tragedy.'

Despite Ms. Winters's claims that Renfrew was using his abilities for 'personal gain,' the man was a lurker with no appreciable assets. When found, he was dressed in rags and had no money of which to speak.

'This guy wasn't a criminal, that's for sure,' said Dr. Stephen Franklin, the station's chief medical officer and the one who performed the autopsy on Renfrew. 'Sure, he was a telepath, but it's clear he kept his abilities to himself. If he wanted to, he could've found a way to at least get some quarters and a little money. Instead, he died penniless, on the run, trying to hide from those he considered his oppressors. His death was a tragedy, indeed. Yes. A tragedy.'

Adolph Renfrew was the third dead blip to turn up on Babylon 5 in the last six months, a remarkable number considering the rarity of telepaths and the even greater scarcity of blips. Psi Corps estimates that perhaps no more than twenty or thirty blips exist at any given moment.

Anyone who encounters a blip should not attempt to interact with him or her in any way. Blips can be very subtle and dangerous. Instead, contact your local Psi Corps representatives with all due haste.

'Blips aren't to be taken lightly,' explained Talia Winters. 'They can be quite desperate, and if you want my opinion, few things are more dangerous than a desperate telepath.'

Analysis of the crime scene: Page A2

HANDOUT FOR MODULE THREE

Universe Today — Babylon 5 Edition — May 2, 2259

SPECIAL REPORT — WAR!
Narn Regime and Centauri Republic Declare War Over Quadrant 14

Babylon 5 (ISN)—At 1630 today, the ambassadors made it official: The Narns and Centauri are at war.

The bubbling pool of rising tensions has finally boiled over. Early today, a Centauri force of unknown size attacked and annihilated the Narn colony in Quadrant 14, resulting in the loss of at least 10,000 dead. Narn forces arriving on the scene beheld untold devastation and immediately fell upon the Centauri fleet. The battle still appears to be raging, but at press time, the Narns were falling back in the face of arriving Centauri reinforcements.

All this comes on the same day the Centauri Emperor, Turhan, made a historic visit to Babylon 5, during which it was hoped he would patch things up with the Narn Regime. Sources have learned that such an attempt was indeed made, but it came too late. Centauri forces were already on the move.

Shortly before Emperor Turhan's death, sources at ISN learned that the Centauri Prime Minister was assassinated on Centauri Prime. Details are sketchy, and the name of the Emperor's successor is not yet known. However, the timing of all these events seems curious.

'Emperor Turhan's death was by natural causes, I can assure you of that,' said Dr. Stephen Franklin, who took care of the dying man in his final hours. 'He was just old, and his body finally failed him. There were no toxins in his system and no foul play was at work.'

The timing of events has led many experts to declare that certain individuals were merely waiting for the Emperor's failing health to overtake him. 'It's clear that his death was the trigger for a kind of chain reaction,' said Sir Victor Richards, the Earth Alliance Foreign Minister and well-known expert on alien governments. 'The beginning of the war was precisely timed with the death of the Prime Minister. Clearly, one of the Major Houses is making a power play, hoping to tie the Republic up in a popular war while they increase their power.'

Meanwhile, Narn forces all over the galaxy are marshalling for a war that seemed to take both sides by surprise.

'Clearly neither race is prepared for all-out war,' said Dr. Alicia Lindstrom of the Earth Alliance Foreign Affairs office. 'If they were, the Centauri would be pouring over the border with vast armadas. They aren't. The Narns are just as bad. Their fleets are scattered through their space. If you were prepping for an invasion, wouldn't you place your forces at the points of attack, or at least along the border to offset counterstrikes? No, this took both sides by surprise. You can count on that.'

Lindstrom is on Sir Richards's staff, but frequently disagrees with him. Richards declined to respond to her observations.

Regardless of the reason for the sudden attack and who was or was not prepared, war is upon these two great powers. Now the galaxy can only hold its breath and wait to see which side is the victor.

Please see the Cover Story continuing on the next page
Quadrant 14—analysis of the attack: Page A3
Comparison of Narn and Centauri military forces: Page A4
The Primus vs. the G'Quan—a comparison of two battlecruisers: Page A5
Economics or Military? Great wars through history: Page A6

Centauri Emperor Dies During Visit to Babylon 5

Babylon 5 (B5P)—Despite failing health, Emperor Turhan felt a state visit to Babylon 5 was important enough to risk his own life. His gamble failed.

'The Emperor was dying of old age,' said Ambassador Mollari, the Centauri ambassador to Babylon 5. 'Many of us urged him not to come, but he said he had to try. No one is sure what he meant by that. Perhaps his message was to personally deliver the declaration of war to the Narn ambassador, but if so, he was unable to do so before the fighting began.'

'That's crazy,' insisted Captain Sheridan, commander of Babylon 5. 'Leaders of vast nations don't risk themselves to deliver declarations of war. That's what ambassadors are for. He came here for another reason—but I don't think anyone will ever know for sure what it was.'

Speculation is that the Emperor came to Babylon 5 to attempt to make peace with the Narn Regime. If so, he perished before he could make the attempt. In any event, this seems unlikely. Ships of the Centauri Republic were already on the move before Turhan even arrived at the station. The trip to Quadrant 14 from their nearest staging base would've taken at least a day.

'Emperor Turhan died of natural causes,' said Dr. Franklin, who examined the Centauri leader both before and after his death. 'There was no evidence of foul play.'

Shortly after the Emperor's death, a Narn colony was destroyed in Quadrant 14, and the Narns declared war on the Centauri.

See Complete War Coverage Throughout Section A

Akdor Erupts Into Civil War

Akdor, Sh'lassan Empire (ISN)—Barely noticed in today's tumultuous events involving the Narn and Centauri, the planet Akdor in the Sh'lassan Empire flared into open revolt yesterday. The announcement came scant hours before the destruction of the Narn colony in Quadrant 14. Very little is known of the cause of the rebellion.

'Akdor has been the primary colony of the Sh'lassan Empire for two hundred years,' said Ambassador Quat'shata, speaking from his quarters in the Alien Sector of Babylon 5. 'We have always treated the colonists with the utmost respect and kindness. Yet this is how they repay us! Attacking our police, destroying public works…they will be punished for this, I assure you!'

ISN reporters also spoke to one of the rebels on Akdor, who declined to be named, believing that doing so would threaten his life. He appeared nervous as he spoke to us, constantly swivelling his head back and forth. 'The homeworld has treated Akdor as a slave world for dozens of your years. We are the lowest caste of citizens in the Sh'lassan Triumvirate. Pah! As if that word truly described our status, as though we were equals. Sh'lassan Slavocracy is more likely!'

'That is nonsense,' said Quat'shata. 'Absolutely false. They are not slaves. Akdorrian citizens have the same rights as those on Sh'lassa or Hishor. We give them what they need—food, fuel, better standard of living—and they repay us with greater and greater demands! They would live like kings in their protected domes while the rest of the Empire serves their whims. No longer!'

Although the beginning of the Narn-Centauri conflict has most Earth Alliance delegates focusing on that matter, some did express concern over the Akdor revolt. 'The Sh'lassans are a favoured trading partner of Earth,' said Jorge Tossada, a member of President Clark's foreign ministry. 'Additionally, Akdor is directly on the Alliance's primary trade route to the Narn homeworld. We already have a defence agreement with the Sh'lassans, and there are troops present in both their systems. As yet, our garrison on Akdor hasn't come under attack, but if our troops are threatened, we'll have to defend ourselves. Furthermore, if the Sh'lassans ask for our help in suppressing the revolt, I can't see how we could possibly refuse them.'

'Think of it this way,' said Quat'shada pointedly. 'You humans have already suppressed open revolts on one of your major colonies—Mars, is it not? This is the same to us, although Akdor's population and industry are far higher than those on Mars. We have no choice but to bring these rebels back into line. I hope we can count on aid from our like-minded friends in the Earth Alliance in this matter.'

This statement provoked a storm of criticism from the Martian senatorial staff in Geneva, but has so far been overshadowed by the Narn-Centauri War. 'No one seems to want to bother with Akdor at the moment,' said Tossada with a noticeable shrug. 'Sooner or later, though, it's bound to come up, and when it does…'

He left the statement unfinished, but the meaning is clear: The Marines will be called in.

Akdor's history: Page A10
Who are the Sh'lassans? Page A11

Unidentified 'Floater' Brought to Babylon 5

Medlab, Blue Sector (B5N)—A freighter bound for Earth space dropped off an unusual cargo today—a 'floater,' or lifepod containing a survivor in suspended animation. The pod was discovered and picked up in the Comac system several days ago. Inside, an unidentified man in a Belt Alliance uniform was still alive, held in suspension by the pod's automatic systems.

'He could've been out there for years,' said Security Chief Michael Garibaldi. 'Pods like that are designed to broadcast a distress signal to any ship that comes close enough. We don't even know what ship he was from, since this one took so much damage while it drifted. Anyone who recognises the man shown in the image (see picture, page A16) should contact Security immediately.'

According to Dr. Stephen Franklin, the medical officer who brought the man safely back to consciousness after his ordeal, the 'John Doe' has an acute case of amnesia. 'He doesn't remember anything, not even his own name,' the doctor explained. 'That's not uncommon in situations where suspension lasts for long periods, but it usually fades within a few hours. His seems to be lingering. That's why we need anyone who recognises his image to contact us at once.'

'We're pretty sure he was a Belt Alliance crewman, but we don't know when or where he might've lost his ship. I wish I had more time to look into this, but with all the wars going on, I'm terribly busy just getting Medlab ready for what are sure to be plenty of casualties in the next few weeks.'

'If we can't find out who he is, and he doesn't recover from his memory loss, I'll have no choice but to release him,' said Dr. Franklin sadly. 'That would be a tragedy. For all we know, this man could shed some light on the mystery of one of the Belt Alliance ships that's gone missing in that area in the last dozen years or so. He could even be a hero, and not even realise it.'

The man, known only as 'John Doe,' was unavailable for comment.

Listing of Belt Alliance losses in or near Brakiri space in the last 20 years: Page A15

HANDOUT FOR MODULE FOUR

Universe Today — Babylon 5 Edition — October 24, 2259

Markab Race Virtually Annihilated By Plague

Markab Space (ISN)—Reports coming in throughout Markab space indicate that the Markab race has been all but destroyed by what is now known as the 'Drafa plague.'

Every Markab planet and colony has been devastated by the disease, which has a nearly 100% fatality rate. The spread of the plague was accelerated by the mistaken belief among the Markab culture that those who came down with symptoms were 'cursed' by the gods and were struck down as unworthy or immoral. The righteous, or so they anticipated, would be left unharmed by the disease.

Sadly, this proved not to be the case. Markabs of all ages, even innocent children, were slain by the Drafa organism, which was apparently an airborne virus of extreme communicability.

'The Drafa plague has an incubation period of about a week,' explained Dr. Stephen Franklin, Babylon 5's chief medical officer. It's all but impossible to detect during that time. After that, symptoms develop quickly and include dizziness, nausea, weakness and finally an almost inevitable death. Every single Markab on Babylon 5 perished from this disease, a 100% casualty rate. Even those who kept apart from the others, staying out of the isolation zone, contracted it through airborne vectors.'

Dr. Franklin then compared the plague to that of the Black Death of Earth's Dark Ages. 'The Black Death was spread by the fleas that infested rats,' he explained, looking weary from what has been at least two days without sleep. 'Yet the people in the areas struck by this disease considered it 'immoral,' brought by the Devil. Cats were considered the 'familiars' of Satan, and therefore the people mindlessly believed that killing every cat they found would stop the spread of the disease. Instead, they only allowed the rat population to explode, creating an epidemic of immense proportions.'

'The same thing happened here, basically. Even at the end, the Markab government wouldn't research the plague. I was actually able to find a cure working almost entirely on my own, alongside a brave Markab friend named Lazarenn—may he rest in peace. If only they hadn't clung to this belief that it was an immoral curse! We could've saved at least some of them!'

During the Drafa plague's course on Babylon 5, a Pak'ma'ra fell victim to the disease. Dr. Franklin eventually identified a similar physiological structure in the Pak'ma'ra body that's subject to the plague's effects. 'They (the Pak'ma'ra) have a kind of 'green cell' that produce chemicals that aid the neural relays in the body's nervous system,' he explained, pointing at a medical scan (see illustration, page A2). 'The Markabs have a 'yellow cell' that does much the same thing, only is far more critical to their health. With the yellow cells disrupted, a Markab victim's neurons literally couldn't communicate with each other, causing the body to simply fail to work. Fortunately, most races—including humans, Narns, Centauri, and Minbari—don't use similar cells, so they aren't in any danger. The Pak'ma'ra who died was unusually susceptible due to a genetic disorder. I don't believe the other Pak'ma'ra on Babylon 5 are at risk, but even so, I've ordered them all vaccinated against the plague.'

The appearance of the Drafa plague came as a surprise to the Markab race. 'Drafa was last seen decades ago on the Markab homeworld, in an isolated religious retreat,' said Dr. Franklin. 'That's what Lazarenn told me. The whole area was later sterilised, since it was believed that those victims were struck down by the gods. How the disease resurfaced years later is a complete mystery.'

Technical analysis of the plague organism: Page A2
Markab space declared off-limits to travellers: Page A3

Volunteers Needed to Locate Possible Markab Survivors

Babylon 5, Blue Sector (B5P)—With the Drafa plague still out there, a call has been put forth to locate potential Markab survivors on isolated outposts.

'The Markabs were a very religious people,' explained Captain John Sheridan, commander of Babylon 5, in an exclusive interview. 'They believed the beauty of the universe was a blessing from their gods. In some ways, I almost agree with them. To celebrate this belief, they constructed small bases known as 'shrines' around nebulas, exploding stars, and things like that. Not just in their space, either. Anywhere in the galaxy they possibly could. We don't even know for sure how many of these shrines are out there.'

'In any case, what we need are some intrepid explorers to go out to the known shrines and deliver the cure for the plague. If any Markab survivors are still out there, we owe it to them to give them a chance to survive, and potentially rebuild their race.'

Anyone who wants to take part in this humanitarian operation should see Dr. Stephen Franklin in Medlab One. Access to your own spacecraft is required.

Narn Admiral G'Tal Defeated at Jux Prime

Centauri Prime (ISN)—G'Tal, early hero of the Narn-Centauri War, was defeated yesterday after being cut off and surrounded in the Jux Prime system, according to Centauri sources.

G'Tal, who took a war fleet all the way to Marigol, a major system in the far corner of Centauri space, destroying the starbase there, had been on the defensive for weeks following the failure of his troop ships to conquer Marigol. According to Centauri insiders,

reinforcements were not forthcoming because the Drazi declared their borders closed to Narn reinforcements, leaving G'Tal cut off behind Centauri lines.

Despite this, G'Tal had managed to conquer Jux Prime, Quadrant 8, Quadrant 32, and nearly Marigol before arriving Centauri forces halted his ill-fated invasion of the latter system. The only ships arriving to reinforce his battle-weary squadrons were a few Corillani co-belligerents. This small nation, once a Centauri subject race, is the only non-aligned power to ally itself with the Narn Regime in the war.

Nine days ago, after the Marigol defeat, G'Tal retreated to Quadrant 8, but then, instead of moving to the more heavily populated Jux Prime, where he might at least expect reinforcements, he moved to Quadrant 32 instead. Experts believe he may have anticipated either aid from the Antareans or possibly reinforcements, as that race was also considering joining the war. The faltering Narn invasion of Centauri space, however, apparently forced the Antareans into neutrality, and they closed their borders to G'Tal. Thus, by the time he could move to Jux Prime, the Centauri fleet was already there.

Upon dropping out of hyperspace, G'Tal found his war-weary forces surrounded, and had no choice but to surrender or face destruction. Low on fuel and supplies, he surrendered his flag at 2130 hours yesterday, according to Centauri news sources.

G'Tal now faces a war crimes tribunal for atrocities supposedly committed at Marigol and Jux Prime. 'There were no atrocities,' said Narn Ambassador G'Kar firmly, in a prepared statement today on Babylon 5. 'G'Tal used no weapons of mass destruction, and no slaughter of civilians took place as the Centauri claim. He should be afforded all the rights of a prisoner of war, not hauled away as a common criminal! This is war, and soldiers fight in wars! To say otherwise is to suggest a policy of genocide against all Narns!'

Ambassador Mollari of the Centauri Republic had no comment, except to state that the trial would continue as scheduled.

Full-fledged Narn-Centauri war coverage: Pages A4-A9

Alien Creature Found Lurking in Grey Sector May Be New Type of Lifeform

Medlab, Blue Sector (B5P)—An alien 'creature of thought' that infested the mind of Babylon 5's own Captain John Sheridan recently is believed to have been a totally new form of life unknown to science.

'At first, we weren't sure what was happening to him,' explained Dr. Stephen Franklin. 'All we knew for sure was that he was having hallucinations, essentially reliving events of his life that were particularly stressful. I thought it might be a virus at the time, but nothing seemed wrong with him at all.'

The creature was set free three days ago by returning it to Sector 14, the mysterious and restricted area of space where Babylon 4 mysteriously reappeared—and then disappeared—last year.

'My current theory is that this was a kind of creature native to another universe entirely,' said Dr. Franklin in complete seriousness. 'A Markab ship passed through Sector 14 several days before the Drafa plague hit, and apparently picked up this hitchhiker by mistake. All the poor thing wanted was to be returned home. When Captain Sheridan took it back there, it left his body and re-entered its home universe through the weakened fabric of space. All the more reason not to go back there—and yet, I can't help but wonder what sort of things these creatures could teach us, if we could only learn to communicate with them.'

Be that as it may, Captain Sheridan isn't authorising any new trips to Sector 14 in the near future. 'That area of space is still restricted,' he said with a knowing smile. 'After all, the creature drove its first host mad, and was on its way to doing the same thing to me. My advice is stay away from that area if you value your sanity.'

Speculation about the creature's origins and physical structure: Page A8

Halloween Week Arrives on Babylon 5

Babylon 5 (B5P)—Once again, the annual human tradition of Halloween Week is upon us. Humans of all ages, but children in particular, will be seen dressed in bizarre costumes throughout the coming days, leading up to the grand celebration on October 31.

Halloween is a difficult holiday to explain to non-humans. Its origins are lost in antiquity, combining elements from several different religious celebrations. (For a detailed explanation, see the essay on page D5.) In its modern incarnation, parties are held throughout the week while those who participate wear outlandish outfits from Earth's history and mythology. Male and female partners often wear matching costumes, such as Samson and Delilah, for example. Nonhumans are warned not to be alarmed by the bizarre clothing that will be seen over the next few days.

As usual, the following costumes are not allowed: Anything with real or simulated weapons (not just firearms, but swords and other antiques), any modern military uniforms (especially Babylon 5 Security or Command attire), replicas of non-human aliens that could confuse visitors, or anything known to be dangerous or that could cause a panic. When in doubt, contact Security with a description or sample of your costume to ensure that no trouble will result. Failure to do so may result in arrest or confiscation of the offending clothing or accoutrements.

Note that these restrictions apply only to individuals travelling in public areas of Babylon 5. Those attending private parties can wear what they like, so long as it is within Babylon 5's normal laws. The wearing of weapons is still expressly prohibited without a permit, of course.

Note also that a good number of costumes involve feigned injury or death, such fake axes in the head, or individuals made up to look like zombies. The Pak'ma'ra are advised to verify that all corpses are, in fact, dead before making any attempt at consumption.

Halloween throughout history: Page D5
Locations of costume shops on Babylon 5: Page D6

Appendix B: Important Non-Player Character Statistics

Alison Fernandez

5th Level Human Diplomat
Hit Points: 11
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +1/-4 melee or +2/-3 ranged
Special Qualities: Contact (Theresa Cross), Contact (Ian McLeary), Contact (Games Master's choice), Improved Diplomacy
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +1, Will +8
Abilities: Str 8, Dex 11, Con 10, Int 13, Wis 14, Cha 16
Skills: Appraise +6, Bluff +8, Computer Use +7, Diplomacy +17, Gather Information +10, Intimidate +6, Knowledge (History) +3, Knowledge (Law) +3, Knowledge (Star Systems) +5, Listen +6, Sense Motive +9, Speak Language (Centauri), Speak Language (Spanish)
Feats: Iron Will, Skill Focus (Diplomacy), Weapon Proficiency (Melee)
Standard Equipment: PPG, hand communicator

Alison has held many jobs in her life, but the one she is most fond of is her stint as an aide to Ambassador Sullivan of the Earth Alliance during the post-Minbari War reparation discussions. She discovered then that she had a real flair for diplomacy, but unfortunately, in her early days she was not quite as good at it as she is now. In her attempts to please everyone, she made a few enemies, and one of these (she is not quite sure which) arranged to have her accused of taking bribes. IPX, however, saw her potential value and gave her a job on Babylon 5.

Alison is quite comely and may well attract the eye of one or more male human characters in the group. She will wait first to see if any of them make a move, but if not, she will approach one (the most attractive one who has no other attachments) and arrange a date. This could lead to a couple of side scenarios later in the story arc, including one in which she could learn who set up the false accusations that ruined her original career—and why they did it.

Alison is from Buenos Aires, but speaks English like someone from the American Midwest. She also speaks Spanish fluently, though she considers it her second language. When she becomes highly emotional (or in the heat of passion), she will interject Spanish words or phrases into her speech patterns (e.g., *Madre de Dios!*).

After Module Three, Alison advances to 6th Level Diplomat, earning Government Resources as a special ability. This increase brings with it 1 hit point, +1 to all saving throws, +1 base attack, +1 to each of 7 different skills (Games Master's choice), and the Adaptable feat (see the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*).

Caitlin Schulz

3rd Level Human Agent
Hit Points: 10
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee or +5 ranged
Special Qualities: Security Systems, Sneak Attack +1d6
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +6, Will +3
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 16, Con 11, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 13
Skills: Balance +9, Computer Use +7, Concentration +6, Drive +9, Escape Artist +9, Pilot +12, Speak Language (German), Spot +8, Technical (space travel) +7
Feats: Skill Focus (Pilot), Spacecraft Proficiency, Veteran Spacehand
Standard Equipment: PPG, hand communicator

Caitlin is German, although the accent is barely noticeable. She was recruited by Theresa Cross as her personal pilot, and is intimately familiar with the *Liberty's Fortune*. She was born in Frankfurt, but grew up in Geneva, a city she's very familiar with. She also knows the story of Rasheed Isanda's betrayal during *Fiery Trial* and is initially worried about meeting the players, expecting them to distrust her because of her predecessor's actions. Thus, she acts cautious and guarded at first, but eventually opens up and becomes friendly. Unlike Rasheed, she won't betray anyone, and although she normally stays with the ship, she can become an invaluable ally in several of the modules herein.

G'Trokk

4th Level Narn Officer
Hit Points: 17
Initiative: +3 (+3 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +7 melee or +7 ranged
Special Qualities: Covering Fire, DR 3 (armour)
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +4
Abilities: Str 17, Dex 16, Con 13, Int 13, Wis 10, Cha 11
Skills: Computer Use +8, Pilot +10, Sense Motive +7, Spot +7
Feats: Spacecraft Proficiency, Nerves of Steel, Weapon Focus (PPG)
Equipment: PPG Model 10, Narn battle armour

G'Trokk is large and burly, even for a Narn. His head is wide and his nose flat. He wears his battle armour constantly, even while sleeping, as though it were a second skin. He spends a great deal of time planning for his latest mission, exercising constantly to make sure his body won't fail him when the time finally comes to act.

G'Trokk is well-known to the rangers and a valuable ally, although he is not himself a ranger. It is he who arranged for them to move into their secret training facility in Quadrant 14, where he made regular visits while stationed on the nearby base. He was away from the facility on a trip to Homeworld when the Shadow attack came, destroying the entire Narn colony, but leaving the ranger facility unaffected since it was on a different planet and hidden deep underground. He has since made two attempts to return to Quadrant 14, but each has failed. Now, he has a ship, as well as allies, and is confident he can rescue his 'family'—the rangers trapped behind Centauri lines.

Theresa Cross

9th Level Human Agent
Hit Points: 21
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30 ft.
DV: 18 (+8 Reflex)
Attacks: +5/+0 melee or +8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities: Security Systems, Sneak Attack +2d6, Skill Mastery (Bluff, Concentration, Intimidate, Listen)
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +8, Will +8
Abilities: Str 9, Dex 14, Con 10, Int 18, Wis 15, Cha 16
Skills: Bluff +17, Computer Use +16, Concentration +14, Diplomacy +17, Gather Information +15, Intimidate +15, Listen +14, Search +16, Speak Language (Narn, Drazi, Minbari), Spot +14, Technical (electronic) +16
Feats: Manipulative (see Appendix C), Resist Scan, Iron Will, Driven (see Appendix C), Independently Wealthy
Standard Equipment: PPG, hand communicator

Theresa Cross is an agent of IPX much like Roland Anderson was, but she's become disillusioned by things going on behind closed doors in her company. She suspects that someone else is now pulling the strings, and isn't very happy about the idea. As the campaign begins, she keeps these thoughts to herself, but eventually she learns that all her fears are true. After this, she tells Alison the truth about her own background, and begins a secret war against IPX and the forces of President Clark.

Theresa dresses plainly and tries very hard not to be noticed. She wears dark, uninteresting clothing and speaks without any recognisable accent. A Listen check (DC 20) will note that she occasionally slips briefly into one accent, and then another, and another, as if unable to decide what country she's actually from. Whether this is by accident or design can't be determined.

Theresa is a thin rail of a woman who only weighs about 100 pounds. She prefers heavy coats or outfits with shoulder padding to suggest she isn't so frail. She rarely smiles and tends to speak in a cool, businesslike manner. If anyone makes a joke, she laughs along with the others, but it's a clipped, harsh sound that's clearly forced. Humour, it seems, isn't an important part of her life. The only time she shows any true emotion is when describing a potential job or trying to convince others to do what she needs them to do. Then, she becomes animated, appealing to them in whatever way she must to get them to accept the task she sets before them.

Theresa will not gain any levels over the course of the campaign.

Appendix C: New Characteristics

This section includes a variety of new character rules either used in this book or inspired by its pages. Use of this material is subject to approval by the Games Master.

New Prestige Classes

The Empath
While telepaths work with the power of thought, empaths focus on the power of emotion. They can read the feelings of others, and manipulate them to a certain degree. Doing this uses many of the same rules that telepath characters employ.

True empaths are extremely rare. Although some P1 and P2 telepaths have some weak empathic abilities, these fade quickly at higher P-levels. Most empaths simply get 'gut feelings' about others, or seem unusually likeable or charismatic. Psi Corps has undertaken some experimentation to boost empathic powers, but has found that such improvements result in a weakening and eventual loss of all telepathic abilities. Thus, they are reluctant to employ such methods except in rare cases. Telepathic powers are considered far more useful and effective than empathic ones. Still, a few do exist—the results of early experimentation, or volunteers agreeing to undertake the procedure for reasons that remain unknown.

Although it is theoretically possible to be a true empath, virtually all existing ones of any strength whatsoever are conversions from ordinary telepaths. This is the result of experimentation conducted by Psi Corps or another similar organisation. Any race that employs telepaths can theoretically use empaths as well.

To qualify to become an empath, a character must fulfil all the following criteria:

Abilities: Charisma 12+, P-Rating 8 or greater.

Skills: Sense Motive 8 ranks, Concentration 8 ranks, Diplomacy 8 ranks, Telepathy 8 ranks.

Feats: None. Note that the telepath will lose the use of any telepath feats in any case, so this isn't a particularly big deal.

Special: The empath must undertake a special, dangerous procedure that permanently removes all his telepathic abilities. This procedure isn't generally given out to anyone who asks—Psi Corps (or whatever organisation employs it) will only do so for good reason. Usually, this is to create a special agent or other operative, although other reasons might also be available.

Class Skills

The empath's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Bluff (Cha), Computer Use (Int), Concentration (Con), Diplomacy (Cha), Gather Information (Cha), Intimidate (Cha), Listen (Wis), Perform (Cha), Sense Motive (Wis), Spot (Wis), Technical (Int), and Telepathy (Cha).

Skill Points Per Level: 4 + Int modifier.

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the empath prestige class.

Hit Points Per Level: 1.

Non-Telepath: Although the character may have once possessed telepathic powers, these are all stripped by the procedure that makes him an empath. However, the character keeps his ranks in the Telepathy skill and continues to advance that skill, employing it for his empathic abilities as though they were telepathic abilities. Because an empath is not a true telepath, psi-blocking drugs won't restrict his abilities.

Empathy: Beginning at 1st level, an empath can sense emotions in all those around him, reaching out to a range of 30 feet. This ability extends in all directions, even those the character isn't currently looking. However, it does not penetrate metal at all, and can't reach through more than 2 inches of concrete or stone, or 4 inches of dirt or earth. Thus, under most circumstances, this ability cannot be used simply to detect the presence of other creatures on the side of a wall.

Most of the time, the empath is only aware of emotions on a subtle level, in the same was he is aware of conversations going on in a crowded room as he passes by—he doesn't actually hear the words unless he tunes in directly. It's the same with empathy. An empath normally shrugs off anything other than powerful or suspicious emotions unless he's actively concentrating on someone. Concentrating is a standard action and reveals the precise emotional state of the target. This ability can't be blocked, although a telepath receives a Will save (DC 10 + the scanner's empath and telepath levels + the empath's Charisma bonus) to resist. A mind shield will help for this purpose. If the save succeeds, the empath detects nothing, but the telepath is unaware that an attempt was made to read his emotions.

Empathy functions whether the character wants it to or not. However, the character learns to live with such things as a matter of course, retreating to a private room if he wishes to be free of foreign feelings. Some aliens, especially those with radically different physiologies, can cause distinct discomfort. Empathy has no effect on Vorlons or Shadows.

Likeable: The empath's powers are constantly at work on others, improving the character's charisma automatically. He receives a +1 enhancement bonus to his Charisma for every 2 empath levels. This bonus applies only against those within 30 feet as described previously—it doesn't apply over electronic communications, for example. As has been said before, people just want to like an empath.

Project Emotions: Beginning at 2nd level, an empath learns to project desired emotions onto any subject. At 2nd level and each level thereafter, he can select one ability from the list below. He can project any known emotion as a standard action against any target within 30 feet as described previously. Using one of these powers requires concentration to maintain, but he can keep it going as long as he wishes and as long as the target remains in range. Projecting an emotion requires a Telepathy check at the indicated DC and inflicts 1 point of subdual damage on the empath. Note that some emotions have prerequisites, listed in parenthesis; an empath must know all prerequisites before he can learn the listed power.

All targets of emotional projection receive a Will save (DC 10 + the empath's telepath and empath levels + the empath's Charisma bonus) to resist the effects. A mind shield helps defend against this effect, but no other means of defence will block it, including helmets and other items used to reduce the strength of telepathic powers.

Anger (DC 17): The target becomes angered and upset. Anything—any insult or threat, or even a poorly timed joke, can set him off. Generally, this will result in a bare-knuckles brawl, although someone with a weapon might draw it and attack. If no threat appears, the target simply seethes for as long as the power is maintained.

Anxiety (DC 24, Prerequisites: Fear and Disgust): The target becomes nervous, agitated, and sick to his stomach, as though consumed with worry. He is treated as both shaken and nauseated, and if he failed his save by 5 or more, he becomes physically unable to do anything except stand there trembling.

Directed Anger (DC 20, Prerequisite: Anger): The target becomes angry at another subject whom the empath subtly indicates, either by voice or body language. The new subject doesn't have to be within range of the empath's powers. At a further suggestion by the empath, or the slightest provocation, the target attacks the indicated subject. During the resulting fight, the empath can simply

The Empath

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1	+0	+0	+0	+2	Empathy
2	+1	+0	+0	+3	Likeable +1, Project Emotions
3	+2	+1	+1	+3	
4	+3	+1	+1	+4	Likeable +2
5	+3	+1	+1	+4	Extended Emotion (1)
6	+4	+2	+2	+5	Likeable +3
7	+5	+2	+2	+5	Extended Emotion (2)
8	+6/+1	+2	+2	+6	Likeable +4
9	+6/+1	+3	+3	+6	Extended Emotion (3)
10	+7/+2	+3	+3	+7	Likeable +5

walk away, allowing the battle to rage on unabated. The effects of this particular power persist for as long as the battle continues.

Directed Hatred (DC 21, Prerequisite: Hatred): Like directed anger, this ability allows the empath to cause the target to hate someone else, even someone out of range or not even visible (such as an image on a holo). The empath can then make suggestions or hints that fuel the hatred, and can even give the target a method or means to undertake 'revenge.' Since the empathic power only lasts as long as the target is within range, it's not very useful for convincing someone to attempt a long-term campaign. Also, unless the target is already unstable, he won't try to commit murder. However, he could be incited to take some other action, such as embarrassing the target or robbing him.

Disgust (DC 17): The target becomes ill and is treated as nauseated. If he fails his save by 5 or more, he is sickened instead.

Fear (DC 17): The target becomes afraid. If he fails his save, he is shaken. If he fails by 5 or more, he is frightened and runs away, or, if there's nowhere to run, he cowers instead.

Friendship (DC 20, Prerequisite: Like): The target decides he likes the empath and considers him on the level of a good friend. The target refuses to attack the empath, even if already engaged in combat with him when the power is invoked. Furthermore, the target will do whatever he can to help the empath in the current situation, short of undertaking violence on his behalf.

Hatred (DC 18): The target is consumed with hatred of the empath, believing he is the lowest scum there is. Depending upon the target's character, this could have a variety of results. He might spit in the empath's face, or example, or slap him. More than likely, however, he'll simply retreat from the area to get away from the empath's hated presence.

Like (DC 17): The target decides he likes the empath, and wants to believe whatever the empath tells him. This gives the empath a +10 circumstance bonus on Bluff or Diplomacy checks against that individual, and may have other effects. If the target enters combat or is already fighting when this power is invoked, he receives a –2 morale penalty on attack rolls against the empath.

Love (DC 25, Prerequisite: Friendship): The target believes he or she loves the empath, either romantically (for those of the opposite sex or orientation) or like a brother or sister. In addition to the effects of friendship, the target sees the empath as someone to be cherished and protected. If someone else attacks the empath, the target protects him in whatever way he can. An empath won't use this ability often because afterwards, the subject realises that something strange must've happened to him to make him feel that way. Most empaths don't want to have their powers revealed to mundanes.

Sadness (DC 18): The target is consumed with sadness, perhaps even weeping openly. He receives a –2 penalty to all attack rolls, ability checks, and skill checks, and may take other actions depending on his nature (such as reaching for a strong drink). If he fails the save by 5 or more, he breaks down and cries, unable to take any actions at all.

Extended Emotion: At 5th level, an empath can maintain a projected emotion against a target even if the target is out of the normal range or behind a barrier. An empath must first invoke the emotion in the normal manner, within the normal parameters. An empath can maintain more than one power at longer ranges at 5th level, two powers at 7th level and 3 powers at 9th level. When the subject moves out of normal range, the empath must make a second Telepathy check to hold the power, at a DC 5 points higher than the listed value. Success indicates he maintains the ability, while failure causes it to drop. In either case, he takes 1 additional point of subdual damage. An ability may be maintained at range for no more than 15 minutes before the empath must try another Telepathy check and pay one more point of subdual damage. Lost subdual damage cannot be recovered while an extended emotion is maintained.

NEW FEATS

The following feats are available specifically to members of the Dilgar race. As an option, a Games Master may allow these feats to be purchased by members of other races whose background permit similar abilities.

Act of Desperation

When the going gets tough, you can call on an inner reserve that few can match. Whenever a situation becomes desperate, you can choose to forge ahead through sheer force of will. Once per day, you can call upon this ability to change any one die roll your character just made. You must make this decision immediately after the results of the roll, before anyone else takes his action, and you may not alter die rolls made by others. When this ability is invoked, you basically alter the die roll to any number you choose. If this results in additional rolls (e.g., if you used the roll to change an attack roll to a 20, thereby threatening a critical hit), those rolls are made normally and may not be changed. Immediately after using your Act of Desperation, you become fatigued for 2d6 rounds.

Arrogant

You believe you are better than everyone else, and this attitude comes out in the way you speak and act. You receive a +2 bonus to all Bluff and Intimidate checks.

Cunning Tactician

Your military training and background have left you a master of battlefield tactics. Whenever you are in charge of a group, you and everyone in your attack force earn a +1 bonus to initiative checks. In starship combat, this applies only to your own ship and others in a group under your command. In fighter combat, this applies to other fighters in your flight if you are their leader. In surface combat, this applies to any allies or vehicles under your command within 30 feet of your position at the time the battle starts.

Driven

You pursue your goals, whether personal or assigned by others, with single-minded determination. Even when injured or interrupted, you have an uncanny ability to keep your focus securely on the task at hand. You receive a +1 inherent bonus to Will saves and a +2 bonus to all Concentration checks.

Genetically Altered

Through the years, the Dilgar have studied many alien races, performing horrible experiments as a means to potentially improve their own stock. You are the result of one of these alterations. Some of your genetic structure includes DNA or similar material stolen from other races, improving your physical or mental abilities significantly. However, this modification carries an externally visible trait that cannot be easily hidden. While you wear this proudly as a badge of honour, many 'pure' Dilgar see your kind as a threat, and members of alien races who know of your modification treat you with scorn or disdain. As a result, your Charisma score is reduced by 2 points when you take this feat.

When this feat is selected, choose one of the following statistics and increase it by 2 points. In addition, this statistic is increased by 1 point every three levels beginning at 4th level (i.e., 4th, 7th, and so on). This replaces the automatic attribute increase that normally occurs every four levels. In addition to the stat increase, a physical change is visible on your body, as listed hereafter. This change may also have other disadvantages as described in the text.

Strength +2: Your muscles visibly bulge and often appear to pulse of their own accord. Your height remains the same, but weight increases by 25% over normal. You must exercise frequently (at least 2 hours per day) or you become extremely overweight very quickly. Your food and water consumption is increased by 10% and you sweat frequently, even in cool weather. You have a –2 penalty to all saving throws against fire, disease, or to avoid the effects of fatigue or exhaustion.

Intelligence +2: Your cranium seems to push outward along the forehead and above the ears, producing a 'swelled head' appearance. Your heart rate is high as your circulatory system races to keep your enlarged brain properly supplied with blood. You become fatigued one round sooner than normal, and the duration of any fatigue effects is increased by one round. Furthermore, when fatigued, all penalties are increased by 50%.

Wisdom +2: Your eyes expand in size by about 50% and you rarely blink, giving you a constant 'staring' appearance that is very unsettling to others. You tend to be very contemplative and studious as a general rule, and can develop a tendency to be absent-minded. You suffer a –4 penalty on all Concentration checks.

Constitution +2: Your torso extends upwards and outwards to accommodate significantly larger lungs and a powerful diaphragm. Armour and clothing must be specially designed to fit your bigger-than-barrel chest structure. Your maximum heart rate increases by about 25%, but your life span decreases by approximately 10 years because of the greater wear and tear on your circulatory system. All penalties for heavier than normal gravity are increased by 50% for you, and you may not take the High-G Tolerance feat.

Dexterity +2: You are very thin and wiry, almost to the point of appearing skeletal. Although you eat normally, you do not gain weight and are often thought of as anorexic. You have 2 hit points less than a typical character of your race and may not acquire the Toughness feat.

There is no known way to genetically improve one's Charisma score.

The Genetically Altered feat can only be taken when your character is first created (genetic modifications generally do not affect someone once they have reached maturity).

Manipulative

The desires of others are of secondary importance to you. Friendship is a tool, and your enemies are stepping-stones on your path to greatness. Allies are merely those you allow to ride on your coattails and discard when they have served their purpose. Even those superior in rank to yourself are simply obstacles to be overcome.

Because of this outlook, you have become quite skilled at manipulating others to suit your purposes. You receive a +2 bonus to all Bluff and Diplomacy checks.

Ruthless

You stop at nothing to accomplish your goals. Anything goes in your advancement through the ranks or your climb to power. Morals are for the weak. You are what many would call 'evil,' but that is just a word used by those of low intelligence to defend their actions. They are fools, and one day you will show them all just what you are really capable of.

Because of this philosophy, you have trained yourself to perform activities that ordinary people find distasteful or inappropriate. You have no trouble breaking the law when it suits your purposes, even when the potential consequences could be high. After all, risk is not without reward. You receive a +1 bonus to the following skills: Bluff, Disguise, Forgery, Intimidate, and Sleight of Hand.

Smooth Liar

You have taken the art of telling falsehoods to new extremes. Through constant practice, you have become so good at lying that others can rarely tell, even when you are spewing forth a real whopper of a tall tale. You receive a +4 bonus to all Bluff checks. However, because you're so good at lying, you have a real tendency to lie all the time, just for the fun of it—in other words, you're almost a pathological liar. Whenever a situation comes up that requires you to tell the truth, you must make a Will save (DC 10) to do so. Otherwise, you spill another lie automatically, without even thinking about it.

DILGAR

INTRODUCTION

There was a time before the Drakh attempted to subvert the galaxy to their way, before the Vorlons and Shadows fought one another, and before the Minbari battered the Earth Alliance into the ground and then apologising for doing so. In that time, a conflict occurred which set up most of the atmosphere and tensions between the main races that would stay throughout the timeline of the Babylon 5 series.

Despite a Dilgar character being the major plotline of only one episode, in the first season of Babylon 5, the echoes of the events of the Dilgar washed through most of the primary characters. Jeffrey Sinclair's father, a fighter pilot haunted by what he had seen, died during the latter stages of the Dilgar War. Stephen Franklin's father served in the Dilgar War, alongside Garibaldi's father. Most of the distrust exhibited by the League of Non-Aligned Worlds towards the Narn and Centauri, and indeed their respect for Commander Sinclair and the Earth Alliance, can be partly contributed to the Dilgar War. That conflict gave the Earth Alliance an inflated sense of confidence, which ultimately led to Captain Jankowski's arrogance and the start of the Earth-Minbari War.

This Book

The first part of this book focuses on the Dilgar race, and begins with a detailed analysis of the Dilgar race by a junior doctor with Med-Corps, Benjamin Kyle, whose name should be familiar to fans of Babylon 5. The culture and society of the Dilgar Imperium will be covered, as will their system of government along with the War Council, who were given free rein to desecrate the League of Non-Aligned Worlds in search of a new home

Following on their system of government, this first part of the book will detail the history of the Dilgar race, from their origins, through a savage history amid slavery, torture and almost constant warfare. The final part of this chapter will include details for Dilgar vehicles, weapons, equipment and characters, many of which have never been seen in any prior publication.

The second part of this book is concerned with the conflict for which the Dilgar are most well known, from the opening shots above Alaca III to the final assault on the Dilgar homeworld of Omelos. Also included will be the pacification of the Dilgar, the war trials and the final days of the Dilgar. This section will also include the economic, militaristic and political effects that this war had on the major races and governments of the galaxy. It will also expand on the few Dilgar who were not isolated on Omelos after the Dilgar War ended would fare in a universe that cursed their name.

Opposing the Dilgar menace were the forces of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds and the Earth Alliance. The forces of the League will be detailed, in the rag-tag manner in which they pulled themselves together. Larger still, the Earth Expeditionary Force will be highlighted, complete with gaming information for the versions of the EarthForce ships which fought in the Dilgar War. Statistics for the major characters opposing the Dilgar, such as the legendary Admiral Hamato, will also be included.

Of course, other parties were involved in the Dilgar War, either directly or doing their best to avoid it. The activities of the Belt Alliance and the Independent Mercenaries League will be explained in this second part of this book, as well as the activities of the major news networks and galactic corporations, to present a holistic picture of the Babylon 5 universe at the time of the Dilgar War.

The third and final part of this book will include the outline for a sample campaign, set aboard an EarthForce corvette during the final year of the Dilgar War, enabling the information presented in this book to be used as the basis for a complete Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game campaign.

So, for now, return to a time of optimism for the future, where the Minbari are nothing but a distant rumour. The League is attempting to unify itself diplomatically and the Earth Alliance expanding with its eyes on the stars, unaware of the threat of the Dilgar. In their blissful ignorance, darkness begins to swell from a small and relatively insignificant world in the direction of the galactic core…

DILGAR BIOLOGY

Student Name: Benjamin Kyle.
Student Status: Final year med-student, Med-Corps (Earth).
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Document Title: Dilgar Biological Study (Final Draft)
Document Status: Classified (Access Restricted)

The Dilgar race, recently defeated by the combined efforts of the Earth Alliance and the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, were previously unknown to the majority of humans and aliens across the civilised sectors of our corner of the galaxy. Their barbaric nature was unknown, as was their ultimate goal to conquer much of the space occupied by the League, if not our own space.

In this assignment, I intend to provide an overall examination of the Dilgar race, together with baseline comparisons between their physical structure and that of other races. I will intend to discuss the internal structures, sensory organs, methods of reproduction and digestive function of this race. Finally, I will endeavour to discuss those sub-races which until previously were unknown to any sentient outside of Dilgar space.

It is my objective that the content provided in this assignment will serve as a suitable reference text on the Dilgar species. This text is the culmination of the allotted three months work on alien anatomy, and several autopsies were conducted on Dilgar corpses to provide the necessary information. Where a reference is not specified, all of this work was conducted first hand.

This assignment is presented as a component part of the 'Alien Studies' module, in the final year accreditation for graduation from Med-Corps as a practicing physician, under the laws of the Earth Alliance and certified by Med-Corps. Additional references to this work, including full copies of all referenced documentation supplied by third parties, can be obtained from the Dean's office upon request.

The Dilgar (Prime Dilgar)

The so-called 'Prime' Dilgar, from the Thrazan tribe, are the dominant sub-race on Omelos. This sub-race is the one that the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, indeed the galaxy as a whole had most contact with. Indeed, up until the defeat of the Dilgar above their homeworld, it was only hearsay and rumour that there actually was more than one sub-race in the whole of the Dilgar culture, save some alien sources which I will credit later in the appropriate section of this analysis.

What is immediately noticeable at first sight, and perhaps something that humans can best relate to, are the feline influences in the appearance of any Thrazan Dilgar. Naturally, this may cause a premature value judgement, in assuming that the traits common to the felines that have evolved on Earth also apply to the Dilgar, but almost as if to prove some sort of order to the universe, some of these constants ring true.

The Dilgar have a standard bipedal body shape, similar to humans. They have two upper limbs, with digits that enable the lifting and grasping of items, and two lower limbs that allow the Dilgar to move around again at a similar speed and comparable level of flexibility to humans, Centauri or even Narns. The Dilgar brain, whilst a little smaller than that in humans, appears not to suffer from this, as the skull is thicker in a Dilgar head than it is in many other races, Drazi excepted. The Dilgar brain, from my initial findings, is well developed, and appears to have an excellent capability for information storage, retrieval and analysis. However, the Dilgar which I have examined and dissected as part of my year long study into differing forms of alien biology appears to indicate a distinct lack or diminished ability for what humans would consider 'left-brain' activity.

As I will detail further in this initial report, the Dilgar have several genetic traits, which must be noted and logged for future investigation. It appears that the Dilgar possess the gift of telepathy, but no information is available to either prove or disprove this opinion. Equally, the peacekeeping operation revealed the presence of two distinct sub-groups, with a genetic link to supposed telepathic activity that may warrant further investigation, should the blockade of Omelos ever be lifted. Live subjects, if made available, would be able to tell us much regarding this genetic ability; the presence of a member of the Psi-Corps at any initial interviews would be enough to prove whether the possession of telepathic abilities amongst the Dilgar is myth or fact.

Throughout this report, I will refer to the self-named 'Prime' Dilgar by their common name, Dilgar simply for reasons of clarity, rather than 'Prime' or 'Thrazan'. This will aid comprehension of the later text, specifically when discussing the Dilgar sub-races. For comparisons, I have used humans as a baseline, but when discussing elements similar to those of other races, then those races have also been included.

Dilgar in the Babylon 5 d20 Roleplaying Game

All Dilgar characters share the following racial traits, unless noted in the sub-races section in this fact book. The explanation behind these traits is explored in greater detail later in this chapter, but are summarised below.

Dilgar (Thrazan) Racial Traits

+2 Intelligence, -2 Charisma: As a race, Thrazan Dilgar have extremely quick and agile minds but are utterly uncompromising in their self-proclaimed superiority which inevitably leads to friction when dealing with others.

All Dilgar are of medium size.

Dilgar have a base speed of 30 feet.

Low-Light Vision: All Dilgar have superior eyesight that is far sharper than a human's. Dilgar of any (sub) race have superior eyesight that can see twice as far as a human in starlight, moonlight and similar conditions of poor illumination. They retain the ability to distinguish shade and colour while under these conditions, and can even read by such light.

Thrazan Dilgar are ever alert for danger and can detect the slightest movement in their vicinity with an ease that can almost seem supernatural. Thrazan Dilgar start the game with Alertness as a bonus feat.

Thrazan Dilgar can resist incredible amounts of damage and will carry on fighting long after others have fallen. Thrazan Dilgar start the game with Toughness as a bonus feat.

Automatic Languages: Thrazan

Favoured Classes: Officer. A Thrazan Dilgar's officer class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

A Note on Telepathy

For a Dilgar of the Thrazan or Rittacan bloodlines to be eligible for telepathic abilities or the Latent Telepath feat, there must be a telepath or Rittacan Dilgar involved in the genetic tree of the Dilgar concerned in at least the last six generations. After this, the dilution of the gene pool removes the likelihood for a telepathic aware individual to be born. For a Rittacan Dilgar, this is increased to a telepath, or any Kathran or Thrazan Dilgar within the last eight generations, as their DNA is more suited to telepathic abilities than that of their kin.

Whilst this only exists to serve a purpose for the race's history, it is important to note that a telepath can in no way be considered to be a 'true' Thrazan, as they contain some of the genetic make-up of the Rittacans, one of the two Thrazan slave races. This secret, unsurprisingly, is well kept in Dilgar society.

Telepaths in Dilgar society are much more common if they primarily come from the Kathran or Rittacan bloodlines, averaging around 1: 100,000 citizens. The ratio for telepaths from the Thrazan bloodline (with Rittacan heritage at some point) is around 1:750,000.

Dilgar Anatomy

The Dilgar body overall is both efficient and resilient. Senses are keen and alert, Dilgar bones have an above-expected level of flexibility, and their reproductive capabilities seem to be limited purely for the need to continue the species. For more details, this report is broken down into the following sections, each detailing a specific area of Dilgar physiology.

Dilgar Internal Structure

Blood: Dilgar blood is not that different to that of most of the other races of the galaxy, being reddish in colour. It should be noted that from (deceased) test subjects that when on Omelos for any length of time Dilgar blood has a slightly orange tinge, no doubt caused by the increase in yellow blood cell production.

In a similar manner to Narn blood, Dilgar blood is comprised of three types of blood cells. Like the Narn, the Dilgar yellow blood cells undertake a similar purpose, to handle background radiation common to those races in much of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. The Dilgar liver is able to handle an increase in yellow blood cell production, but this does not appear to be an immediate process, based off my research. Dilgar whom spend a significant amount of time away from their homeworld, I would estimate around a year, would suffer a period of initial nausea whilst their yellow blood cell level increased when they return home.

With white and red blood cells, functioning similar to humans, it would appear that even at this level the Dilgar are not vastly different from the other races of the galaxy.

Bone: It is worth noting that whilst the bone density of a typical Dilgar is comparable to that of any other average sized sentient, the actual structure of the bone is somewhat different. Dilgar bones tend to be less brittle than other races, particular humanity, and can bend slightly before they break. From secondary sources, I have confirmed that the milk with which a Dilgar mother feeds her young is critical in these bones growing up with a slight degree of flexibility. A Dilgar child who does not have the benefit of his mother's milk would in all probability suffer drastically with conditions similar to arthritis when in their early thirties. A slow hardening of the bone structure over time is to be expected, but the rate at which the bone structure becomes brittle occurs three times faster if a Dilgar child does not retrieve valuable nutrients from his mother.

Aside from this, the Dilgar skeletal structure is light and flexible, with additional bones covering the majority of their internal organs. The most resilient bones in a Dilgar's body are their skull and the bones in their neck and back, and these serve to keep the Dilgar alive where a blow would have killed a lesser sentient.

Muscles: The structure of Dilgar musculature is focused on lean, compact muscle density. If anything, the Dilgar musculature seems to favour slightly brief but more focused exertions than lengthy applications, but this does not seem to be a major limitation. The Dilgar have similar muscle structures on their arms as their legs, with two counteracting sets of muscles on either sides of their upper arms and legs, with slimmer muscles on their lower legs and arms. The muscles on the torso of a Dilgar male tend to be a little bulkier than the muscle structure that of a female Dilgar, but this is in all probability due to the evolution of the species. Most importantly, and regardless of the sex of the Dilgar concerned, the abdominal muscles tend to provide a great deal of power transference between the upper and lower body when compared to other races, such as the Centauri, but clearly the presence of the sexual organs in that area of the Centauri tends to affect that aspect somewhat. The Dilgar abdominal muscles also are compacted enough to prevent a Dilgar becoming excessively winded, but this is mainly to counteract the reflexive actions of their lungs in preventing damage.

Organic Structures

Senses: Dilgar eyes emphasise movement, in addition to relaying colour and other information to the Dilgar brain. Their large eyes are capable of seeing in low light conditions that Humans would struggle in; whilst struggling in total darkness as any sentient with human standard vision, the Dilgar are able to cope where there is only starlight or other dim level of illumination. With no moon in the sky above their homeworld, it is clear that to survive some level of night-time vision was essential for their survival.

Heart: Whilst having one heart, the same as humans, this organ is also divided into various chambers which push blood around the Dilgar's body. The heart is slightly smaller than an average human's, and much smaller than an average Narn's. The heart appears to be kept clean of any arterial blockages of any kind due to the efficiency of the Dilgar organ that equates to a human's liver. Even so, I would anticipate that many Dilgar later in life suffer forms of cardiac illnesses.

Lungs: In the event of one lung being damaged, and filling with liquid, the other lung takes over. When this takes place, the affected portion of the damaged lung shuts down, and is actually sealed off from the rest of the lung. This internal system, similar in some ways to an airlock sealing off parts of a starcraft which have been exposed to vacuum, is quite efficient, but it is my express opinion that this survival feature would complicate surgery, as any attempt to open a lung for surgery would surely result in a great portion of the lung effectively killing itself. In the instance of any concussive effect on the lungs, they will close themselves off momentarily to protect themselves from damage, but this seems to primarily be a reflex action.

Digestive System: The digestive system of the Dilgar examined during my final year appears to have an immensely efficient digestive system. Virtually all of the nutrients are absorbed, with food taking eight or nine hours (based on estimations) to pass through their digestive system and become ready to be removed. This slow passage of foodstuffs through the narrow intestines is what it is believed allows the Dilgar to extract so much in the way of useful material from what they digest. The Dilgar intestinal system appears to be of a size comparable to humans, but able to push through undigested matter easier than us humans would find it. My theory is that this is linked closely with Dilgar evolution, and the requirement for them to consume anything based around animal flesh, including bone and other indigestible elements.

Liver: The Dilgar liver has a great deal to do, and this larger than average organ appears to fulfil a major part of keeping the owner alive. Indeed, the fact that this organ is larger than average for the size of the host indicates that this organ is fulfilling a larger role than genetically it may have been intended to perform. Given the conditions on the Dilgar home planet, this may be as a result of coping with the various poisons and radioactive elements that exist in the ecosphere of their home world of Omelos. Of course, this may be a genetic mutation common to all Dilgar, including the sub-races, but without other test subjects this will be impossible to qualify. Given the nature of the Dilgar DNA formation and structure, this seems to be unlikely.

If a Dilgar suffered liver damage, it would perhaps be of a more serious nature than it there was a mild lung condition.

Reproductive: Dilgar reproduction is anything but the pleasant recreational diversion that it can be to many other races. Whilst engaging in reproduction for reasons other than procreation are common in many species, such as Narns, Centauri and indeed Humans, for the Dilgar the only reason for the act is to continue the species, at least as female Dilgar is concerned. For male Dilgar, the act is often more about power than gratification. I should note at this point that this information has been provided by sources whom reliability have not yet been questioned.

Dilgar female sexual organs are located internally, with three main ovary equivalents. These organs release eggs on a seemingly random cycle; in any given three-month period the Dilgar female may release no eggs, or up to three. Each of these eggs may be fertilised separately, enabling a single brood born to a Dilgar mother to come from more than one Dilgar father. During the early stage of pregnancy, an egg may separate into two, although if this occurs in any more than one egg then the pregnancy usually aborts. A large womb, much bigger than its human equivalent, provides the environment in which the Dilgar foetuses can grow. Delivery of the Dilgar babes is via a birth canal, similar to that possessed by many mammalian females. Unlike Centauri sexual physiology, the birth canal serves a dual purpose as the enabler of reproduction. This birth canal has few organs for sensation, perhaps essential given the intensity of Dilgar childbirth. Thus for Dilgar females intercourse is something which appears to pose less gratification than other races, although it may be that this is dependant upon hormonal conditions. This said, cursory examinations seem to indicate that the number of released eggs has a defined effect on the hormones present in the Dilgar female's body, pushing her on to seek one or more mates.

Male sexual organs are comprised of a seed production centre, located within the lower abodomen. Whilst visible from externally, the fact that this organ is located at least partially internally stands male Dilgar out from any other species. The main penile organ in Dilgar physiology is partially attached to their lower skeletal structure, and appears to be shaped solely to provide the neccesary stimuli to encourage the release of Dilgar seed and thus allow fertilisation within the Dilgar female's reproductive system to take place.

Nutrition and Diet:
From what we are able to ascertain, the Dilgar have a high requirement for protein, and from secondary sources it has been confirmed that they maintain sizeable livestock assets

on their homeworld to deliver this need. Aside from this, the Dilgar diet appears to be similar to that of Humanity and several members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. A bizarre point is the Dilgar intolerance for many types of fish, but without samples I have been unable to ascertain the reason for this.

The Dilgar also have a high requirement for Vitamin 'A', as it can affect their vision. The amount required by an average healthy Dilgar appears to be in the region of 2000 micrograms for both male and female Dilgar. Luckily, this vitamin is found in abundance in Dilgar cattle, as well as in the few varieties of native shellfish that their internal organs are able to digest.

As an optional rule, a Games Master may elect to nullify a Dilgar's Low Light Vision special quality for a period of time if a source of Vitamin 'A' is not available. Should the vitamin be denied for an extended period of time, such as three months, a Games Master may decide that the special quality has been lost permanently, as long-lasting damage has been done to the Dilgar's eyes.

As an aside, as part of my research I have been able to uncover a notable element within the Dilgar diet. Most of their natural foods seem to possess Vitamin K in very small amounts. As this (in human terms) is concerned with the blood and clotting, it may be that the Dilgar are unusually susceptive to the substances which make up this vitamin, given that their heart is much smaller than average for their size.

Should I be permitted, I would like to revisit this section at a later date, as I find the study of diets and digestion aspects of this species to be personally fascinating.

Dilgar Lifecycle

Communicable Diseases

Given the wretched state of the Dilgar's home planet, once could assume that the Dilgar species to be continually beset by diseases and medical conditions. From my preliminary findings, this is not necessarily the case. Whilst the Dilgar do have their share of diseases and medical conditions, they do not have the level one may necessarily expect.

The communicable diseases presented below are based off information gained by third party sources, and thus their reliability should be treated accordingly.

Wastrel's Plague: The origins of Wastrel's Plague are unknown, but the condition is one that is suspected to have roots in Dilgar history. A common misconception is that not disposing of the dead can give rise to this disease, but without proof this can only be treated as a supposition.

The disease affects the Dilgar brain stem, interfering with the transmission of signals up and down the Dilgar spinal cord. This causes muscles and internal organs to slow down, as well as having a major effect on the mental capacity of a diseased Dilgar. Whilst medication can offset the symptoms, death from this disease is not uncommon. The victim often falls into a deep sleep, and never to awake.

Wastrel's Plague
Races Affected: Dilgar
Infection: Inhaled
Fortitude DC: 20
Incubation: 1d6 days
Damage: 1d4 Con, 1d6 Intelligence

Rigamontosis: The Dilgar liver functions above that which the size of the host would expect. However, the liver can under certain situations go into overdrive, and without treatment can kill the host in an unpleasant manner, as the liver effectively floods the blood supply with yellow blood cells. Simple antibiotics can cure this condition, but the main problem is that the onset of the disease is fast, catching out any Dilgar who is not aware of it.

Rigamontis
Races Affected: Dilgar
Infection: Inhaled
Fortitude DC: 16
Incubation: 1d4 hours
Damage: 1d4 Con

Corinnosis: The counterpart to Rigamontis, the host's liver can under certain situations go into slow motion, effectively and cause the Dilgar to become more susceptible to the environment of their world. Over time and left untreated the victim will become hypersensitive to heat and cold.

Rigamontis
Races Affected: Dilgar
Infection: Inhaled
Fortitude DC: 16
Incubation: 1d4 hours
Damage: -1 to Fortitude Save (cumulative) to resist the effects of radiation, hot and cold.

Mel'Ank's Infection: Contracted by those Dilgar males who are suffering from Mel'Ank's Disease, this secondary infection can cause life-threatening harm if left untreated. For details of Mel'Ank's Disease, please see the Medical Conditions section later in this report.

Mel'Ank's Infection (Bacterial infection)
Races Affected: Dilgar
Infection: Must be suffering from Mel'Ank's Disease
Fortitude DC: 15
Incubation: 1d10 hours
Damage: 1d6 Con

Medical Conditions

Very little information is available regarding Dilgar medical conditions, perhaps unsurprisingly.

The Dilgar questioned by EarthForce have been reluctant to provide any information, so much so that none has been forthcoming. The following conditions are therefore somewhat speculative, although one of my dissection subjects appeared to suffer from Corabb's Syndrome.

Corabb's Syndrome: Affecting the Dilgar heart, which is an organ is smaller than would be expected for the size of the host and thus placed under a high level of pressure throughout the Dilgar's life. The heart of the Dilgar is prone to stopping occasionally, effectively placing the Dilgar heart under a minor attack. A victim of Corabb's Syndrome is prone to their heart stopping upon commencement of physical exertion, as the heart simply shuts down rather than increase in performance.

Rethikki's Syndrome: Information on this condition was obtained from my esteemed collegue within the Abbai Matriarchate, Kimnar, a notable scientist within his own culture. This condition affects the Dilgar digestive system, preventing them from consuming food for a period of days. The Dilgar digestive system can often recover from this by itself, but in some situations manual intervention is required.

Mel'Ank's Disease: A painful condition which affects male Dilgar exclusively, this disease affects the Dilgar male reproductive system, often causing infertility if not treated early. It causes immense swelling, and often a bacterial infection which has particularly unpleasant side effects. This infection can be fatal in the long term.

DILGAR SUB-RACES

The following information is, I must stress, not gathered first hand. Several sources were used in the compilation of this section of my analysis. These include Doctor Andrew Daly of EarthForce Special Intelligence (Biology Division) and Scientist Kimnar of the Abbai Matriarchiate who kind enough to lend their information with no request for acknowledgement or payment. An additional credit must be granted to the Centauri citizen Tenshin Kiro, of House Kiro,who proved to have an extensive set of information on the Dilgar Imperium in their internal files. Out of respect for the manner in which this information was offered, I chose not to inquire as to the source.

The Kathrans (Dark Dilgar)

The Kathrans were perhaps the only other sentient race on Omelos which could have challenged the dominant species for land and resources. As it stands, they fell behind in the arms race and suffered a nuclear annihilation that crippled their society, and threatened their very existence.

When compared to the dominant Dilgar race, the Kathrans have several differences in their make up which warrant description in this analysis. They have a darker tawny fur and pointed ears that end closer to their scalps when compared than that of their kin, together with slightly thicker but shorter body hair. Other than this, there is little difference between the Kathrans and the prime Dilgar race on an external level, which perhaps explain the level of subterfuge and infiltration that both sides conducted in during their evolutionary struggles. The vocal cords and sensory organs of the Kathrans are also identical in size, construct and function to those of the Dilgar.

The Kathrans do not possess the same ability to continue after suffering tremendous amounts of damage as their counterparts, although this is perhaps fortunate for the other sub-species of Dilgar on Omelos. The reason for this is a mental imbalance inherent in many Kathrans, which can cause them become incontrollable, wrapped in violent urges which can often only be sated by fulfilling their desires. Of significant note is the physical state that a Kathran is left in after this beserker-like exertion, often struggling to even stand. The hormones which are released, triggering intense contractions and rapid bloodflow through their internal organs and muscular system actually exhaust the body of the Kathran, with muscles appearing to require several hours to recover. The supposition I present is that this is directly related to the length of time the Kathran was in this ferocious mental state.

The Kathran sub-species therefore have a physical weakness in that they are less hardy than the Dilgar race, although it would be remiss of this analysis to overstate this. Indeed, the presence of the beserker rage in the profile of the Kathrans seems to indicate that their powers of recovery from injury and infection are greater than that of their sister species. This seems to indicate that the Dilgar have a greater ability to avoid injury, but the Kathrans better suited to dealing with adverse physical conditions.

Dilgar (Kathran) Racial Traits

+2 Intelligence, -2 Charisma: As a race, Kathran Dilgar have extremely quick and agile minds but are utterly uncompromising in their self-proclaimed superiority which inevitably leads to friction when dealing with others.

All Dilgar are of medium size.

Dilgar have a base speed of 30 feet.

Low-Light Vision: All Dilgar have superior eyesight that is far sharper than a human's. Dilgar of any (sub) race have superior eyesight that can see twice as far as a human in starlight, moonlight and similar conditions of poor illumination. They retain the ability to distinguish shade and colour while under these conditions, and can even read by such light.

Kathran Dilgar are blessed with an innate toughness, allowing them to carry on when other Dilgar would collapse from exhaustion, poison, disease or simple damage. This genetic ability allowed them to survive in the harshest of conditions of their homeland, and giving those few surviving Dilgar on their nuclear-blasted continent a slightly increased chance of survival. Kathran Dilgar start the game with Great Fortitude as a bonus feat.

Whilst the Kathrans that survived through to their destruction when their home sun exploded might had believed different, the Kathrans still have trouble controlling their temper. The Kathrans have a -2 racial penalty applied to their Willpower when attempting to avoid losing their temper. This difficulty to control their rage is a key factor in the development of the Kathran Beserkers during their long wars against the Thrazans.

A Dilgar of either the Kathran or Rittacan racial sub-group gains the Life of a Slave feat automatically at first level. For details on this feat, please refer to the Feats section.

Automatic Languages: Thrazan, Kathran

Favoured Class: Soldier. A Kathran Dilgar's Soldier class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

The Rittacans (Tall Dilgar)

By historical accounts provided by Tenshin Kiro, of House Kiro, the Rittacans were conquered because unlike the other dominant species on their homeworld, they possessed little taste for violence, which ultimately led to their becoming a slave race to both the Kathran (Dark) and Thrazan (Prime) Dilgar.

The Rittacan sub-species have many aspects lacking, when compared to the other native species on Omelos. First and foremost is the lacking of any advanced recovery or resistance to external elements, which the other sub-species possess in relative abundance. Instead, their brains seem to have an increased learning capacity, even above that of the other Dilgar species.

A note, which must be recorded, is that unlike the other main Dilgar races, the Rittacans seem to be especially weak. Whilst in no way unable to utilise their physical attributes for the benefit of their race, the muscular structure seems leaner and less compact than that of the Kathran sub-race and Thrazan race. This may also be caused by an elongated skeletal structure, which all Rittacans share.

The 'pure' Rittacan genetic structure in theory could allow for telepathic ability on its own; from my initial observances, it appears that the remaining genetic elements to allow this ability to actually mature are not present within the Rittacan DNA structure. Rather, they are present within the DNA structure of elements of the Kathran sub-race, and to a lesser extent in the primary Thrazan race. This bizarre quirk, one could almost question was by design, for I propose that for a Dilgar to have telepathic abilities, they must have Rittacan, and either Kathran or Thrazan parentage.

Dilgar (Rittacan) Racial Traits

+2 Intelligence, -2 Strength. As a race, Rittacan Dilgar have extremely quick and agile minds but their elongated body frames possess less muscle bulk than one would expect for a Dilgar.

All Dilgar are of medium size.

Dilgar have a base speed of 30 feet.

Low-Light Vision: All Dilgar have superior eyesight that is far sharper than a human's. Dilgar of any (sub) race have superior eyesight that can see twice as far as a human in starlight, moonlight and similar conditions of poor illumination. They retain the ability to distinguish shade and colour while under these conditions, and can even read by such light.

Rittacan Dilgar are ever alert for danger and can detect the slightest movement in their vicinity with an ease that can almost seem supernatural. A Rittacan Dilgar begins the game with Alertness as a bonus feat.

Rittacan Dilgar have a dispensation towards focusing on particular goals, the majority of them peaceful and for the benefit of their society as a whole. The Rittacan Dilgar gains the Skill Focus feat free at first level.

A Dilgar of either the Kathran or Rittacan racial sub-group gains the Life of a Slave feat automatically at first level. For details on this feat, please refer to the Feats section.

Automatic Languages: Thrazan, Rittacan

Favoured Class: Lurker. A Kathran Dilgar's Lurker class does not count when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing.

Summary

The Dilgar whose bodies featured in this report were taken from a destroyed vessel found on the fringes of Earth space, some of their crew exposed to vacuum. Most of those bodies were incomplete, and badly scarred due to fire damage from a suspected missile hit. Therefore, I request that the nature of this limitation to be bore in mind when scoring and grading this assignment.

To summarise, the Dilgar physical state is an efficient bipedal structure, with several varying features that clearly distinguish it from other sentient races. There are clear and distinct differences between the racial subtypes, which were borne out of their environment and their proximity to one another. Upon the availability of further corpses or indeed live subjects, the summary of the Dilgar race as presented in my report could be expanded upon.

File Note (additional):

At the request of EarthForce Intelligence, this file is closed, pending a future review. The information contained within this report, even though somewhat speculative, is correct in all regards based off our own covert sources.
The author of this report is also

entirely correct on the origins of Dilgar telepathy resting on the presence of a Rittacan Dilgar at some point in their genetic history.

As per recommendation from this office, the individual concerned has received an appropriate grade for this piece of work at their educational establishment, and all secondary copies of this work have been deleted. Suggest placing a trail on the subject for a period of eight weeks to ascertain whether the individual concerned has liasons with alien governments that could prove harmful to either EarthDome or the Earth Alliance as a whole. A system mole to observe financial transactions and communications conducted by the individual concerned may also be warranted.

Until the Dilgar War is declassified, the locking procedure on this document will be valid until a significant event occurs which warrants the closure being overturned. Permission to unlock this document is hereby granted to EarthForce officers holding the rank of General rank and above, or three EarthDome signatories of Senator rank or higher.

Lieutenant Abigail McCormack, EarthForce Intelligence. November 12th, 2233.

Dilgar Culture and Society

It may seem contrary to their military nature, but the Dilgar no different in the fact they possess a culture, the difference between what they class as a culture and that of other races within the galaxy notwithstanding.

Dilgar society is an oppressive one, but the individuals within that society do not complain, for to the Dilgar people it is a necessity. It also provides a sense of order, albeit a dark one, which has been accepted as the norm.

This chapter details the social customs of the Dilgar, of all three sub-races. It includes a section on the Dilgar principle of government, based around that individuals have no rights save the authority granted to them by their position in Dilgar society. The life patterns and artistic pursuits, such that they are, are also detailed, together with a section on the religious beliefs of the three sub-races.

Social Customs

Commemoration of Births

Rare amongst the races of the galaxy, the Thrazan Dilgar do not have a birthing ceremony as such. Whilst the humans have a different variant for each of their major dominant religious, the Dilgar of the Thrazan bloodline do not overtly celebrate the birth of a new generation. The names of the newborn are registered one week after the birth of the young by a family member at the local administrative office, which is typically assigned to the staff of the regional Magistrate. A growing Dilgar tradition is that the father of the brood, or one of the fathers, performs this task, officially sealing the end of their relationship to their offspring's mother.

For the Rittacans, a simple naming ceremony conducted by the eldest Rittacan in the region suffices. This simple ceremony is both direct and poignant, reflecting as best as it could the must more elaborate ceremonies of centuries past. In those early days, the birth of a new Rittacan was seen as a blessing, increased exponentially for every additional child that survived their first few dangerous days. In the time of slavery, there was little to celebrate about. The naming ceremony is hard for the mother, who can sometimes feel like her powerful hormonal bond with her children is being cast aside for the purpose of ceremony.

For Kathrans, the strongest and most able warrior climbs the highest peak and to the wind shouts the given names of the children born in the tribe. This is to get the gods of the elements to recognise the named children, and give them a long, bloody and violent existence. These days, it is as much for survival as anything else. The child is actually not present for the Kathran ceremony, reflecting the level of violence a new Kathran mother can show to any who attempted to take her brood away. In times of Thrazan dominance, a Kathran will always attempt to do this from a tall building or structure, which clearly the Thrazan authorities have no inclination to permit.

Commemorations of Death

The Dilgar from the Thrazan bloodline have little acknowledgement for death – with no state religion or belief system the death of a Dilgar is simply a moment to reflect on their accomplishments, for themselves, their family and Dilgar society.

The Rittacans and Kathrans both cremate their dead, in a move that pleases the Thrazan Dilgar no end. Not wishing to sully their hands with the bodies of slaves, the religious observances that both of the slave races follow a similar pattern.

The Rittacan belief, stemming from their religious focus on the sun, burn their dead in the hope that inspired by the heat their spirits will rise up to the sun. The Kathrans do something similar, specifically taking the ashes of their fallen and casting them to the winds, in a mirror to the birth ritual. It is a Kathran belief that the spirit of the warrior will take flight on the wind.

The motto of life continuing certainly applies in Dilgar society, and it is common for slaves to receive less than an hour away from their ordained tasks to take care of their dead. There is less pressure for Thrazan Dilgar to return to work so quickly, although exhibiting an abundance of grief is viewed as a weakness, and Dilgar society does not take kindly to weakness.

General Social Artefacts

In civilian life, it is considered the responsibility for every Dilgar to defend themselves and their families. This is

not to say that violence is expected, like the Drazi, but rather there is little reported instance of theft or common assault. Also of note is that this does not apply to Dilgar of different social standing – a Rittacan Dilgar striking a Thrazan is considered a criminal act, but a Thrazan striking a Rittacan is not. A list of crimes can be found in the section on Admonishments and Punishments later in this chapter.

There are methods of speaking between Dilgar who are not familiar with one another, a formal arrangement of dialogue that can seem a little bit like verbal sparring to an outsider. This interplay performs a necessary function, for it details the Magistrate who is in charge of the Dilgar's region, to the number of slaves that the Dilgar possesses. This fits in with the Dilgar social structure, of informing the other Dilgar who has rank above the Dilgar concerned, and whom he has rank over. Details on the structure of the Dilgar language can be found later in this chapter.

The Dilgar currency is the concorinn, a simple classification of coinage following the Dilgar base 25 number system. At the time of the Dilgar War, roughly ten concorrin's were worth the same as an Earth Alliance credit. Clearly, no official conversions rates were possible, as the two races did not trade at all. This comparison is only useful when considering other races, which may have interacted with the Dilgar on some level.

Dilgar Social Order

The social order followed by the Dilgar is different to that followed by many other races in the galaxy. From a concept of no Dilgar having rights of any kind, a truly dictatorial regime has been founded which would wage war on the League with little concern as to the rights of the innocents who would be stamped under their heel.

The Rule of Imperium

The civilised worlds of the known galaxy often, but not always, share a common trait. An individual born has certain inalienable rights, which cannot be traded, bartered or otherwise taken away from a sentient being. In theory, these rights provide for equality across all members of all species, regardless of sex, race, colour, age and religious preference.

The system of government that the Dilgar has flies wholly in the face of this; rather than assuming that every sentient has a set of basic rights, the Dilgar system of government professes that, at the lowest possible level, an individual has *no* rights. Even the acquisition and partaking of food and water, of having available clothing is not a right. Rather, it is the responsibility of those above the individual, in the cultural hierarchy, to permit the individual to eat food and drink water, or wear clothing.

The highest level of authority held in the entirety of Dilgar culture is held by the Emperor, or in the case of no immediate candidate, a Regent. These levels of authority, referred to as *Imperium*, are considered to be invested in the Emperor by the individuals in charge of the tribes. In more current times, this is actually the Magistrates in charge of domestic regions. These Magistrates hold the level of authority over any in their area. They effectively have the power of life or death over those in their charge.

The eldest individual in a Dilgar household holds Imperium over those who live in the household. Whilst this may seem to be at odds with the Dilgar position on treating the infirm for medical conditions, this is seen as an advantage, as the chances are against a sick individual from leading their household for a lengthy period of time.

Finally, any Thrazan in a household holds Imperium over any slaves in that household. If a Thrazan in the household orders that a particular slave has not worked hard enough to earn their food, then the slave does not eat, unless they can find or steal something. The penalty for the latter is severe, often resulting in maiming or execution.

In turn, a Thrazan has an element of responsibility assigned to their level of Imperium. When out in public, all slaves must wear specific clothing – wearing of any clothing of any Thrazan cut or colour is grounds for punishment at the whim of the controlling Magistrate, and often a rebuke to the owning Thrazan. Of course, some Thrazans have sent their slaves out naked into the streets as punishments, to be followed by an additional punishment meted out by the Magistrate.

Admonishments and Punishments

The Dilgar do not tolerate failure lightly. They tolerate criminal activities even less than failure, with punishments for even the smallest crimes being treated severely. Crimes against property are viewed worse than crimes against the person – Dilgar are generally expected to be able to defend themselves, and any failure to do so is their failure, not that of the state. This excludes murder under a specific set of circumstances.

A sample list of crimes follows, grouped by the expected punishment for that crime. Note that the punishment of execution is administered in many different ways, including the criminal being handed over to the Imperial Research Arm to assist in their so-called experiments. These crimes do not apply for Magistrates and those in power; those individuals are considered to have Imperium over all of those beneath them, including Thrazan civilians. Only the threat of failing to be re-elected to the Assembly, and the ever-observant Consuls and Pro-Consuls higher up the food chain, keeps the actions of a Magistrate in check.

The Dilgar Magistrates do not have direct control over the individuals appointed to investigate suspected crimes. These belong to a group of law enforcement personnel that answer directly to the Consuls.

Execution
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) killing a non-slave.
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) conspiring against a Magistrate or a figure with higher level of Imperium.

A slave (Kathran or Rittacan) killing a slave (Thrazan).
A slave (Kathran or Rittacan) engaging in sexual relations, with or without consent, with a non-slave.
Theft of property (either a Kathran or Rittacan) belonging to a Thrazan.

Maiming, Penal Servitude (of a term up to fifteen standard years)
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) harming a non-slave.
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) organising a religious event.

Public Torture, Penal Servitude (of a term up to a year)
A Thrazan stealing the property of another.
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) speaking to a non-slave in a language other than Thrazan.
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) refusing to obey the dictates of a Magistrate.

Public Torture
A non-slave engaging in sexual relations, with or without consent, with a slave (Kathran or Rittacan).
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) caught in public not wearing the proper attire.
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) caught lying to a non-slave.
A slave (Kathran, Rittacan or debased Thrazan) refusing to obey the dictates of their 'owning' Thrazan.

Dilgar Life Pattern

Childbirth and Infancy

After a six month gestation, Dilgar infants are brought into the world, normally accompanied by between one and three siblings. Given that each of these babies could come from an egg fertilised by a different father, it is not uncommon for siblings to be only half-related to one another.

The mother loses the maternal instinct after a matter of months, but during the time that instinct is strong. This influx of hormones, which causes the Dilgar female to be so protective of her young, actually kick in several days before the onset of childbirth. The pregnant female becomes highly irritable, and feels the urge to create a space for herself in which to give birth. In later times, it became common for pregnant females to actually leave the domain of her family to give birth. In earlier times, this was practically difficult and inherently dangerous.

A young Dilgar learns quickly to compete for access to the mother's milk, and to gain her attention over that of his brothers and sisters. This craving for basic needs to some extent never leaves the Dilgar as they mature. Equally, by the time a young Dilgar is six or seven months old, they gain the ability to recognise faces, colours, even some simple objects around them. During this time, the mother is still wholly devoted to her children, even so far as physically assaulting any Dilgar she deems to be a threat to either them or the expenditure of her time with them. Part of this is a throwback to earlier times, where the male father of a mixed brood took unfavourably to those offspring who were not his.

Language skills come shortly after, and by the time a Dilgar child is twelve standard months old he can speak, mainly associated with the world around him by repetition of key phrases. Dilgar children do play, predominantly playing and tumbling in these earlier stages, although as the Dilgar children reach their eighteenth month a certain level of menace manifests itself in play. The trait of stalking their siblings, a rehearsal for stalking food sources in prehistoric times, teaches the Dilgar the value of measured thoughts and acts in preference to any other approach.

As her brood reaches their second year, the Dilgar mother begins to loose interest in the welfare of her children, as the hormones that have been influencing her since her body readied itself for labour subsids. From this stage, she slowly retracts from her wish and indeed need to feed milk to her children, as her body returns to normal. Whilst for the next year she still observes over her offspring's welfare, she is content with allowing them to explore further away from her care.

By the time a Dilgar child enters its third year, the mother has withdrawn what would be considered as maternal care by most alien races for her offspring. She still maintains a low-level attention on the brood; the hormones, which first entered her bloodstream when she began the process of giving birth, are wholly not lost. They remain in her system at an almost background level, creating the myth that once a Dilgar female has given birth to a brood, the process of having more children becomes easier. Ironically, these levels of hormones both increase the potential for childbirth and the desire to mate further, although these increments are only minor in nature.

Education and Experience

From the age of three, the Dilgar receives possibly the most intensive education regime in the galaxy. The schooling, whilst only for eight hours per day, carries with it a great deal of homework. More than admonishment is the punishment for poor grades – the expectation is that Dilgar children will receive physical retribution for their mistakes.

Creating a loyal and focused workforce is the goal of the Dilgar government and the Imperial Education Commission. Indeed, the Magistrate of a region has the ability to involve himself in the education process of the next generation of Dilgar, even so much as to remove those teaching personnel from their duties should the Magistrate be unhappy with their work.

Whilst at school, the primary lessons that a Dilgar learns are Thrazan, Thrazan History, Scientific Studies and Mathematics. The Thrazan language does not take up a great deal of the curriculum, perhaps only fifteen percent of the overall time. Much of that time is taken in establishing the word patterns that will be joined to form up Dilgar nouns and phrases. A process of learning many nouns is normally by rote, with the teacher stating a key phrase and the students repeating.

Thrazan History, unsurprisingly, is the history of the dominant race on Omelos who went on to simply become known as Dilgar. The history is unreservedly biased against the Rittacan and Kathran tribes, emphasising the negative aspects of how those cultures affected their own. A portion of sociology appeared within the teachings of Thrazan History, although emphasising the role which the Rittacans and Kathrans were destined to play in Dilgar society; that of subservient slave races. Military history is also covered, as is discussions of the great manoeuvres and battles fought in years past.

Scientific Studies takes up a greater percentage of the curriculum than any other, with a full third of any Dilgar's time spent on rudimentary biology, chemistry and physics. Even though in their first year at school some of it may be portrayed as recreational, the emphasis is there at that early stage. By the time a Dilgar child reaches ten year old, there is an expectation that the child can design a catapult, create a concoction of chemicals which can explode, and dissect the deceased body of a slave. Whilst this is horrific by the standards of any sane or humane society, it is important to note that those two words have never and will never be applied to the Dilgar.

Dilgar Mathematics is interesting; from an early age the Dilgar adopt a quinary number system, which is a base five system. This number system is used, as a Dilgar has five fingers on each hand, up until a Dilgar enters the second year of primary education. At this point, a base twenty-five system is taught as standard to Dilgar children, as using the base five system twenty five is the maximum that a Dilgar child can count to on both hands, with one hand recording multiples of 5, and the other hand counting units.

For those Dilgar who are able to complete their assigned work and still have time to spare, Dilgar education establishments offer social events and gatherings designed to promote Dilgar society and historical knowledge. These optional but acknowledged activities heavily reinforce the lessons learned in Thrazan Language and Thrazan History sessions, and success at these often is a footstep into the Dilgar taking an higher than expected paid position when they being work.

Dilgar Number System

Dilgar Number Pronunciation	Decimal equivalent
Un	1
Ne	2
Un-Ne	3
Ne'Fa	4
Narar	5
Narar'Un	6
Narar'Ne	7
Narar'Un'Ne	8
Narar' Ne'Fa	9
Jaran	10
Jaran'Un	11
Jaran'Ne	12
Jaran'Un'Ne	13
Jaran' Ne'Fa	14
Kelon	15
Kelon'Un	16
Kelon'Ne	17
Kelon'Un'Ne	18
Kelon' Ne'Fa	19
Borra	20
Borra'Un	21
Borra'Ne	22
Borra'Un'Ne	23
Borra' Ne'Fa	24
JelAn	25 (or 10 in Base 25)

Example:
33 in Dilgar is represented as JelAn Narar'Un'Ne (25 + 8)
52 in Dilgar is represented as Ne Jelan Ne (2x25 +2)
74 in Dilgar is represented as Ne Jelan Borra'Ne'Fa (2x25 + 24)
101 in Dilgar is represented as Ne'Un Jelan Un (4x25 + 1)

The experiences gained during their first few years of schooling dictate how the Dilgar will be treated for the rest of their lives. Bullying is accepted, even encouraged, although the bullying of one Dilgar upon another is preferred to group bullying, at least initially. A Dilgar that is bullied, and does not possess the mental wherewithal to take the matter into their own hands and deal with the bully, by fair means or foul, is viewed as being weak. Dilgar teachers observe this, and score their pupils based on how well they cope with aggressive peer pressure. To leave introductory schooling with the respect of peers is acknowledged as a key trait Dilgar employers look for.

Physical examinations form a prime part of the curriculum, especially as a Dilgar reaches puberty, normally at the age of nine for both male and female Dilgar. When a child is judged to have entered puberty, regular tests begin to ensure that the child is developing according to expectations. Any child not doing so is blackmarked, and a note placed on that child's file that an improvement must be made. Three black marks results in the child being removed from the school and thrown into slavery. For the unfortunate child, they will spend the remainder of their days cleaning, serving and dealing with the unpleasant end of Dilgar society. Whilst Kathran and Rittacan slaves are allowed to reproduce, with a careful eye being kept on the proceedings, Dilgar with a Thrazan bloodline are not allowed to reproduce, and are clinically sterilised. As taught in the Thrazan History, the society had got to the point of almost removing genetic weaknesses from their gene pool. Ironically, as alien students would later discover, this selective breeding affected the scope of the Dilgar gene pool, perhaps handicapping their development for all time had Omelos not exploded.

For Kathrans and Rittacans, there is no regular state schooling. Viewed as wasteful expenditure of resources, the expectation is that those slave tribes will handle their own educational requirements. The usage of Thrazan education resources are often permitted to be used by the slaves to teach their own, with the intent of enforcing the will of the state upon the two slave races. Unlike that of the Dilgar children who fail their physical examinations, there is no such penalty applied to the other slave tribes, as they are judged to be physically as well as mentally poorer than the Thrazan bloodline in any case.

Regardless of bloodline, the Dilgar child grows at the same rate. The onset of puberty causes a great many changes in Dilgar of either sex, for up until puberty there are only minimal physical differences between male and female Dilgar of that age. Male Dilgar gain a slight increase in muscle bulk when compared the female, with the cost usually being a trace element of agility that Dilgar children possess. The voices of both sexes change, becoming deeper as they progress through puberty.

In this critical stage of life, the Dilgar learns how to relate to others, the value of their own self worth, and their talents and skills. The Dilgar understands how their position in Dilgar society fits in with their world view, and more importantly how they can contribute to Dilgar society, and be seen to be contributing. By this stage, the Dilgar will be aware how society functions, and that Dilgar society does not carry what it considers dead weight. Hopefully, the Dilgar has also learned how to defend himself; when to strike, and perhaps equally important and especially so for a slave, when not to strike.

Adulthood

Having reached the height of their physical and mental abilities, graduates from the Dilgar education system are expected to take up their place in Dilgar society. If they have not been singled out by any one of the advanced educational institutions, such as the Pre-Indoctrination Centre for those with a clear aptitude for the armed services or the Imperial Research College for those displaying mathematic or scientific genius, then the Dilgar can expect to take up a position in their family business or any business in the village, town or city from where they hail.

Unless instructed not to by either their position with Dilgar society (as a slave for Dilgar of the Thrazan bloodline or by noted genetic defects) the Dilgar is free to purse a mate and reproduce. Unlike many other galactic cultures, the Dilgar have no concept of marriage, perhaps because they view love as a fleeting emotion rather than a potential lifelong commitment. Whilst sometimes Dilgar take the same mate on repeated occasions, there is no requirement to do so. Any Dilgar children born from any union are the responsibility of the female's family, and the male can make no claim to them. Whilst this could be construed as being grossly unfair, Dilgar males have very little in the way of paternal feelings unlike males of other species, such as humanity. Therefore, apart from a wish to mate again with a particular Dilgar female, Dilgar males have little concern for their progeny; save for the fact that they have some progeny, and thus passed their genetics onto the next generation. Dilgar females are as sexually active as the males, often seeking out a mate or more than one mate with whom they feel the wish to breed with. To a Dilgar, intelligence, wit and physical fitness are seen as suitable characteristics to look for in a mate, to both male and female Dilgar.

Given the time a Dilgar female spends bound to her children for the first few years of their lives, it is unsurprising that the male members of the household are expected to make up any deficiency. This has an additional benefit for the Dilgar concerned, because the state does not expect to foot any bills for a Dilgar who has not worked for that right. Working hard, and gathering funds to assist their family will reap benefits later in life, when the Dilgar starts to slow down.

Dilgar are expected to live either in the family dwelling or close to the family dwelling. As Thrazan society expanded, this became more difficult to achieve, as the Dilgar within a family were expected to travel to where work was. Therefore, it is common for most Dilgar families with members spread across several regions to return to what is considered the family dwelling once per stellar month to bring the largest portion of their income for the upkeep of the family. This system, bordering on tribal, is relatively unchanged since before the Thrazans encountered their continental neighbours.

A loyalty to the family is expected for all family members, and family members cast out face an uncertain future, a throwback to earlier tribal times. In certain rare situations, a family member is taken in by another, although this depends on the size of the new family and the number of males and females already present. It is rare but not unheard of for a Dilgar family to take on another female exorcised from another family if she possesses childbearing

potential. Equally, Dilgar males or Dilgar females who for some reason are not able to bear children stand the best chance of joining another family who currently have several females with broods, and need workers to bring in funds to keep the family afloat.

Any working Dilgar is expected to give twenty percent of their earnings to the state. In times of war, this would increase to thirty or sometimes even forty percent. This would often leave the individual Dilgar with little money, but with a slave population to clean, wash, even make clothing and perform other duties, this was not as great a hardship as may be imagined.

Old Age and Death

There is the fear that elderly Dilgar possess when passing seventy years of age that they will be considered disposable when they cease to be of use to Dilgar society. Sadly, this fear is well founded. Medical treatment is only provided by the state when the Dilgar is viewed as being of some worth to his family or society as a whole; appeals may be made to the local Magistrate to force medical treatment to be provided, but the Magistrate often asks for a sizeable donation or a favour in return for intervention.

With this in mind, Dilgar carry on working when they reach old age, for as long as they are able. Whilst their workload may not be as intense, the Dilgar will attempt to make themselves useful for as long as they can, to hopefully gain enough respect to warrant medical treatment when they need it. A common occupation for elderly Dilgar is to teach the next generation, where their physical frailties are less of an issue. Bone diseases are relatively common, with the Dilgar skeletal structure becoming exceptionally delicate in old age. The reason for this is unknown, although it is assumed that it is a genetic contrast to the Dilgar reaching infancy so quickly. Unsurprisingly, for those Dilgar living on Omelos the hazardous radioactive nature of their world often causes cancers and other suchlike that often snub out the life of a Dilgar before they reach old age.

Many Dilgar believe that there is no afterlife, and thus elderly Dilgar often become preoccupied with what comes next, after such a hard life. The answer that Dilgar society has is simply nothing, unlike the Kathrans and Rittacans, who have their own belief at what comes after death. The only future they can look forward to after death is possible medical experimentation, or the extraction of their organs for use in transplant for other sick Dilgar who have been deemed worthy of receiving such advanced medical treatment.

Cultural Elements

Dilgar Art

The Dilgar have little desire or inclination towards the arts, favouring active displays such as demonstrations of physical prowess and vigour, rather than passive displays such as painting or drawing. These latter activities are viewed as being little more than a waste of effort.

Physical combat is their top sport. Regular competitions are a crown pleaser, with an annual competition resulting in much acclaim for the winner. Of course, there are infrequent competitions where unwilling participants are involved, in a gladiatorial manner. It is important to note that these individuals have no rights, and thus the opportunity is often preferable to being handed over to scientists for live trials of whichever medical experimentation is currently favoured. Often, an additional motivation is offered, for penal duty at an outlying facility. During the 2220's and 2230's, the reward for any Kathran or Rittacan Dilgar was a position at the mining facility at Innata IV or the farming concern on Wahant 1. In reality, this reward was more than a death sentence, but the Thrazans would not have the situation any other way. Criminal Thrazans were freed, but under the condition they fulfilled whatever tasks the regional Magistrate instructed of them for a period of ten years.

Whilst this may seem totally barbaric for a space-going culture, the Dilgar have little in the way of compassion, viewing such an emotion as a weakness, especially where either individual or racial progression is concerned. The governing system, of an individual having rights enough to dictate to those beneath them, leaves these individuals with no powers to dictate, and thus unable to exercise any rights whatsoever.

Dilgar martial arts focus primarily on precise striking and the use of short bladed melee weapons rather than large weapons and grappling techniques. Dilgar martial arts bear a similarity to the various Chinese martial arts, in their dedication to a combination of deadly blows. Physical wrestling is viewed with distaste, as being an inelegant and primitive throwback to earlier times.

To represent a Dilgar using martial arts within the Babylon Five Roleplaying Game, the Improved Unarmed Strike feat is perfectly suited.

One area in which the Dilgar do have a level of artistic skill is in sculpture. Slight exaggerations of physical appearance are tolerated, but anything other than a clearer defined musculature or the removal of facial imperfections do not sit well, as the piece then is seen as being inaccurate. Historical depictions, such as nameless Thrazan warriors beating their Kathran and Rittacan foes are also popular; metal plaques depicting such forms were commonplace on the main entrance to Thrazan dwellings.

The favoured material for Dilgar sculpture is a dark marble which is common in several of the hilly regions of southern Thraza. Although this marble is a little brittle for such precise work, the results tend to be pleasing to the Dilgar eye. Commonly, sculptures are of living Dilgar, such as Magistrates or Consuls, although

before the 2220's the depiction of historical figures was more widespread. For these historical depictions, a bronze derivative was common. A wood or clay original was the basis for a mould to be constructed, which was treated with a variety of waxes before the molten metal was poured. The metal used gave the finished sculpture a bronzed-steel effect, which would hopefully cope with the notoriously wet Dilgar weather better than any other. Perhaps the finest example of this sits in front of the main council building in Olgarin, a Thrazan warrior holding the disembodied head of a Kathran foe high in the air. Needless to say, Kathran slaves hold a dim view of this, but as befits their position have no authority to do anything about it.

Dilgar architecture is amazing uninspiring in nature, with the brutalist architectural style the most common. Large slabs of plain concrete and other mixes make up the majority of the construction of these facilities, with everything from governmental offices to entire housing estates built of thse materials. Five sided apartment blocks are the most common, with five separate dwellings on each floor, with three floors. These apartment blocks are often constructed with other blocks, appearing like some strange kind of alien honeycomb from space.

Dilgar Literature

The Dilgar, despite their high level of default intelligence, have less in the way of literature when compared to other sentient races. This is not to say that the Dilgar dislike the act of writing, but for them it is specifically a means to an end.

There have been few instances of fictional literature in the Thrazan history. Whilst this may seem peculiar, it is important to allocate several key facts with the Thrazan mindset. The prime Dilgar race is both practical and ruthless to a fault, and Dilgar literature is exactly the same. Stories which tell of great deads, noble or dastardly acts and doomed love affairs simply do not exist in Dilgar culture. In fact, the fact that the Dilgar have such a low appreciation and daresay tolerance for the emotion of love, which almost every other alien race has in some capacity, may provide a root cause for the lack of any fictional work.

However, despite this lack of fictional literature, the Dilgar place a high value on the written word where factual events and history are concerned. Equally, scientific papers and theorems are considered important works of literature to. For the Dilgar, a race which possesses much imagination but little in the way of dreams save those involving conquest, the reading of a historically accurate retelling of Jel'Tur's exploits, or the diary of a Dilgar Battle Captain from the Raider Wars are considered to be much more in keeping with the expectations of the Dilgar society, in focusing on what needs to be done, not what idyllic future it is anticipated to be. This is the manner in which the Thrazans from an early stage in their history shaped themselves to be, and are a victim of their own success as much as they are controllers of it.

The other Dilgar sub-races, the Kathrans and Rittacans, are similar to a degree, but with more appreciation for things literal. The Kathrans believe in the spirits of dead warriors returning on the wind, to avenge wrongs which occurred during their lifetimes, and these tales are common in Kathran folklore. Most Rittacan tales speak of the light of Nid'Dur, one of their former leaders who was inspired by an external entity. The Rittacans tell of Nid'Dur and his followers, in somewhat outlandish tales of his exploits in the afterlife after he had passed on. The Rittacans are a more emotional people than either the Kathrans or Thrazans, although that is not to difficult to accomplish. This emotion often carries through in their poetry, their literature, and their music.

Dilgar Music

Unsurprisingly, like their approach to literature, the Dilgar have little in the way of musical appreciation. What does exist is primarily as a ceremonial tool, usually as a way of celebrating particular events or retelling past glories. There is little scope within Dilgar society for the writing, recording or playing of any form of music – to the Dilgar of the Thrazan bloodline, composing musical arrangements is something that is generally considered a wasteful expenditure of time. In official ceremonies, silence is believed to be more respectful.

The Kathrans have more of a interest in musical composition, although primarily this is comprised of songs about valour and bravery, which typically end in the death of the subject matter in the song. The chief Kathran instrument, the Pol'ta, is a stringed instrument that produces a deep, vibrating sound. The seven strings of the Pol'ta are all tuned into slightly different notes, which when plucked together produces an unusual but distinctive sound, one string intended to harmonise with another. Historically, the Kathrans had been known to use the cured hides of their deceased enemies to construct the skins of such instruments. For this reason, the production of a Pol'ta is considered a grievous crime, and an insult to all Thrazans. The only examples of the Pol'ta are within the Imperium History Museum in the Dilgar capital Olgarin, in the section termed 'Primitive Decadence'.

The pacifistic Rittacans have their own instruments and music. Their favoured wind instrument is called the Shai'Ui, and consists of three primary chambers. A series of levers on the main stem of the instrument control how the sound is distributed throughout the chambers. Constructed mainly from wooden parts, in later times metal has been used where natural materials were not available. A distinctive and surprisingly mellow noise is produced, some might even claim that the sound produced is haunting.

The other primary instruments which the Rittacans play are the Coleni, a larger variant of the Shai'Ui but with a deeper baser sound, and the Sarin, a smaller version which produces noises similar to that of the Human piccolo. Rittacan music is primarily woodwind based, as opposed to the Kathrans, who favour stringed instruments.

Unlike the majority of human music, Rittacan music is not limited to a musical octave of eight notes. Depending on the complexity of the individual piece, an octave by the stereotypical human definition may be 15, 17 or 19 notes. Compositions tend to be monophonic rather than polyphonic, with little in the way of harmonies to complement the main tune. Typically, supporting instruments in a piece of Rittacan music echo that of the main tune, providing almost a shadow of the main tune rather than a complementary arrangement. In times past, the Rittacan culture placed a great deal of emphasis on musical composition and performance. In the days of slavery, most of the teaching of musical appreciation is done by ear, with one generation passing what it knows to the next. Most Rittacan songs are about loss, in particular that of their home.

LANGUAGES AND SPEECH

Without a doubt, the primary tongue as spoken by all Dilgar without exception is that of the Thrazans. Physical dominance over the other tribes allowed them to dictate many other cultural aspects, one example of this being the choice of language.

That is not to say that the Dilgar languages spoken by the Kathrans and Rittacans are never spoken, but it is more correct to state that they would never be spoken in the presence of a Thrazan. To many Magistrates, charged with administering control over their regions, the speaking of any non-Thrazan tongue to a Thrazan is often considered a crime punishable by death, customary for many so-called crimes committed by Kathrans and Rittacans.

The verbal repetition of any Kathran or Rittacan language is not the only crime as regards their language. As of 2228, there were few surviving practitioners of the Kathran language, so low in number that they could be counted on two hands. To all purposes, as a written language the Kathran tongue was effectively dead. Over time, the affect that this has on the language would reduce the scope and variety of any language.

The Rittacans were luckier, if that was to be at all possible, as those telepathic-aware individuals who served the Emperor were largely Rittacans. They were able to keep the memory of their language alive, under the claims that it would assist in their efforts to ensure the safety of the Emperor and the reliability of the War Council. Those telepaths who are not Rittacans are directly assigned under the War Council, but are not entirely trusted due to the source of their telepathic genetic potential.

Thrazan Language

More guttural than an outsider would expect, the Thrazan language sounds broken to an untrained ear. Phonetically, phrases are linked, with the inclination of various phrases conveying perhaps more than any other language would, with the possible exception of human tongues. When compared to other languages, such as that of the Narns or Drazi, the leaning on certain sounds can carry meanings above and beyond the written words. A fair comment would be that subtlety in their spoken language is the only 'weakness' that the Dilgar allow.

In the written tongue, the utilisation of the Thrazan language is highly formalised, almost mathematical in nature. Nouns and verbs are placed specifically in the Dilgar language, placing a relationship between the words by their positioning in a given Dilgar phrase or sentence. Nouns, or the sequence of nouns, always comes first in a Dilgar phrase or sentence. The reason for this is historical, for there was often a need for a Dilgar to introduce himself, and thus identifying himself to others, before any discussion could take place. Second often came the statement with which a Dilgar identified his intentions.

As an addition to this, the number of nouns in the Thrazan language must also be recorded. As of 2228, there were eleven thousand nouns in the Dilgar language, but only around two thousand of these related to actual objects. EarthForce Special Intelligence struggled for several months to adequately decode the Dilgar language, as it became apparent in short order that the whole language was constructed differently than the majority of Earth languages, and many alien languages. It was not until two months later, after many headaches that a junior intern with EarthForce remarked that perhaps it was like the Navajo language on Earth, with more nouns than any other construct. The comparison was only a rough one, but it gave the EarthForce Special Intelligence an idea to start from, and gave that intern a noteworthy mark at the end of her year's assessment.

Whilst the number of actual nouns is only a subset of the total number of nouns used, the remainder are extensions of those base nouns. Many Dilgar nouns have additional wordings, which would generally be considered in human languages and their equivalents as being adjectives. These prefix the noun in order of importance, with the most important adjective being placed first in the list. Following the base noun is normally an abbreviation of the person or group that has ownership of the extended noun. Thus, the whole extended noun can be considered to be possessed by the name or role specified in the suffix. The reason for this can only be estimated, but the most likely reason is that the Dilgar language evolved this way due to a need to identify ownership of property, perhaps even before the

rest of the language evolved to its current state. Curiously, an item which does not have a possessive name specified still has a suffix, specifically *-kilara*, which simply means 'unclaimed'. Given this specific detail, the requirement to identify ownership has additional weight.

Dilgar verbs, the other main construct in the Thrazan language, are no less simple. Dilgar verbs have different versions for whether the meaning of the verb takes place in the past, present or future, but also have altered suffixes, which denote the actual status of the verb. From *-na*, which means completed, through to *–jurra*, which means unstarted, there are sixteen separate states which a Dilgar verb can be in. Depending on which state is selected, the actual specific wording of the verb itself can alter. Thus, even a simple verb, such as 'walk' can sound different depending on the context.

The ability to speak the primary Dilgar tongue is not one that all sentients can do easily. To represent this, non-Dilgar individuals wishing to gain the Speak Dilgar skill must as a prerequisite have an Intelligence attribute of 10 or higher. This is to represent the mental juggling that must be performed to structure the phrases in the Dilgar language correctly. This requirement does not need to be met by any native Dilgar, as they are assumed to have been schooled in the language since birth.

The inclination of wordings, in particular of extended Dilgar nouns, has an effect on the level of ownership, and the position in which the Dilgar speaking holds the person. This aspect is perhaps the most difficult for those attempting to speak the Dilgar tongue to master, as natural inflections within a given language can either insult or compliment. By finishing a noun (or extended noun) with an inflection pitched higher than the speaker's normal voice, a mark of respect is implied. Alternatively, by pitching the end of a noun or extended noun lower, instruction or command is inferred.

As to why the Dilgar language was able to become so complex, the root in all probability lies within the advanced mental abilities that the Dilgar possess.

Other Languages

Despite Thrazan, the official language of the Dilgar Imperium being the most widespread and spoken, it is not the only tongue spoken. As previously mentioned, the speaking of any language other than Thrazan can and often does result in a death sentence for the speaker. It is only due to the strength of conviction that Kathran and Rittacan Dilgar have in their own distinct heritage that they would risk death by speaking in a tongue.

The Kathran language is, at first glance, unstructured when compared to the Thrazan equivalent. The Kathran tribes originally had a form of government where the tribal leaders came together, but did not invest power in a given leader. This led to regional dialects taking on a greater level of weight than in any other Dilgar tongue. The Kathran tongue is more fragmented than the Thrazan in terms of the placing of descriptive words as part of a main noun. In Kathran, the words are separated, and variations on the order of words are more common, which inevitably leads to a measure of confusion. The Kathran language appears when in written form as sharp, precise lines, almost like a collection of knives on the page. This may be intentional from a visual point of view for the Kathrans who during their fight for survival seemed to have a predisposition for bladed weapons.

More distinct than the Kathran and Thrazan tongue is the language spoken by the Rittacans. Developing away from the realms of the Kathrans and Thrazans for much of their development led to their language taking on a different structure, perhaps more akin to the language structures used by various alien races within the League. Verb and Noun constructs are separated to a greater degree, and the emphasis on possession so clear in the Thrazan tongue are less apparent in the Rittacan language. Phonetically, the Rittacan language favours vowels, and the inclination that the Thrazans place on their possessive portion of their nouns is common across the whole of the Rittacan spoken language.

The Rittacan method of handwriting favours a more flowing style, with perhaps a little more artistic flair than one would normally associate with a Dilgar. Unlike the other written languages, additional meanings can be conveyed in the manner in which something is written; by using certain brushstrokes or endings on lines additional weight can be placed in the words and phrases recorded that appear merely to be an artistic waste to any non-Rittacan. The truth of the matter is that the Rittacans have been able to pass a great deal of their history down the ages, a single statement conveyed in a written document merely by the calligraphy on given capital letters. If this truth was known, and the subject matter discovered, then there would be little which would prevent the War Council slaughtering the Emperor's prized cadre of Rittacan telepaths.

RELIGIONS

Thrazan Religious Beliefs

For a long time, in human political circles there was always a contentious relationship between church and state. It was felt for a long time that the two should be separated, whilst an equally vocal group favoured a close relationship between the two, ensuring that a traditional moral high ground was kept. This argument aside, it is important to acknowledge the effects of religion on many human political systems. Religious principles, such as not harming others and respecting the property of others found themselves as cornerstones of political opinions and will, in time became the expected, almost defacto expected behaviour for a country and its citizens.

This is worth noting when considering the Thrazan religious belief system, for simply there is no belief system. Save a modicum of ancestor worship more prevalent early in their history, the Thrazans have little in the way of religious beliefs. This was not always the case, for early in their history the Thrazans did have some simple pagan beliefs, but these fell out of favour relatively quickly, ancestor worship going the same way as their ancestors.

The key to this was the Thrazans themselves; in short, they began to believe in their destiny was theirs to be forged, not preordained by some elemental or supernatural force. Their victory over the Rittacans and Kathrans sealed their belief that there was nothing beyond their ken that they needed to be respectful of, nothing that they should place their allegiance in save their own knowledge and abilities. The Dilgar could accomplish anything that they desired; they could smash any obstacle out of their way whether by force of might or force of mind.

Kathrans Religious Beliefs

Whilst much of the Kathran belief system was in a state of decline by the time their lands were bombed into submission by the Thrazans, their captured homeland defiled by radioactive fallout, the religious beliefs that enabled the Kathrans to push themselves repeatedly at the Thrazans were literally inspired by the elements around them.

Elemental worship, that is a belief in the power of the elements such as the wind, storms, and suchlike are not uncommon in primitive societies, and it was these beliefs that took root in the Kathrans cultural history. In particular, the power and tenacity of the wind was a great figure to the early Kathrans, embodied as a wise old Kathran whose battlefield vigour was not to be underestimated. A Kathran who was born during a storm, or during a severe gale, was often considered to be a special child, blessed by the elements.

Whilst the majority of the Kathran people placed their faith in the elements, Kathran warriors, and in particular the Beserkers placed their faith quite simply in death. A force that could not be avoided by any proficiency or lack of skill on the battlefield, Kathran Beserkers instead began placing offerings in high places on the eve of a battle. As the requirement for their brutal and psychotic battlefield skills began to wane, as technology rendered their hormonally fuelled rages redundant, the Kathran death cults started to lose appeal to the soldiers and officers who replaced them. Despite this, a token amount of respect was still paid by Kathran officers and soldiers, with the aim of requesting that death not claim them until great deeds had been done.

Often, Kathran soldiers would make a pilgrimage to a small temple erected hundreds of years near to a Kathran coastal village called Ghymikin.

When the Kathrans were forced from the continent of their origin by the invading Thrazan armies, under the command of Jel'Tur, the first Warmaster, defiled Ghymikin and the shrine with great abandon. The very stones that made up their shrine were taken to the nearby cliffs and cast down into the rocky coastline below. Clearly, there was little retribution possible for this act of heresy, as the Kathrans were soon forced off from these lands, instead having to settle on the former continent of the Rittacans.

Rittacans Religious Beliefs

Whilst the Kathrans are focused on darkness and death, the religious beliefs of the Rittacans are focused around a historical event that occurred early in their history.

A visitation by a force from outside their ken, indeed from off world, had a powerful effect on the religious beliefs of the Rittacans. Some Rittacans, whom seemingly were taken away, returned both calmer and wiser than before. They often spoke of co-operation with others, a belief that gradually permeated every aspect of Rittacan society. Unfortunately, this belief would place them at a disadvantage when dealing with their violent neighbours.

This belief, through several incarnations, manifested itself in worship of the sun, which the visitation was linked to. Indeed, the fact that for a brief moment in their history their sky was lit up as if by a second sun proved to the Rittacans that the sun, and the visitor, proved to be a powerful force worthy of respect, if not more.

The Rittacans generally believed that when a member of their race died, their essence rose up to the sun, to be reborn each day. Ironically, as the forces of the League and the Earth Alliance won the war, the fact that the Dilgar sun would explode did not concern them greatly. Many Rittacans still held to their religious beliefs, and the fact that their sun was about to end their lives and thus claim them posed no threat or worry.

As previously mentioned, the secrets of their race, including that of their religion and the visitation by a being, seemingly Rittacan bathed in light, were told in the Rittacan language during the time of their slavery, carefully hidden away in the artistic manner of their scripting.

Dilgar Prestige Classes

The following Prestige Classes detail special routes for Dilgar characters that exist outside the scope of the classes presented in the *Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book*. They are only for utilisation by Dilgar characters, the first two being exclusive to Thrazan Dilgar. The last Prestige Class, the Kathran Beserker, represents the route taken by Kathran veterans to fully embrace their violent state when engaged in melee combat.

The War Scientist

Episode Reference: Deathwalker
Additional Hit Points: 1

Requirements

To qualify to become a War Scientist, a character must fulfil all of the following criteria.

Race: Dilgar (Thrazan only)
Base Attack Bonus: +2 or higher
Skills: Computer Use 4 ranks, Concentration 4 ranks, Intimidate 4 ranks, Medicine 2 ranks, Pilot 2 ranks
Special: First level of this class must be taken prior to the defeat at Omelos in October, 2232. The character must also possess the 'Branch Specialisation' feature, as gained by the Officer base class.

Class Skills

The War Scientist's class skills (and the key abilities for each skill) are Bluff (Cha), Concentration (Con), Intimidate (Cha), Knowledge (any) (Int), Listen (Wis), Medical (Wis), Sense Motive (Wis), Spot (Wis), Technical (any) (Int).

Skill points at each level: 4 + Int Modifier

Whilst the War Scientist only gains 4 skill points to be spent per level, it is important to remember that the Dilgar have a standard +2 racial modifier to Intelligence. If the starting skill points were any higher, then the War Scientist class would become seriously imbalanced when compared to the base Officer and Scientist classes.

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the War Scientist prestige class.

Bonus Feat: A Dilgar War Scientist is encouraged to pursue their scientific and academic studies in any way they see fit, as long as they do so. At third and ninth level, the War Scientist receives a bonus feat from the following list.

Alien Anatomy, Contact, Dilgar Lucky, Hobby, Iron Will, Lightning Reflexes, Nerves of Steel, Pentacan Command, Resist Scan, Sixth Sense, Skill Focus (any), Veteran Spacehand, Verbal Assault, Weapon Focus.

Death over Compassion: Whilst the effects are mainly cultural, any Dilgar who becomes a War Scientist becomes a proponent of a mental regime that encourages the application of strength over equality, violence over tolerance, and death over compassion. Whilst the Dilgar does not become a mindless automaton, the pleas of the innocent become less important as the doctrine of ruling by fear, and the growing belief that they are simply *better* than any other being. The War Scientist gains a +2 class bonus to their Willpower save to resist any attempt by any sentient in a disadvantageous position to them (such as a prisoner, slave or member of an alien race) attempting to change the attitude of the War Scientist towards the sentient.

Manner of the Beast: With an in-depth knowledge gained by dissecting and studying alien life forms, the War Scientist has a virtual genetic understanding of alien minds, predominantly gained by inflicting various tortures and arcane experiments. To represent this, the War Scientist gains a +2 synergy bonus to any Charisma-based skill check if they possess the Alien Anatomy feat and five or more ranks in the Medical skill.

Measure of Imperium: Despite not being part of the civilian administrata, a Dilgar who has served dutifully and made a name for themselves becomes known as a loyal servant of the Emperor, and thus is treated differently by their kin. This is equivalent to the 'Measure of Imperium' feat which is normally denied to those Dilgar who follow a military profession, but does not confer entry into any prestige classes unlike the 'Measure of Imperium' feat.

Prime Dilgar: A War Scientist who has reached the pinnacle of their craft is well respected, and stands an excellent chance of becoming a Warmaster, if circumstances have not allowed them to do so already. Their entire being is an example of what the War Council wishes to portray as a perfect Dilgar officer, keen of military mind and possessor of scientific intellect. Once per day, the War Scientist may re-roll one failed Charisma check with *any* citizen of the Dilgar race, including the Kathrans and the Rittacans, regardless of the character's social, political or military standing.

Scientific Endeavours: The War Scientist is expected and encouraged to pursue scientific endeavours, whether it is overseeing military research, working with scientific project teams, or even pursuing their own scientific interests. Similar to the 'Peripheral Studies' Scientist class feature, the War Scientist selects one Knowledge or Technical skill, or the Medical skill, to represent an area that they have taken an interest in. The same area may be selected more than once, even if that particular skill has already been picked as a Scientific Endeavour, Primary Area of Study (Scientist Class) or Peripheral Study (Scientist Class). From the point that this class feature is gained and selected, the character gains a cumulative +1 competence bonus to all checks made using the skill.

Way of Command: If the character does not already possess the Way of Command class feature from the Officer class, then it is gained at 4th Level. If the character then gains the Way of Command class feature from the Officer class, or some other class, by class progression, then no additional bonus is conferred.

The War Scientist

The following table details the level progression for the War Scientist prestige class, together with class features gained at appropriate levels, and changes to attack bonus and saves.

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1	+1	+0	+0	+2	Death over Compassion
2	+2	+1	+1	+3	Scientific Endeavours
3	+2	+1	+1	+4	Bonus Feat
4	+3	+2	+1	+4	Way of Command
5	+4	+2	+2	+5	Scientific Endeavours
6	+5	+3	+2	+6	Manner of the Beast
7	+6	+3	+3	+6	Measure of Imperium
8	+6	+4	+3	+7	Scientific Endeavours
9	+7	+4	+4	+8	Bonus Feat
10	+8	+5	+4	+8	Prime Dilgar

THE MAGISTRATE

Additional Hit Points: 1

Requirements

To qualify to become a Magistrate, a character must fulfil all of the following criteria.

Race: Dilgar (Thrazan only, but see sidebar)
Skills: Bluff 4 ranks, Diplomacy 8 ranks, Intimidate 6 ranks, Sense Motive 6 ranks.
Special: The Measure of Imperium feat must have been taken to take a starting level of this prestige class, and must be considered 'active' to progress by gaining additional levels in this prestige class. If for some reason the Measure of Imperium feat becomes inactive, then no more ranks can be taken in the Magistrate prestige class.

The Magistrate prestige class is intended to portray the political will, experiences and career choices of a Dilgar who becomes appointed to hold public office. However, with a little adjustment, there is no reason why this prestige class could not be opened up to other races. The main change for this would be to replace the requirement of the Measure of Imperium feat. The suggested replacement for this would is the possession of the Contact feat to represent friends in high places who make such a high-ranking position possible, a natural Charisma score of 16 or higher, showing that the individual has enough charisma to warrant others believing in him and four or more levels gained in the Diplomat base class, representing experience gained in a diplomatic career. Finally, in more tolerant cultures, the usage of the Intimidate skill in this class may be replaced by the Diplomacy skill.

Class Skills

The Magistrate's class skills (and the key abilities for each skill) are Appraise (Int), Bluff (Cha), Concentration (Con), Diplomacy (Cha), Hide (Dex), Intimidate (Cha), Knowledge (any) (Int), Listen (Wis), Move Silently (Dex), Sense Motive (Wis), Spot (Wis).

Skill points at each level: 6 + Int Modifier

Class Features

Bonus Feat: A Magistrate, when firmly entrenched in office, finds that doors previously locked to them as a Dilgar citizen become opened. As a result, the Magistrate can exercise their own interests, should the need arise, or pursue a task or occupation they desire with additional vigour. At fourth level, the Magistrate receives a bonus feat from the following list.

Contact, Dilgar Lucky, Hobby, Iron Will, Nerves of Steel, Skill Focus (any), Speak Language (any).

Command of Imperium: A Magistrate who has achieved this level of ability has achieved some notoriety within the corridors of power, as an individual who can get things accomplished. A Dilgar Magistrate at this level becomes a potential candidate for recruitment as a Consul, although this is very often at the whim of those higher up the political food chain. To represent this, the Magistrate gains the Contact feat, but the individual selected for the Contact must have either five or more levels in the Diplomat base class or any number of levels in the Magistrate class. It is suggested that for characters that have taken the Magistrate Prestige Class, a potential contact is introduced to the character that can fulfil this requirement previously in the game, or in earlier adventures.

Political Realities: Sometimes, despite the best wishes of the people there are simply situations in which a proposal or piece of legislation will never be passed. The reasons for it may be political, moral or even simply a matter of public opinion, but whatever the reason the proposed bill or act will never get passed. Once per day, the Magistrate may apply a bonus to their Sense Motive skill equal to the number of levels in the Magistrate class that have been taken. The taking of this bonus may be declared after a roll has been made, representing wisdom and political intuition in truly seeing a situation for what it is.

Power of Control: Upon taking up the role of Magistrate, the responsibility to govern a regional district, preside over claims of criminal acts and order punishments is combined with the power that within that region there is no other Dilgar citizen capable of. In addition, a Magistrate has total control over any slave within their appointed region; typically this will be a Rittacan or Kathran slave, although it may be a Thrazan who has fallen from grace and been punished according to the law of the land. Whilst the slave may still nominally belong to the owner, recompense to the owner for the inconvenience is required, but the actual amount of this recompense is up to the Magistrate to decide.

The Magistrate may always gather financial resources in the form of native currency comparable to 1d4x100 credits, a means of transportation around their home province or from their home province to the capital of the Dilgar homeworld of Omelos, or 1d4 Dilgar supporters. These supporters may be from any base class the Gamesmaster deems appropriate, although they will almost certainly be either 1st or 2nd level.

The Magistrate must be seen above all to be firm and focused in any decision that is made, to do so would be to invite revolt from those over whom the Magistrate has control. All Diplomacy and Bluff checks that the Magistrate makes against members of his own race, who are aware of whom the Magistrate is and what his duties are, are automatically treated as being unfavourable. This reflects the apathy that some citizens have towards political figures, as well as the Magistrate requiring to phrase his arguments in a manner where he will leave his opponents less chance to utilise his own arguments against him.

Regional Responsibility: The Magistrates frequently hold total power over the regions they are assigned to, often being able to instruct punishments carried out for any given crime. The Magistrate gains the benefit of the Independently Wealthy feat, to represent generous contributions made(read: blackmail) and taxes, such as that placed on the selling of slaves in the region which the Magistrate controls. However, at any point this benefit can be suspended and re-activated by the Gamesmaster.

Normally, there is a requirement for a Dilgar Magistrate to intervene in situations where a Dilgar has exceeded their normal rights, or when the authority of the Magistrate is challenged, either directly or indirectly. Whilst new Magistrates receive support for a time from their loyal supporters, after the breaking-in period the Magistrate must fend for themselves.

Once per calendar month, the Magistrate must make an Intimidate check against DC 15. Failing this causes a problem to become evident, one in which the underlings underneath the Magistrate have either failed to deal with or been forced to defer to the Magistrate for his direct intervention. Failing this check for three consecutive calendar months will automatically force the Magistrate to fight for their post in an election.

A table of sample situations is provided on page 22. Games Masters are encouraged to dispense with this table entirely if they have a situation planned which would be of benefit to the current game, or is part of a recurring arc for a later date. Holding a position of power should always carry an expectation of responsibility to the position.

The Magistrate

The following table details the level progression for the Magistrate class, together with class features gained at appropriate levels, and changes to attack bonus and saves.

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1	+1	+1	+0	+2	Power of Control
2	+1	+2	+1	+3	Regional Responsibility
3	+2	+2	+1	+4	Political Realities
4	+2	+3	+1	+5	Bonus Feat
5	+3	+4	+2	+6	Command of Imperium

THE KATHRAN BESERKER

Additional Hit Points: 3

Requirements

To qualify to become a Kathran Beserker, a character must fulfil all of the following criteria.

Race: Dilgar (Kathran only)
Base Attack Bonus: +6 or higher
Skills: Intimidate 4 ranks
Special: Character must possess at least four levels gained in the Soldier class. Character must also have the Weapon Focus feat in a melee weapon, of any type.

Class Skills

The Beserker's class skills (and the key abilities for each skill) are Bluff (Cha), Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Intimidate (Cha), Jump (Str), Listen (Wis), Medical (Wis), Search (Wis), Sense Motive (Wis), Spot (Wis), Survival (Wis), Technical (any) (Int), Tumble (Dex).

Skill points at each level: 2 + Int Modifier

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the Kathran Beserker prestige class.

Likelihood (on a 2D6)	Situation	Penalty of not dealing with situation.
2	A Dilgar has murdered another. Normally this would be not be a major complication in Dilgar society, but the person who was murdered was a person of some important from a nearby district, perhaps even a visiting Magistrate.	The Magistrate is seen as not being able to handle difficult situations, especially where important individuals are concerned. All Charisma-based checks that the Magistrate makes when dealing with other Magistrates suffers a -1 class penalty.
3	Whether as a result of brutal treatment of slaves, or as a result of generous treatment of slaves, the lower elements of the populace start to have ideas above their station, and an uprising occurs.	The ability to control the lower classes, the Kathran and Rittacan tribes, are seen as crucial to any Thrazan. When dealing with any Thrazan Dilgar, a -1 racial penalty applies to all Diplomacy and Bluff checks.
4	A public demonstration has occurred, either criticising the Magistrate directly or his pursued policies.	Whilst political demonstrations are not unheard of, the response must be handled carefully and correctly. The Magistrate rolls a D6. On a result of 1-5, the demonstration passes without incident. On a roll of 6, a revolt occurs, triggering an instant election.
5-6	Dilgar in the Magistrate's district have started becoming ill en-masse. Whether as a result of chemical poisoning, or the unintentional releasing of radioactive material into the region, this problem needs to be addressed.	The poisoning results in a diminished number of citizens in region, which has a major effect on morale and the view of the Magistrate's ability to handle a crisis. Attitudes of all citizens in the Magistrate's region worsen by one level to the Magistrate.
7-8	Food logistical problems plague the Magistrate's region.	Despite being used to logistical problems, the occurrence can still cause problems for a Magistrate who does not move to address them. On a roll of 4+ of a D6, attitudes of all citizens in the Magistrate's region worsen by one level to the Magistrate.
9	Political Opposition. An outspoken individual, with much respect in the local community and many favours garnered, publicly challenges the Magistrate and his abilities.	The Magistrate clearly demonstrated a lack of ability in perceiving the opinions of his citizens, and suffers a -2 penalty to any Sense Motive check, until the Games Master deems that enough work has been undertaken to garner the trust of the average Dilgar in the Magistrate's region. On a roll of 6 on a D6, an election is automatically triggered.
10	Nothing can predict the whims of fate, such as a civilian disaster.	The benefits of the Power of Control speciality are halved, for a period of 1d6 months. If this result occurs again in that period of time, then no benefits may be gained for the remainder of that period. Attitudes of all citizens in the Magistrate's region worsen by one level to the Magistrate.
11	Whether as a result of other situations, any trigger can causr a crime wave.	All Intimidate checks that the Magistrate makes when dealing with individuals in his region suffer a -2 class penalty. This includes the monthly Intimidate check to avoid a situation developing.
12	Abuse of power. An underling to the Magistrate had been acting higher than their station, and must be dealt with.	The Magistrate is seen as having a lack of ability to control his citizens.

Bonus Feat: A Kathran Beserker gains many abilities on the field of battle, often not from any recommended course of training but from opportunities in combat. At second and fourth level, the Kathran Beserker receives a bonus feat from the following list.

Blindfight, Dilgar Lucky, Great Fortitude, Improved Unarmed Strike, Lightning Reflexes, Nerves of Steel, Sixth Sense, Toughness, Weapon Focus, Weapon Specialisation

Blood Mind: Kathran Dilgar have a beserker rage that can sometimes afflict them when they engage in melee combat. When in any dangerous situation, such as combat or where combat is expected, a Kathran Beserker can enter a dangerous and uncontrollable mental state. A Willpower save is required against a difficult of 15 to avoid entering this beserker state, although if the Kathran Dilgar wants to enter the beserker state no check is required.

The Kathran Beserker gains a temporary +2 bonus to Strength for a number of combat rounds equal to the Kathran's base attack bonus plus his Constitution modifier. When the state expires, *and* combat is ended, the change in hormones flowing around the Kathran's body causes them

to become fatigued, and suffers a temporary -2 penalty to all Strength and Constitution checks for a number of hours equal to the Kathran's base attack bonus.

Juggernaut: The Kathran Beserker gains the 'Improved Overrun' feat, as published in the *Players Handbook*, even though this feat is not normally available in the *Babylon Five Roleplaying Game*. The prerequisites normally required by this feat do not apply to the Kathran Beserker.

The Burning: The Beserker can literally 'burn' vitality points, trading them in at a ratio of 1 vitality point to 3 damage points, in any melee or brawling attack. Clearly, this pushes the body of the Kathran Beserker beyond breaking point, and an opponent who manages to avoid the attack will, if advantages are pressed, be able to capitalise on this weakened foe. If the opponent does not dodge or circumvent the attack, then there will be very likely little left after the Beserker has finished.

The Kathran Beserker

The following table details the level progression for the Kathran Beserker prestige class, together with class features gained at appropriate levels, and changes to attack bonus and saves.

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	Special
1	+1	+2	+0	+0	Bloodmind
2	+2	+3	+1	+0	Bonus Feat
3	+3	+4	+2	+0	Juggernaut
4	+4	+5	+3	+1	Bonus Feat
5	+5	+6	+3	+1	The Burning

Dilgar Racial Feats

The feats presented below represent some of the aspects exhibited by Dilgar individuals. It is not recommended that these feats be taken by characters if playing within other time periods, for example a standard Babylon Five campaign or adventure, although as always this is subject to the approval of the Games Master and the specifics of the game being played.

Dilgar Lucky

Whether the only true manifestation of psychic talent amongst the Thrazans, or a hint of a heritage long forgotten for millenia, a Dilgar with this racial feat can succeed in a task, where the conscious mind tells them that they must fail. Whether fired from the subconscious, or something else, a Dilgar is often accused of being 'Dilgar Lucky' without being aware of whether this unusual trait is possessed or not.

Prerequisite: Dilgar (Thrazan)

Benefit: Once per 1D10 days, the holder of this trait may re-roll any one attempted save. The second result must be accepted, even if it is lower than the first.

Genetic Matching

Coming from a parentage specifically designed to offer an improved genetic advantage, the Dilgar who has this trait has normally benefited from a genetic advancement in either mental or physical abilities. Sometimes the War Council instructs a specific mating with an aim of a specific genetic outcome, although this is often not proclaimed in a public manner. In this regard, the War Council are in accord with the Psi-Corps, who unknown to them have a similar policy on producing offspring beneficial to their own cause.

Jha'Dur is perhaps the most well known individual who came from carefully selected parentage, as were her two brothers. One was a deviant of unusual focus, and her other brother a mathematical genius who Jha'Dur never saw after her early years.

Prerequisite: Dilgar (Thrazan). In theory, any Dilgar sub-race could be part of this, although with their limited abilities to participate in Dilgar society the point is relatively moot for slaves. This feat must also be taken at first level.

Benefit: The Dilgar who was brought into the world with genetically selected parentage gains a +1 permanent bonus to a base ability of the player's choice, in the same manner as if the fourth character level had been reached and an attribute increase become available. Note that this *may* push the character's maximum ability for a starting character past the usual limit.

As a penalty, the Gamesmaster may assign one personality trait to the character as a result. This personality trait is up to the Gamesmaster to decide, which may be selected either for game reasons or as a roleplaying challenge. These may include personality disorders, such as bouts of depression (in the case of Jha'Dur) or a difficulty interacting with other Dilgar (such as Jha'Dur's brother, who was so focused mentally his social skills suffered). Physical disorders may also be possible, such as weakened joints by extended muscle bulk, or overstressed joints by increased flexibility. This is not to imply that a disorder such as this is essential if this feat is selected, but that the Games Master has an option he can choose to utilise if he wishes.

Life of a Slave

Whilst the Thrazans battle constantly amongst themselves, attempting to gain domination over the other, the Rittacans and Kathrans make up the slave populace of Dilgar culture. Entrenched as they are in this position, a slave has little chance of successfully arguing their case against a 'superior' Thrazan.

Prerequisite: Dilgar (Rittacan), Dilgar (Kathran)

Benefit: The social situation that a Rittacan or Kathran slave finds themselves in, from birth, represents itself as a -2 penalty modifier to their Diplomacy, Bluff and Intimidate when dealing with any (Thrazan) Dilgar. If an individual interacting with the slave possesses the Measure of Imperium feat, then the penalties and risks are more severe. The penalty modifier to Diplomacy, Bluff and Intimidate is increased to –4, representing the risks to their very life that the slave has in interacting with such an important individual.

The possessor of this feat is also restricted from gaining the 'Independently Wealthy' feat (as they have no financial resources to call their own).

Measure of Imperium

To be a true Dilgar, it takes the realisation to grasp the concept of control fully, of not having doubt in one's actions, of subjugating the weaknesses within as well as dominating others through their weaknesses. A Dilgar who understands this concept can be said to appreciating what it means to hold a measure of Imperium.

In real terms, a Dilgar who has a Measure of Imperium holds an office, either as a Magistrate or in the direct service of a Magistrate. This authority to dominate others and impose control, above and beyond any normal Thrazan, is normally the first step on a political career.

Prerequisite: Dilgar (Thrazan)

Benefit: A Dilgar character that possesses a Measure of Imperium gains a +2 bonus to their Charisma score, and any Charisma related skill rolls, when dealing with another Dilgar character.

Measure of Imperium is not available to military characters – if ranks in a military class (Soldier, Officer or War Scientist in the first instance, others are the province of a Games Master's opinion) are taken after this feat is selected, then this feat is lost. This represents the character stepping back from public service of whatever description to pursue a military career, for the War Council in the service of the Emperor. At no point in the future will the character be permitted to regain the feat, and thus gaining additional levels in certain Dilgar prestige classes may become barred. The exception to this is the War Scientist, upon gaining the Measure of Imperium class feature.

Pentacan Command

Dilgar military officers are schooled in Pentacan tactics, grouping their fleets into squadrons. They practice formations and learn tactics based around these specific squadrons, which represents itself in a bonus to the efficiency of all crews.

Prerequisite: Dilgar (Thrazan), at least 4 levels gained in the Officer base class.

Benefit: A Dilgar officer with the Pentacan Command feat may nominate a number of Dilgar vessels, between 3 and 6, which fall under their charge. A Dilgar vessel may only be affected, and nominated by, a single Dilgar officer who possesses the Pentacan Command feat at any one time. The vessels nominated may include (and indeed, commonly includes) the vessel on which the officer with this feat is travelling.

The benefit of this feat is to provide a bonus to crew co-ordination. All Dilgar crewmembers and officers on vessels under the command of a Dilgar officer with this feat gain a +1 bonus to all Attack Rolls, Computer Use and Pilot rolls. In return, the Dilgar military officer suffers a -1 penalty modifier to all skill rolls and attributes checks whilst this feat is in use, as the officer is considered to be constantly watching the field of battle and adjusting his responses accordingly. It can be dropped at any time, by the Player, or by the Games Master when the player is forced to make a save of any kind or suffers damage. The feat, when dropped, takes immediate effect

Any benefits of this feat do not apply for a vessel if for some reason they cannot make contact with the vessel on which the officer with Pentacan Command is situated. Examples of this could be if a vessel in the Pentacan was outside of communications range, cannot clearly see the layout of the battlefield or the communications equipment on the officer's vessel was damaged. In those examples, the vessel previously affected would no longer benefit from the bonus of Pentacan Command.

Normal: Crews of Dilgar vessels do not gain any special bonus to the above skills. This represents the Dilgar reluctance and lack of experience in operating outside of the Pentacan military discipline.

Verbal Assault

On the Assembly floor, there is often a case for one Magistrate to attempt to put down another. There may be reasons for this – the opinion of one Magistrate when compared to another may be vastly different, for example. A matter of opinion could result in a match where insults and tirades are exchanged, attempting to force their opponent to back down. Rather than discourage this, this is the Dilgar way - dominance over others is their key cultural trait.

This rule of dominance, often by imposing the will of one Dilgar over another, passes from beyond the Assembly floor out to normal Thrazans, whose dominance usually extents to the slaves within their household. Sometimes, this rule of dominance is attempted by one household member over another, but almost always has repercussions with the family elder usually wading into the argument.

Prerequisite: Dilgar (Thrazan)

Benefit: The target of the Verbal Assault and the character who possesses this feat make an opposed Intimidate check. The loser of this Intimidate check suffers a -1 penalty modifier to their Diplomacy, Bluff and Intimidate. This penalty lasts for a number of hours equal to the difference between the highest and lowest Intimidate skill ranks of the two participants, regardless of who possesses the higher or lower skill rank. This feat may not be used in combat, as there simply is not time in a combat situation for the verbal assault to be conducted successfully. A character may only be under the effect of one verbal assault at any one time.

If one of the individual possesses the Measure of Imperium feat, then the penalties and risks are more severe. The penalty modifier to Diplomacy, Bluff and Intimidate is increased to -2.

Although this feat provides for a verbal assault wholly, a Games Master may wish that a Player contributes by providing examples of what they wish to say as part of a verbal assault. The Games Master can skill make the skill roll, and uses this skill roll, but allowing the Player to role-play the verbal assault could be beneficial in a game.

Governing an Imperium

Governing the Dilgar is not an easy task, managing a world devastated by nuclear war and environmental damage. The system of government, one of the strictest regimes ever seen in the younger races of the galaxy, runs on a principle of an individual having no rights, only the power to make decisions unless that power is taken away by an individual further up in the hierarchy.

This chapter contains information on the state of the Dilgar government as it existed in 2228, on the eve of the assault on the Alacan Republic. After this time, the noble family and the Emperor spent less time in charge of the economy, only providing a token leadership to the Assembly via their Consuls and Pro-Consuls. That leadership was provided by the War Council, who was looked upon as the best hope for the situation on Omelos to be dealt with.

The Civil Government

Early on in Thrazan history, there was a realisation that without a guiding force behind their war for survival, then the defence against the Kathran tribes would ultimately become undone. Tribal leaders did not want to relinquish the power over their tribes, but accepted that some overall control was required to keep the tribes focused in the right direction; against the Kathrans as opposed to against each other.

The rule of authority was established early on, with each tribal chief having authority over those in their tribe. This rule was viewed to be absolute; the tribal chief had the authority to administer punishments, even fatal ones. Most tribal chiefs abused their power at some stage of their rules, but this was hardly new.

The individual charged with overseeing the control of this role, of controlling the tribes without interfering in the way that their tribes worked, was called the Ker'Ashi'Tumen'Yutan. This elongated title explained in its name that the owner controlled without sovereignty. It was for this reason that this role was abbreviated over time, into a Dilgar word which paralleled the word 'Regent'.

For almost a century, this level of government worked. The Regent directed a percentage of the military forces and the overall actions of each tribe, but not the resources assigned to the tasks and how those tasks were performed. Thos decisions were the right and responsibility of the tribal chief. However, over time, it became apparent that this could not always be the case. It was during a dispute between two tribes over hunting lands that threatened to overspill that the remaining tribes requested that the Regent become involved to make a decision. He did so, and the side that was not favoured rebelled. Rather than causing a spiralling descent into anarchy, the other tribes sensed an easy victory over the rebelling tribe and butchered them in a matter of days.

As the lands under Thrazan control expanded, and the population blossomed, the inevitable expansion of control and authority occurred. Other individuals underneath the Regent were required to hold powers of authority, initially Vice-Regents but then expanded to include Magistrates, which held authoritative powers but not the ability to administer punishments. The Magistrates functioned as the tribal chiefs had done, but with authority over a predefined area as opposed to the concept of a tribe. Even though power was dissolved to some extent, the Regent (and later Emperor), was said to possess the right to overrule any authority within his domain, in short he had imperium within the sphere of his command, which was total.

It is for this reason that the term Imperium, based off a concept of legal control and authority used by the Romans, was chosen by Earth Force political analysts when studying the governmental makeup of their new foe. It was not a perfect match by any means, but it was the closest approximation in their experience. Most common citizens across the galaxy simply referred to the Dilgar Imperium by their racial name.

The Assembly

The lowest form of Dilgar government is the Assembly, a chamber comprised of 240 Magistrates, who all have dominion over their areas. Twice per decade elections are made, and it is quite rare for a Magistrate to lose an election, even though they may only serve for three consecutive terms. If a Magistrate makes these successive terms, then he gains the right to pick his replacement, who serves a whole term before an election takes place. In

reality, Magistrates are made up of the heads of important families in a variety of fields, from trade through to long-standing loyalty to the current Emperor.

These Magistrates have powers to vote on governmental laws, and pass new ones. There are no official political parties, as the wishes of each Magistrate tend to be individualistic. Also, with the overall power being held above them, there is little for political parties to aim for. Factions change on a daily basis within the Assembly, often with favours being traded for an individual Magistrate's compliance on a crucial vote.

Any individual Magistrate may propose a new law, but there are regulations on how often this may occur, and if it conflicts with any existing law. Of course, even if the Assembly believes that the law is good and just, those outside of the Assembly must still approve it, such as the Consuls, handpicked Magistrates who have responsibility for a specific area of government.

The individuals who can approve these laws wield a great deal of power, and are selected by the Emperor from the ranks of the Magistrate to serve a term of five years. After the term is up, these empowered individuals may either return to the Assembly or more commonly retire from public service, with acknowledgement for a deed performed for the benefit of all Dilgar.

The Consuls

When requested to do so by the Emperor or Regent, a Magistrate may become what is known as a *Consul*. This role allows the Magistrate to take a more active hand in government, although the Consul is still serving at the Emperor's pleasure. The newly promoted Consul is no longer considered a Magistrate, but may pick a replacement for his old position as if the Magistrate had won three consecutive terms.

A Consul can take on specific roles, depending on the availability of such a role (normally when the current post-holder retires or is promoted). These roles encompass the following areas:

Office of Public Welfare: Education, Celebrations, City Works, Public Events.
Office of Commerce: Commerce, Financial Affairs and Non-Capital works.
Office of Law: Law, Law Enforcement, Property Legislation and Control.

There are two individuals appointed to these offices at any one time, and both hold the title of Consul. These Consuls within the same area do not have any hierarchy over one another, regardless of length of service.

For a Dilgar law proposed and passed by the Assembly to reach the statute books, all the Consuls must be in agreement. This helps to ensure that laws that curry the favour of one Consul but not the others do not get passed. Of course, the scope of such laws can only relate to those pertaining to Omelos itself, and not any other concern.

Consuls have this power of veto over laws and mandates passed up to them from the Assembly, but do not have veto over the actions of a single Magistrate within his domain. This is by design, to keep the Consuls focused on the laws proposed by the Assembly. The responsibility of overseeing the Magistrates themselves, on the behalf of the Emperor, is the work of the Pro-Consuls

The Pro-Consuls

The Emperor does not have a defined role in the day-to-day affairs of government, although as his right he is able to overturn any edict or proposed law that he does not agree with. To assist the Emperor in this regard, a Consul may after a period of service be promoted to the rank of Pro-Consul. At this new station, the individual will advise the Emperor on legal affairs, and in turn the Emperor may direct the Pro-Consul to address the Senate on his behalf. Naturally, the Emperor may withdraw this promotion at any time.

Pro-Consuls, unlike the Consls, have a higher charge. Whilst still having the authority to prevent a law from becoming official, their true role is to spy on the Magistrates, ensuring that order is being kept. With this status in mind, the rank of Pro-Consul is well respected, and seen as the highest that any Dilgar statesman outside of the ruling household can achieve.

The Emperor

The Dilgar Imperium is unique in that, unlike many other powers with aristocratic elements in their governmental structure, the same ruling family has led the Thrazan people for the last nine hundred years. There have been incidents throughout which have threatened this situation, but as of 2228 the family line had remained constant.

The authority of the Emperor and his adherents was limited to Omelos, and not out to the worlds and outposts that are under the control of the Dilgar. Even during the war, those captured worlds were judged to be under the control of the War Council. There were many reasons for this, not least being the fact that the military would function best if not restrained politically. Even though the Emperor and his government had the will of the Dilgar people at heart, it was generally accepted that the War Council, which as part of the establishment were swore to support the Emperor would be allowed to focus without worry of interference. In reality, the members of the War Council depended so much on the areas controlled by the other Council members that a monopoly was impossible to achieve. The Emperor was reminded of this fact by his closest advisers on several occasions.

As of 2228, Emperor Ren'Turrin held the highest level of Imperium within the Dilgar government, although his health is becoming frailer by the day. As a result of the damage to their world, his life expectancy is five years less than what Dilgar doctors and biologists claim should be the norm. He has six children, none of whom had finished Terraka. One of them, his second eldest daughter, shows considerable aptitude for a military career.

Civil Government Services

There are many services within the civil government, largely appointed by the Consuls to perform specific tasks and duties. Some of these, and their role within Dilgar society as a whole, are outlines below.

Imperial Education Commission

Responsible for educating the next generation of Dilgar civilians, the civilian government takes the needs of the Imperial Education Commission seriously. Knowledge had played such a key role in the Thrazan's rise to dominance over the other tribes, and at times with the other races coveting that advantage themselves. Officially, the Imperial Education Commission is under state control, but it would be remiss to not include the unspoken role that the Dilgar military plays.

The management and structure of the Dilgar education system is brutally simple. All education is under the control of the state; there are no corporate sponsored schooling schemes in existence. This is by design, for the Assembly wishes to control what is taught, and how it is taught, rather than allowing third parties to interfere.

Whilst the Dilgar education system may sound cruel and harsh by Human standards, Dilgar parents have diminished emotional attachments to their children once they reach five or six years old. This is not to say they have no emotional attachment, but the cultural and biological reasoning behind this is that at that age Dilgar children are mentally keen and able to learn for themselves, by doing rather than at the prompting of their parents. This allowed the concept of the boarding school, or Terraka, to take hold as a preferred medium for raising children. Additionally to this is the fact that when Dilgar children reach five or six years old, they start to develop closer ties with their siblings than with their parents. This is another reason why Dilgar children within a family are often sent to the same Terraka, to reinforce this bond.

The most common form of schooling undertaken is a Terraka, which in human terms equates to a boarding school, a type still common in the 22nd Century back on Earth. From the age of five, a Dilgar infant is required to attend this boarding school, which serves to sever any excessive emotional connection with the parents and to allow the child to be educated and monitored away from any external influences.

The infants attending boarding school undertake education in many different subjects. Whilst language and mathematics skills are important, also placed highly on the curriculum is History (from the Thrazan point of view) and Alien Studies, which clearly place the Dilgar on a different evolutionary scale to the rest of the known galaxy. Children who work hard are rewarded with recreational time, to play competitive sports with one another or for individual self-study. Disobedient infants are disciplined with corporal punishment above any other; to the warlike Dilgar, this is only to be expected.

Regular examinations, at least twice a year, inform the teachers and governers of a Terraka to examine their pupils and their rate of progress. These results are studied keenly, not just by the school administrators but by representatives from the Imperial Recruitment Arm. Keen to identify the pick of the crop, the Dilgar military needs to expand its ranks with the brightest and the best.

Additionally, there are several state run Terraka that focus on other elements. Science and Mathematics are particularly prized, and in any given year several dozen of the most promising candidates are taken to attend these special schools. No choice is given, for the argument is that everything must be done with the overall needs of the Imperium in mind. This was the fate that befell the elder brother of Jha'Dur, called Yen'Ra, who displayed an almost genius-like gift in the field of mathematical studies.

When a student enters their final year, a series of complex examinations stretches his mental aptitude and agility in chosen subjects. The Imperial Education Commision will then recommend the career choices most suitable to the Dilgar concerned, based off the results of the examinations. If the results are high enough, the Dilgar is instructed to attend Post-Kerraka, which is an additional two years of high-level studies in a subject that the student has shown an aptitude in. Otherwise, the student leaves their Terraka, normally in a ceremony, and returns to their home village, city or state to undertake one of their selected career choices.

Imperial Medical Commission

Whilst it may appear beneficial for the civilian government to have a state provided medical programme, the truth is that it does not serve the individual needs of a Dilgar citizen. Rather, it is provided to keep the population in as good general health as possible, normally by excising the diseased tissue from society.

When a Dilgar falls ill, they may attend a nearby Medical Centre. With no Hippocratic oath, the doctors of the sick Dilgar are free to discuss treatments and alternatives. A complex set of guidelines laid down decades before, called the Channelling Code, dictates the preferred types of treatment for a given Dilgar, dependent on age and general health. The general rule of thumb is that if a Dilgar can still offer beneficial services to society, then they are treated. If

they can not, then no treatment is offered, other than pain or anti-infection medication.

The Dilgar civilian medical system does not exist to unconditionally heal the sick. It is there to heal the sick where the sick have a valued role to play in society. This was partly caused by the historical problems the Thrazans had of feeding their people, especially when they unleashed their nuclear missiles upon the Kathrans in the 1930's. Resources were so stretched that medical treatment, especially to avoid the effects of radiation damage, were done on a basis of who was considered the most important to Dilgar society at the time.

This dark viewpoint has the additional side effect of pushing the majority of Dilgar civilians to work hard and contribute to the war effort, to ensure that they will receive medical treatment should they need it. Of course, that decision is not in their hands, or that of their employers, but in the hands of the so-called Dilgar 'doctors'.

Scientists within the Imperial Research Arm often try out new medical procedures and treatments where practical. Sometimes these cause more harm than the original condition did to the patient, but to the Imperial Medical Commission testing on live subjects is more than necessary, it is preferable. Live subjects can explain how they feel, how the drugs are affecting them. Lab animals cannot.

When a Dilgar (of the Thrazan bloodline) dies, representatives of the Imperial Medical Commission decide how much of the deceased's internal organs are required by other Dilgar whose lives can still contribute to society. Anything remaining is passed over to the biology and chemistry specialists within the Imperial Research Arm for them to experiment upon, or simply burned.

Imperial Recruitment Arm

Formerly a civilian body, as of 2228 the whole of the Imperial Recruitment Arm is under the authority of the War Council, specifically Training and Recruitment. The responsibility of forming recruitment policy had previously been a civilian issue, with the Magistrates (or a selected committee of Magistrates) responsible for forming policy which was voted on to become law. However, with the planetary emergency, the War Council were been granted permission to do whatever was required, and thus rendering all recruitment decisions to be only valid if made by them.

With selected pupils extracted from their schooling at age thirteen, the Imperial Recruitment has a specific entity for completing the education of these teenage Dilgar and also channeling their special gifts into tools for the military to use. Pre-Indoctrination is all but a boot camp which these teenagers attend for three years, on average until the age of sixteen. The regime is harsh, but intentionally so, as Pre-Indoctrination is charged with readying the next generation of Dilgar officers.

Those within Pre-Indoctrination rise at dawn, or earlier if a dummy military campaign is underway. Morning exercises are hard, torturing sessions that push the will and physical strength of the cadets further than they would have believed possible. Free time, regardless whether it is spent by the cadet enjoying some down-time or spending time with their family, is only earned by good performance or sporadic scheduled breaks.

Following on from Pre-Indoctrination is Indoctrination proper, which is open to include those pupils from Terraka who did not have the advantages of specialised military education. The reason for this, as those governing the Imperial Recruitment Arm decided, is to make up for the fact that no policy was perfect, and indeed there are instances that an individual who has not had the luxury of Pre-Indoctrination still displays the way of command.

Indoctrination Centres are spread across the lands controlled by the Thrazans, as of 2228 there was over three dozen of these training centres. The study programme is divided neatly between classwork, scientific experimentation and the cadet's preferred avenue, such as flight training or ground combat. The intent of the programme is to provide the Dilgar military with a competent force of individuals, ready to populate the bridge of a patrol class starship or to successfully storm an enemy position with minimal loss of life.

Imperial Research Arm

Similar to the Imperial Recruitment Arm, the Imperial Research Arm was formerly a civilian body. Like their related service, the whole of the Imperial Research Arm is placed under the authority of the War Council, specifically Research and Development. This was originally under the control of Warmaster Voth'An, but upon her retirement jurisdiction was transferred to the rising star of Warmaster Jha'Dur.

With central government controlling the majority of the direction of scientific endeavours, the Imperial Research Arm was responsible for much of the scientific improvements that made the expansion of the Dilgar Imperium possible. Civilian research agencies, sub-contracted to the government, were allowed to stay in business with their staff paid an agreeable wage if they worked on the scientific avenues as specified by the higher-ranking employees within the Imperial Research Arm.

As of 2228, and by the wishes of Jha'Dur the Imperial Research Arm became less essential to the war effort, although the truth is that most of their work was performed under the auspices of the War Council. However, Jha'Dur herself could still see the benefit of the Imperial Research Arm, both as a tool to keep the civilian populace content that they were assisting in the advancement of the Dilgar race and as a cheap source of intelligent labour. It is for this reason that she allowed the production of the first batch of Thorun 'Dartfighter' vessels to

emerge from the laboratories and assembly workshops of the Imperial Research Arm. This reinforced in the minds of the Dilgar public that the Imperial Research Arm was still of value to the war effort, but also that it was benefiting from military control. Whether this was Warmaster Jha'Dur's intent is open to debate, although it served as a powerful political tool which did her no harm at all.

THE WAR COUNCIL

Comprised of nine individuals, heading up their various departments and offices, the War Council is arguably more in control of the destiny of the Dilgar than the current Emperor. In theory, the current Regent or Emperor can overrule their wishes and dictates, although this has never transpired. With the current crisis threatening all Dilgar, the current thinking is that if this option was used, it could cause great political harm to the ruler who chose to use it, as well as devastating effects on the Dilgar political structure.

The War Council, sometimes incorrectly referred to as the High Council in the Assembly, consists only of individuals holding the military rank of Warmaster. The awarding of the rank is normally done in conjunction with an individual taking up a position in one of the War Council. The position they hold is known as a *Command*, and demands unequivocal respect from any other military officer or soldier in the entirety of the Dilgar armed forces. Individuals in such position are also respected highly by members of the public, for the (indirect) service they provide to the Dilgar race as a whole in their search for a new home.

There is one restriction placed on candidates to join the War Council – they cannot be telepaths. This is entirely intentional, to provide the Emperor or Regent in charge of the Dilgar Imperium with the opportunity to have the Warmasters scanned if he believes that something is wrong. They also must be a pure blooded Thrazan, without any history of Kathran or Rittacan descent.

To many aliens and members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, the War Council was seen during the Dilgar War as the true government of the Dilgar people. By comparison, the Emperor was considered to be nothing more than a weak thrall to the wishes of the Warmasters. This was actually something of a disservice to the Emperor, who was not weak willed and endorsed almost all the actions undertaken by the War Council.

Had the Dilgar homeworld been transferred to another world during the Dilgar War, then control would have been handed over to the Emperor and his civil government once the population had been relocated. The War Council intended for the status quo to be kept, for it kept domestic issues away from them and allowed them to concentrate on their own concerns, be they scientific or military. Power and blood interested the War Council more than governing the domestic populace of a single world.

Grand Strategy

Perhaps the most important of all of the positions on the War Council, the Warmaster responsible for Grand Strategy holds a totality of power and accountability. This division is focused on intelligence and the analysis of military plans and maneouvers conducted by other alien races.

The role held by Grand Strategy is two pronged. First and foremost is the quest for a new homeworld, which is also arguably the chief goal of the rest of the War Council. The secondary role is to present to the rest of the War Council proposals on the manner to conduct military campaigns.

The individual in charge Grand Strategy is expected to hold the answers to any military conundrum at his disposal. Luckily, the individual in charge of Grand Strategy at the time of the planning of the Alacan invasion was an accomplished military theorist, who was well respected by the other Warmasters. This is doubly essential, as the plan to invade Alaca, and thus begin a war against the galaxy, came from his office.

Warmaster Jel'Abbre

Warmaster Jel'Abbre is the individual charged with the unappointed task of leading the Dilgar War Council, and helms his command with the expected Dilgar brutality and focus. He walks with a slight limp, gained when the bridge on board a vessel on which he was travelling was hit by Raider fire. In truth, this injury causes him great pain on occasion, whenever he is forced to use his leg above and beyond any day-to-day usage. This secret he hides from his fellow War Council members for obvious reasons.

Despite having had little time for the diversions that other War Council members have had to pursue their own academic studies, Jel'Abbre has continued to expand his knowledge of practical and theoretical military tactics, perhaps above and beyond any living Dilgar. He is recognised as the authority of military practice, and is often called to report back directly to the Emperor on the status of the war, a snub which the holder of the Naval command, Warmaster Jeddu'Baran, finds aggravating.

Whilst the rest of the War Council bore a greater responsibility for the individual actions of brutality inflicted on the League during the Dilgar Wr, Warmaster Jel'Abbre's prime contribution to the war was the blitzkrieg itself. The initial successes of that operation proving to any doubters the abilities of the Warmaster commanding Grand Strategy - most of the simulations he crafted himself, such is his ability in computer applications and theory.

Warmaster Jel'Abbre
17th Level Dilgar Officer
Hit Points: 42
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 20ft
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +19/+14/+9/+4 melee, +17/+12/+7/+2 ranged

Special Qualities: Branch Elite, Branch Specialisation (fleet), Legendary Speech, Low Light Vision, Rallying Call, Way of Command
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +5, Will +14
Abilities: Dex 15, Str 11, Con 13, Int 14, Wis 15, Cha 14
Skills: Computer Use +22, Concentration +4, Diplomacy +8, Drive +1, Gather Information +4, Intimidate +17, Knowledge (Military) +17, Listen +10, Medical +8, Pilot +3, Sense Motive +19, Technical (Electronics) +4, Technical (Engineering) +4, Technical (Mechanical) +8, Technical (Space Travel) +6
Feats: Alertness, DataAccess, Hobby(Knowledge(Military)), Iron Will, Point Blank Shot, Skill Focus (Computer Use, Diplomacy, Intimidate), Spacecraft Proficiency, Toughness

Office of Military Planning
There is a great deal of distrust between the Office of Military Planning and the other military divisions. Whilst those who work for the Office of Military Planning are instructed to liaise with the areas of other Warmasters, such as Logistical Operations and Naval Command. The Office of Military Planning is viewed as being populated with weak-willed Dilgar without the stomach to fight themselves.

The Office of Military Planning conducts wargames and exercises constantly, playing out military campaigns with the expected behaviour of their foes, often assisted by their sibling department, the Office of Alien Studies. These exercises and battle simulations are critical to ensure that the plans that Grand Strategy provide to the rest of the War Council give the best possible chance for success for the Dilgar Imperium.

Whilst individuals working in the Office of Military Planning are not required to have military experience, time on board a military vessel is essential for those in a department or team leading capacity. Whilst this time is often short, only a month or so in duration, the hope was that this experience would assist Military Planning in their endeavours. In reality, either their military experience is conducted as a show tour by the personnel on the vessel they are assigned to, with the best representation possible, or as an excuse to make a statement about the Dilgar Navy's opinion of the Office of Military Planning.

Office of Alien Studies
The Office of Military Planning depends on their sibling department, the Office of Alien Studies, to provide analyses of expected alien reactions to their military proposals. Alien Studies are required to utilise all of the information provided by Communications and Covert Ops, together with all data obtained by the Dilgar scouting vessels that have been spying on local alien governments.

The information formulated by the Office of Alien Studies has many aims. Chiefly, the Office of Alien Studies is charged with identifying a list of potential targets to house the Dilgar people. Their mandate was to ignore any alien populace on any target world, save their potential as a labour source to assist, in all probability by force, the relocation effort.

Whilst the actual implementation level details of this plan could not be worked out until the military conquered or claimed the chosen target, a draft plan was worked out with Logistical Operations to transport Dilgar civilians to their new home. Equally, the Office of Alien Studies has frequent meetings with the Assembly within the civilian government, to ensure that the Magistrates are well aware of the plans, and the actions that may be needed of them, when their new home is found, pacified, and ready to be settled.

Naval Command

Without the skill and expertise of Naval Command, the Dilgar Imperium would have been unable to even attempt the search for a new world. Their greatest test would be their first real offensive against the Alacan Republic; resources were stretched, and if this failed, then the Dilgar would struggle to gather the resources they needed to expand their star fleet.

A position in Naval Command is seen as desirable by many Dilgar civilians – with the stories of the demise of their sun, and thus their homeworld, a position in Naval Command is seen as actually doing *something*, searching the stars for a solution to their predicament. Thus, Naval Command has little shortage of recruits, although sometimes quality is preferable to quantity.

It can be argued that there are more individuals under Naval Command than any other division on the War Council. To support the structure of these individuals, the Dilgar war machine is grouped into ranks.

Whilst passing between the sub-ranks, or up from Trainee, can be done with the normal level of promotion one would expect from a military force. However, progressing in rank scale requires either a significant event to become noticed by the officer's peers, or a period of outstanding military service. Officers who display textbook or overly cautious behaviour in their military careers struggle to rise past the Force rank.

Dilgar ground forces follow the same structure, and there is no difference in rank or perception of rank between the two chief disciplines.

Spacecraft Crews
Dilgar spacecraft crews are highly trained, benefiting from an immense focus on military and scientific principles in their education system. Pre-Indoctrination in particular proudly turns out officers which whilst having little experience in their first posting are mentally equipped and prepared to handle the challenges facing them.

Rank Scale	Sub Ranks	Typical Naval Duties
War	Master	Position on War Council
	Leader	Assistant position to Warmaster
	Captain	Plan, command and execute military campaigns
	Commander	
	Veteran (also referred to as Expert)	Assigned to War Command on Omelos.
Battle	Master	Highest acting rank.
	Leader	
	Captain	Command of multiple Pentacans
	Commander	
	Veteran (also referred to as Expert)	
Combat	Master	Command of a starship in a medium offensive strength Pentacan
	Leader	
	Captain	Command of a starship (such as a Jashekar)
	Commander	First officer position on a starship
	Veteran (also referred to as Expert)	
Force	Master	Bridge position on a starship
	Leader	Junior officer ranking
	Captain	Command of a section on a starship
	Commander	
	Veteran (also referred to as Expert)	
Trainee		

To avoid the need to generate statistics for every single crewmember on a Dilgar vessel, use the following table. It is expected that the crew of a vessel in command of a Dilgar Pentacan (detailed below) will be one level higher than their colleagues.

Warmaster Jeddu'Baran
Holding the Command for Naval duties was Warmaster Jeddu'Baran, an experienced Pentacan leader and competent military officer. In his late middle years at the time of the Dilgar War, Jeddu'Baran had the respect of those under his command, for he was known to have actually performed those same tasks he asked of his officers and crew. In appearance, Jeddu'Baran was a tall, lean Dilgar, with slightly emaciated features. A smooth negotiator, he was capable of running rings around some members of the War Council who did not suspect his motives. This skill at diplomacy evidently has not reached the heights of Dilgar civilian government, for Jeddu'Baran is held in poor regard by the Emperor. The actual reasons for this have never been disclosed.

Jeddu'Baran developed a keen interest in anatomy and medical practices during his time on the War Council. During the Dilgar War, Jeddu'Baran performed autopsies and surgery procedures on Drazi victims as a method of easing the stress involved with planning the execution of the war effort. This interest earned him respect in the eyes of Warmaster Jha'Dur, who sometimes considered Jeddu'Baran her closely ally. The inverse is partly true, but Jeddu'Baran sometimes suspects the motives behind Jha'Dur's arguments.

Warmaster Jeddu'Baran
8th Level Dilgar Officer / 6th Level Dilgar War Scientist
Hit Points: 28
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +13/+8/+3 melee, +14/+9/+4 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Death Over Compassion, Low Light Vision, Manner of the Beast, Rallying Call, Scientific Endeavours (Knowledge: Alien Life x2), Way of Command
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +5, Will +13
Abilities: Dex 12, Str 10, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 16, Cha 12
Skills: Appraise +6, Computer Use +15, Diplomacy +18, Gather Information +9, Intimidate +16, Knowledge (Alien Life) +9, Knowledge (Military) +9, Listen +13, Medical +18, Pilot +4, Sense Motive +16, Spot +17, Technical (Space Travel) +18
Feats: Alertness, Alien Anatomy, Data Access, Far Shot, Marksman, Point Blank Shot, Skill Focus (Technical: Space Travel), Spacecraft Proficiency, Toughness, Veteran Spacehand

Military Craft

The Dilgar military is obsessed with craft having predefined roles. A vessel that has the ability to perform more than one task is viewed as being compromised, of possessing a weakness that a dedicated focus would eliminate. Whereas other races may field ships that are general in terms of mission profile, weapons payload and defensive rating, the Dilgar craft their ships with a specific aim in mind. Space and energy usage are considered premium in Dilgar designs, and there were generally few crew amenities on Dilgar vessels, the space put to better use by allowing the

	Crew Experience							
Race	Green		Line		Veteran		Elite	
	BAB	Skills	BAB	Skills	BAB	Skills	BAB	Skills
Dilgar	+2	+5	+4	+9	+8/+3	+12	+9/+4	+14

ships to host better weapons, sensors or improved engines, depending on the profile of the individual vessel.

The Dilgar approach to their star craft having a dedicated role in any engagement scales up, as one may expect, to the actual fleet formations themselves. These ships formed up in a variety of shapes, normally a wedge but sometimes also an arrowhead, with specific manoeuvres practised to perfection. These shapes, normally made up of five vessels, are termed as a *Pentacan*.

The most common manoeuvre, used repeatedly in the Dilgar War, was for a Dilgar captain in charge of the command unit within the Pentacan to form the ships under his command in a narrow 'V' formation, with his command vessel at the apex. The faster and more mobile ships of the fleet would be on the end of the formation, and the midline units between the two. A classic entrapment was then possible, by widening the formation and then the faster mobile vessels encircling around the back of the designated target. Equally, by the point vessels falling back and the midline vessels falling into a wide 'M' formation, the midline units are able to utilise a greater level of firepower against a target vessel, with the main command unit also free to fire if the midline units are split far enough apart. The former point units can then protect the flanks of the formation respectively. This formation is often used when there are too many targets for the entrapment simply isn't feasible to attempt.

Another common formation, used when assaulting large objects such as orbital bases or stationary vessels, is to form up into an arrowhead formation, with the craft carrying the greatest level of firepower leading the formation. Behind the arrowhead is typically the craft with the jump-engine (if only one vessel in the Pentacan formation has one), and other vessels. Some examples of this are Athraskala Heavy Bombers, which need to be protected until they can reach their target, and Garosoch Heavy Carriers, which have little in the way of heavy weaponry but can provide enough fighter support to discourage any attacks by smaller scale enemy craft.

Vindicator Pentacan

This fleet structure is designed to give maximum short and medium ranged firepower. This particular Pentacan was favoured by some Warleaders above and beyond any other for the pacification of enemy fleets and starfighter wings.

Command unit: Leskrati Jump-Cruiser
Midline units: Ochlavita Destroyer x2
Point units: Jashakar Frigate x2
(Garosoch Heavy Carrier on standby)

Subjugation Pentacan

Designed around participating in the subjugation of an alien world, the Subjugation Pentacan favours mass-drivers and bombing runs above and beyond anything else. Like the Vindicator Pentacan, it has a single vessel with a jump-engine, although in this case that vessel is the mighty Mishakur Dreadnought, complete with a mass driver suitable for planetary bombardments.

Command unit: Mishakur Dreadnought
Midline units: Tratharti Gunship x2
Point units: Athraskala Heavy Bombers x2

Superiority Pentacan

This formation, often considered as a 'light' fleet, was able to bring in a significant number of fighters and two frigates. Despite being regarded less well than other Pentacans, the selected vessels were a good mix of abilities, and perfect for achieving space superiority over the inferior navies of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds.

Command unit: Leskrati Jump-Cruiser
Midline units: Targath Strike Cruiser x2
Point units: Jashakar Frigate x2

Vigilance Pentacan

The main scouting formation, the Vigilance Pentacan patrolled systems under the control of the Dilgar Imperium. Whilst having little in the way of offensive firepower (when compared to the other Pentacans), the Vigilance was permitted to engage scouting vessels or picket-class ships. The Captains of ships in a Vigilance Pentacan had standing orders to retreat, and call in a more offensive Pentacan, such as the Vindicator Pentacan, if enemy cruisers or especially dreadnoughts were detected.

Command unit: Protra Scoutship
Midline units: Jashakar Frigate x2
Point units: Jashakar Frigate x2

Hierarch Pentacan

The format of choice for transporting most Warmasters and Warleaders into battle, the Hierarch Pentacan represents the best that the Dilger Imperium can offer. It offers impressive firepower in the form of the Mishakur and Ochlavita, fighter support from the Targath and to a lesser extent the Mishakur, and a notable command presence. Hierarch Pentacans are often crewed by the most loyal officers, often the best but not always the case.

Command unit: Mishakur Dreadnought (Command variant)
Midline units: Ochlavita Destroyer x2
Point units: Targath Strike Cruiser x2

Patrol Pentacan

This is the main formation for in-system operations. Several Pentacans such as this were left behind in systems conquered by the Imperium, as the larger Pentacans moved onto larger and higher profile targets. Although the primary vessel, the Jashakar was relatively small when

compared to other Dilgar capital ships, the number of Jashakars present in this Pentacan could overwhelm an opponent who failed to recognise the threat they posed en masse.

Command unit: Targath Strike Cruiser (in early days, Jashakar Frigate with experienced crew)
Midline units: Jashakar Frigate x2
Point units: Jashakar Frigate x2

	Crew Experience							
Race	Green		Line		Veteran		Elite	
	BAB	Skills	BAB	Skills	BAB	Skills	BAB	Skills
Dilgar	+3	+4	+5	+8	+8/+3	+10	+10/+5	+12

To avoid generating statistics for every single crewmember in a Dilgar ground vehicle, use the following table. It is expected that the crew of a vehicle designated as a command vehicle, or nominated command individual on board a vehicle, will be one level higher than their colleagues.

Ground Forces

League and Earth-born historians, when considering the progression of the Dilgar war, do not often mention the ground and air forces of the Dilgar Imperium. The reasoning for this is understandable, as much of the military campaign focused on space superiority and the bombing of worlds from orbit. When that lengthy part of a military strike was completed, an invasion could begin to either acquire or neutralise any civilians or military structures that had somehow survived. These battered forces would in all probability be in a sorry state, with ineffective command structures and damaged supply lines.

Unlike where the Dilgar naval forces are concerned, the Dilgar ground forces had very little practical experience in the run-up to the invasion of Alaca in 2228. The Naval forces of the Imperium were able to cut their teeth and hone their tactics in the Raider Wars, but no such opportunity was present for the Dilgar ground forces to 'blood' their troops, aside from mercenary actions conducted on behalf of other races, such as the Centauri Republic.

It is common for Dilgar ground forces to be painted in camouflage paints and colours similar to that of other races, in particular those of EarthForce. The Dilgar's technical abilities are not so great that simple battlefield camouflage is an excessive expenditure of time and effort. Unlike their ground based compatriots, Dilgar atmospheric vehicles rarely bother with camouflage, relying on speed to keep them safe from harm.

The structure of Dilgar ground units still reflects the predisposition towards grouping units together into Pentacans, but the actual implementation of this is much less rigorous than that operated by their space fleet. The considered opinion is that ground based warfare, to be wholly successful, has to be flexible to achieve the required goal under a variety of different settings, situations and locations.

Vehicle Crews
Whilst having considerably less experience than spacecraft crews, Dilgar ground personnel are no less focused on the tasks instructed of them by their seniors. Ground crews are sometimes seen in a lesser capacity, with land-based operations not having the same level of prestige.

Warmaster Kurro'Don

Helming the command for Ground Forces is Warmaster Kurro'Don. A former Battle Commander in charge of a vehicle regiment, Kurro'Don achieved his promotion to the War Council by nothing short of extensive hard work. Battlefield experience in mercenary service to the Centauri has given him eyes in the back of his head; Kurro'Don often praised himself up for any unit under his charge never failing on the field of battle. This trait does not sit well with the troops under his command, especially when he all but taunts them with the glory they have achieved on his behalf.

Kurro'Don is a hard and unpleasant taskmaster, and is seen by those soliders under his charge as having risen through the ranks for some reason other than his proven ability. That said, Kurro'Don is still a competent soldier, and is well versed in small arms tactics, in particular with handling the chief weapon of the Dilgar ground forces, the Bolter Rifle.

If Kurro'Don has one problem when dealing with the other members of the War Council, it is with his diplomatic manner. His time in the ground forces, where his words were typically obeyed without question, led to him not developing the skills to argue and defend his case. To the more intelligent members of the War Council, such as Warmasters Jeddu'Baran and Jha'Dur, Kurro'Don's true benefit is that he carries a vote when reaching an agreement has failed.

Warmaster Kurro'Don
7th Level Dilgar Officer / 3rd Level Dilgar War Scientist
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +10/+5 melee, +9/+4 ranged
Special Qualities:
Branch Specialisation (Ground), Death over Compassion, Low Light Vision, Rallying Call, Scientific Endeavours (Knowledge: Alien Life x1)
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +10
Abilities: Dex 10, Str 12, Con 15, Int 17, Wis 13, Cha 12
Skills: Computer Use +9, Concentration +6, Diplomacy +5, Drive +10, Intimidate +14, Knowledge (Alien Life) +6, Knowledge (Military) +11, Listen +8, Medical +6, Pilot

+1, Sense Motive +11, Spot +13, Survival +2, Technical (Engineering) +7, Technical (Mechanical) +8
Feats: Alertness, Sixth Sense, Toughness, Vehicle Combat, Weapon Focus (Bolter Rifle), Weapon Proficiency (Vehicle), Weapon Specialisation (Bolter Rifle)

Logistical Operations

Whilst the Warmaster in charge of Grand Strategy may hold the most important position on the War Council, nothing could be done without the support of Logistical Operations. Charged with the immense task of keeping the Dilgar war machine running, Logistical Operations carry out their tasks with very little public recognition for the work they do.

Whilst this division may have much public acknowledgement, when the new homeworld is claimed then every single Dilgar will have personal contact with Logistical Operations. Co-ordinated with the Office of Alien Studies, Athraskala Heavy Bombers will be emptied of all ordinance and converted into mass evacuation transports, to carry both Dilgar citizens and essential equipment

This plan will evacuate the Emperor and the royal family first, as well as enough individuals to support them. Following them will be strict representations of society, which is something that many Magistrates are unhappy with. With the exception of slaves of Rittacan and Kathran origin, any Dilgar has in theory as equal chance as another of being relocated first. Logistical Operations view of the plan, perhaps the most impartial one that they could have come up with, ensures that if the supernova occurs during the operation, then enough of the structure of Dilgar society exists on their new world to support the Imperium through an unavoidable period of initial weakness.

The entirety of the plan has been revealed to the Emperor, Consuls and Pro-Consuls, but not the Magistrates in the Assembly yet. The key aspects have been explained to them, but the actual detail has been kept a closely guarded secret. The expectation amongst the War Council is that some Magistrates would attempt to perverse the course of the evacuation if they knew the full outline. The War Council has already decided that it will hand any attempts for bribery or blackmail over to Covert Ops, who will deal with the situation in the bloodiest manner possible.

Logistical Operations has no specific divisions. All of its energies are charged into keeping Naval Command and Ground Forces supplied with all of their needs, directed by Grand Strategy and in co-ordination with War Production. When a new home is found, a pre-determined half of Logistical Operations will be pulled onto newer duties.

Warmaster Burro'Don

Hailing from the same region of Thraza as the Warmaster commanding the ground forces of the Dilgar Imperium, Burro'Don is a smooth negotiator and a will to get things done his way. In charge of Logistical Operations, he is well aware that his particular command is predominantly there to support the others,

The agreement for the evacuation plan was his idea, and one that he burned many bridges to ensure got passed by the War Council. He fully expects some Dilgar to attempt to circumvent the evacuation plan, and is ready to deal with them personally if the individual holding the command of Covert Actions is unable or unwilling to act. Whilst the rest of the War Council holds the keys to finding a new homeworld, Burro'Don knows that he holds the key to making the transition possible, which is a monumental challenge perhaps greater than one single Dilgar to take responsibility for..

Warmaster Burro'Don
6th Level Dilgar Officer / 3rd Level Dilgar War Scientist.
Hit Points: 19
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +9/+4 melee, +8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Death over Compassion, Low Light Vision, Rallying Call, Scientific Endeavours (Knowledge: Military)
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +3, Will +12
Abilities: Dex 10, Str 12, Con 10, Int 16, Wis 16, Cha 13
Skills: Bluff +4, Computer Use +12, Concentration +8, Diplomacy +15, Gather Information +3, Intimidate +12, Knowledge (Military), +6, Medical +7, Sense Motive +14, Spot +8, Technical (Electronics) +7, Technical (Engineering) +8, Technical (Mechanical) +9, Technical (Space Travel) +9
Feats: Act of Desperation, Alertness, Data Access, Dilgar Lucky, Driven, Skill Focus (Diplomacy, Sense Motive), Toughness,

War Production

With Logistical Operations commanding supply routes, and Naval Command charged with the expansion of the Dilgar Imperium, something must provide them all with the means to do the bidding of the War Council and the Emperor. If Grand Strategy is the mind of the War Council and Logistical Operations is the lifeblood of the War Council, then War Production is the heart. If it ever stopped beating, then the rest of the body could not survive.

War Production enjoys close relations with many of the other divisions within the War Council. Communications with Naval Command and Grand Strategy are essential, as the correct vessels and variants must be produced to give the Imperium the greatest chance of success. Interaction with Training and Recruitment is essential so that the highest level of interfacing can be achieved

between the vessels they produce and the next generation of Dilgar crews. A close technical relationship is essential between War Production and Research and Development, so that the specifications of new vessels and designs can be followed to the letter.

War Production employs the highest number of civilians, all charged with starship manufacture. Morale is high in War Production, for every civilian knows that their responsibility is creating more than the future prosperity of the Dilgar race; it is their very survival that depends on their hard work. Many civilians within War Production work longer than their required hours, come into work on their days off, even their families come in to offer what assistance they can. For the million or so individuals that are currently working in War Production, the actual labour that War Production commands is closer to two million, based off this unregulated and unofficial work.

Warmaster Jella'Tar

Warmaster Jella'Tar in charge of the command for War Production, was well aware of this dedication. He successfully argued that a good number of them need to be evacuated first, to provide an infrastructure to allow the the resettlement to begin. A former Pentacan Battle Captain, he was promoted to the War Council, where he studied keenly under the previous Warmaster for War Production. Knowledgeable about starbase construction, Jella'Tar is often underestimated by the other Warmasters, often to their cost.

Warmaster Jella'Tar
8th Level Dilgar Officer / 4rd Level Dilgar War Scientist.
Hit Points: 27
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +13/+8/+3 melee, +12/+7/+2 ranged
Special Qualities:
Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Death over Compassion, Low Light Vision, Rallying Call, Scientific Endeavours (Knowledge: Structural Engineering x1), Way of Command
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +5, Will +12
Abilities: Dex 10, Str 12, Con 10, Int 16, Wis 14, Cha 11
Skills: Bluff +3, Computer Use +16, Concentration +6, Diplomacy +15, Drive +2, Intimidate +15, Knowledge (Structural Engineering) +16, Listen +10, Medical +8, Pilot +3, Sense Motive +10, Spot +13, Technical (Engineering) +7, Technical (Space Travel) +9
Feats: Alertness, Fire Control, Lightning Reflexes, Point Blank Shot, Spacecraft Proficiency, Skill Focus (Computer Use, Diplomacy, Knowledge: Structural Engineering), Toughness

Many of these hardworking individuals within War Production will be in the first batches to be evacuated, unknown to them. The ability to mine, craft and manufacture will be critical in the first few years in the life of their new homeworld, to both create an infrastructure for the Dilgar race to prosper as well as keep the Dilgar military in new vessels, spare parts and upgrades.

War Production is divided into three key areas:

Office of Acquisitions

The first office is charged with the actual harnessing of the raw materials required. Most of the civilian workers in this office are civilian, commonly miners, farmers, and smelting plant workers employed directly by the War Council, outside the scope and responsibility of their local Magistrates. These individuals deal with the raw materials that are necessary to keep the Dilgar functioning.

Approximately a third of the Dilgar civilians within War Production work within this office.

Office of Materials

The second office within War Production takes the results produced by the first, creating the raw physical components that will make up the mighty Dilgar fleet, weapons, and many of the other tools of war. Most of the civilian workers in this area are from semi-skilled professions, some in a support capacity. They are well aware that the more parts and components they can turn out, the faster that War Production will be able to supply new vessels to the Dilgar military and weapons to its soldiers. Of course, speed sacrifices quality, and Dilgar military officers working for War Production are ever alert for shoddy workmanship. Luckily, the attention to detail held by workers within this office is high, and a respectable level of quality is maintained.

Approximately a sixth of the Dilgar civilians within War Production work within this office.

Office of Manufacture

Encompassing everything from the development of bolter recharge circuits through to whole starships, the Office of Manufacture is responsible for the crafting the gauntlet to fit the curled fist of the Dilgar military. Many Dilgar private companies are sub-contracted to provide technical expertise and designs to the Office of Manufacture, being paid the barest minimum to ensure their continued co-operation and support.

These companies are well aware that if they quibbled about their pay, then their businesses would be terminated and their chief executive officers arrested as traitors within the hour. This fact helps keeps these essential supporters to the work of the Office of Manufacture's in line.

Half of the Dilgar civilians within War Production work in this particular office. A high level of technical competency is required to correctly assemble the weapons of war. A sizeable number, in the tens of thousands, are skilled in working in zero gravity, to build the very ships that will carry loyal Dilgar subjects into battle against their enemies. Whilst aspects of their work, in particular the hours, are

not particularly pleasing, like the other offices within War Production it is accepted that if they run out of time, and the Dilgar race must die, then at least they will have a clear conscience that they did all they can in the time they had.

Training & Recruitment

With Logistical Operations and War Production able to supply fleets of vessels when required, a similar requirement from within the War Council is to provide crews for Naval Command and fresh recruits for Ground Forces. This responsibility is owned by Training & Recruitment.

Training & Recruitment also played an active part in one of the governmental services, specifically the Imperial Recruitment Arm. Whilst this area is nominally under civilian control, the reality as mentioned previously is different.

Warmaster Keliun'Bar

Warmaster Keliun'Bar is in charge of the Training and Recruitment command on the War Council. His active phase in the military was shorter than most, although it would be wrong to assume that was due to any deficiency on his part. His family had important historical ties to the royal family, and occasionally this historic muscle was flexed.

A keen student of astrophysics, Keliun'Bar is more concerned with the how than the why. Keliun'Bar prides himself on being a true Dilgar, and can often be considered to be a perfect example of Dilgar pride and arrogance. He is a bully and a tyrant, although it is fair to say few Dilgar are not. He also possesses a certain amount of luck, succeeding where others expect him or any other Dilgar to fail.

Warmaster Keliun'Bar
4th Level Dilgar Officer/ 10th Level Dilgar War Scientist.
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: +12/+7/+2 melee, +13/+8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities:
Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Death Over Compassion, Low Light Vision, Manner of the Beast, Measure of Imperium, Prime Dilgar, Rallying Call, Scientific Endeavours (Knowl edge(Astrophysics)), Way of Command
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +6, Will +17
Abilities: Dex 12, Str 10, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 16, Cha 12
Skills: Bluff +9, Computer Use +8, Concentration +4, Diplomacy +4, Intimidate +21, Knowledge (Astrophysics) +14, Listen +11, Medical +11, Sense Motive +18, Spot +10, Survival +7, Technical (Electronics) +7, Technical (Space Travel) +12
Feats: Alertness, Data Access, Dilgar Lucky, Improved Unarmed Strike, Iron Will, Nerves of Steel, Point Blank Shot, Skill Focus (Intimidate, Sense Motive), Spacecraft Proficiency, Toughness

Office of Training

This office continually monitors the instruction that is given at Pre-Indoctrination and Indoctrination centres across the Imperium. No process or policy is outside the scope of review, for the aim of training crews and soldiers before they take up their respective assignments cannot be compromised. Free-thinking is encouraged, although such thoughts against the state are dealt with harshly. Training is keen to promote pain as a teaching tool and always as a punishment for poor performance, simply because it is cheap and has proven to be vastly effective.

Office of Recruitment

With a chief mandate of maintaining a steady flow of new recruits to the armed forces, the Office of Recruitment is amazingly pro-active in this regard. No educational centre is safe from its prying eyes, no student or infant able to avoid the gaze of the Office of Recruitment if it decides to scrutinise them. The War Council, and indeed the Dilgar military, is viewed as being as an elite and historically important institution, and the Office of Recruitment wishes to enforce this in any way they can.

Also part of their responsibility is public relations, as surprising as that may sound within a military organisation. A motivated populace make better fighters and offer more recruits than one that is demoralised and unwilling to fight. Whilst public relations, it may be argued, should have no place in an army, given the important of the current fight such things must be laid aside for the war effort to be conducted as quickly and efficiently as possible. Conscriptions have been considered, but as yet have proved unnecessary, as so many Dilgar have signed up to fight as of 2228 that no forced recruitments have been judged necessary. The Office of Recruitment is well aware that this situation could change at any time.

Research and Development

Historically, the most renowned Command within the War Council was held by Warmaster Jha'Dur, Deathwalker herself. This department was required to provide new weapons and technologies for use by the war effort, on every conceivable level. No invention or discovery fell outside the scope of their remit. Whether it was new fighter craft, new types of bolter weaponry, or even biological weapons, all were to be considered for use by the War Council in the coming war.

Warmaster Jha'Dur

It is ironic that, without her knowledge of early events, Jha'Dur was actually born as part of a medical experiment herself. Jha'Dur and her three brothers, Yen'Ra and Irth'Tor, were all experimented on as they were growing, even before

they were born. Surprisingly, Jha'Dur was not the most intelligent of the three, that title belonged to Yen'Ra, who displayed a flair for mathematics. Irth'Tor, who an infant Jha'Dur was the only comforting friend in their crèche, proved to be a born troublemaker and was removed, never to bee seen again.

Jha'Dur was first diagnosed as having mental problems early in life, caused by a neuro-chemical imbalance but also her childhood, as lacking as it was in parental influences. Drugs were required, and there was no date given at which this prescription would end. Whether it was a result of these drugs, or of something within her mind that had snapped, or perhaps even another mental condition entirely, Jha'Dur started to exhibit a cold focus on improving herself as well as a streak of viciousness that seemed to know no bounds. A true bully, any other student who could prove to be a threat to Jha'Dur, even it was academically, met with accidents or suffered a beating. This followed her through her life, even through Pre-Indoctrination and later through her time at the Indoctrination centre.

Also worth noting was that Jha'Dur surrounded herself with supporters, but these were not mere lackeys. Those brighter, more capable students who befriended her for some unexplained reason were content with her taking the lead, and the credit, for achievements made on behalf of them all. This model, of Jha'Dur and her supporters, followed her through schooling and her military career without exception. Even when she graduated from Indoctrination, and eventually assumed a junior officer position on her first starship, she displayed a lack of instinctive command ability, instead preferring to speak to her fellows privately then present a plan as her own. When the plan fell through, Jha'Dur did not blame her fellows, instead accepting the consequences for failure. This group, referred to some in the Dilgar military as Jha'Dur's 'advisers', were not fixed, fluctuating purely on circumstance and situation.

Cutting her teeth in the Raider Wars, Jha'Dur came to the attention of those in the upper echelons of the Dilgar military, the War Council themselves. Her talents led her back to Omelos, and what seemed like the end of her life, when she was snubbed to command the first of the new Mishakur dreadnoughts, was actually the continuation of her scientific career on a level she did not expect. She was apprenticed to Warmaster Voth'An, who shared Jha'dur's ruthlessness and contempt for lesser beings. Jha'Dur, effectively leading of Research and Development, turned out several innovative designs, new weaponry and improved fighters.

Jha'Dur assumed the role of Warmaster, upon the retirement of her mentor Voth'An. She assembled massive research teams, to collect all resources that could be useful to the Dilgar Imperium and put them to the most effective use in short order. Any technological advances that were found were to be put to use; in short, exploitation was the order of the day. Morality played no part in this, and that was why Voth'An had selected Jha'Dur as her replacement.

Jha'Dur is a competent enough Warmaster, but possesses little flair or imagination in military matters above and beyond accepted textbook tactics. She is more than obsessed with death, bathing in it like the Pharoahs of ancient Earth history had done with asses' milk. Ironically, her final achievement to the galaxy will be to offer eternal life, shrouded in death. As a scientist, researcher and butcher she is without equal, during the whole of the Dilgar War.

Warmaster Jha'Dur (as of 2228)
6th Level Dilgar Officer/ 8th Level Dilgar War Scientist
Hit Points: 30
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 16 (+6 Reflex)
Attacks: +13/+8/+3 melee, +13/+8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities:
Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Death Over Compassion, Low Light Vision, Manner of the Beast, Measure of Imperium, Rallying Call, Scientific Endeavours (Knowledge(Astrophysics)), Way of Command
Saves: Fort +7, Ref +6, Will +15
Abilities: Dex 13, Str 12, Con 12, Int 19, Wis 17, Cha 12
Skills: Computer Use +12, Concentration +5, Diplomacy +16, Hide +2, Intimidate +19, Knowledge (Alief Life) +15, Knowledge (Cybernetics) +15, Knowledge (Genetics) +12, Knowledge (Military) +8, Listen +11, Medical +23, Move Silently +2, Pilot +3, Sense Motive +10, Spot +17, Technical (Electronics) +12, Technical (Engineering) +6, Technical (Space Travel) +12
Feats: Alertness, Alien Anatomy, Genetic Matching (Intelligence), Manipulative, Ruthless, Skill Focus (Knowledge: Alien Life, Knowledge: Cybernetics, Medical), Toughness

Office of Biological Studies

Tho'Ran, a long-time supporter of Jha'Dur, commands the Office of Biological Studies. Tho'Ran took up position as head of this office after the previous post holder authorised the trial release of a Drazi disease, called Voon, into a subset of the Drazi population in the 2220's without the consent or approval of the Warmaster. Such a disease, if it was traced back to the Dilgar, could have pre-empted the calculated invasion by encouraging a Drazi response before the War Council was ready.

Scientific experiments on kidnapped sentients, implantation of technological devices, surgical experiments that own more to medieval-type tortures than anything else are standard within the Office of Biological Studies. The development of new and deadlier chemical and biological agents are Tho'Ran's passion, which he shares with Jha'Dur. The Warmaster herself spends over half of her time personally involved with the work of the Office of Biological Studies, impressive given the time she is forced to allocate to her duties as a Warmaster.

One item, which Tho'Ran is continually investigating, is the DNA sequence of the telepaths of Rittacan and

Kathran descent. This is his personal project, and despite the dissection of several victims Tho'Ran is close to admitting defeat. His attempts to create a Dilgar telepath without the presence of the Rittacan DNA sequence have met with nothing less than total failure.

Tho'Ran has no morals at all, and admires Jha'Dur and her devotion to scientific discovery, no matter the cost. A weak child, Tho'Ran learned the hard way to overcome his initial difficulties, and like Jha'Dur trains daily to keep himself fit. Tho'Ran is also an accomplished martial artist, and is as brutal and callous during training as he is during his working endeavours.

Office of Military Applications

Military Applications have the chief responsibility of always being ahead of the game, providing the Dilgar war machine with the next generation of star craft, weapons and ground vehicles.

Numbering several thousand scientists, researchers and engineers, Military Applications used civilian contractors where desirable to meet Jha'Dur's deadlines for new work. They have immense testing facilities, although are encouraged to use live targets and live situations to test their inventions and creations. Some scientists find this distasteful, but the order is for live testing to be considered as valid as any other.

Ehrol'ki is one of the newest individuals within Jha'Dur's inner circle, but in the short amount of time he has been worked for the Warmaster who would become Deathwalker he has made a name for himself. Painfully shy, with a tragic childhood, he is an expert in fighter propulsion systems and energy distribution principles, which made him a perfect choice to work alongside Jha'Dur developing new items of technological significance, including the Heavy Bolter and the Thorun class 'Dartfighter', of which the upgraded engine array was his own personal design.

He is painfully aware of Jha'Dur's reputation, and is sometimes concerned that if his star rises too much, she will snub it out, and him, like a weak, flickering candle. His assessment in this regard is quite correct.

Communications

Charged with watching both allies and enemies, communications often serves an unglamourous role in warfare, but is as essential as any other. Without the usage of encryption routines and other such artefacts, all battle plans would be laid open for the enemy to dissect at their leisure. For this task, Warmaster Yu'Dun is the perfect choice.

Warmaster Yu'Dun

A highly intelligent individual, Yu'Dun's ability to handle data and reach conclusions were noticed when she was in her early teens. Recruited specifically for communication work by the military, she proved herself a valuable acquisition, by decoding alien signals and then proceeding to translate them. The obligatory tour of duty on a Jashakar proved that her considerable talents lay elsewhere.

In her early teens, Yu'Dun was tested for telepathy, and found to be free from the psychic gift. However, several months later she began to gain a faint but noticeable awareness of those around her, and she suspected that she was a latent telepath. Yu'Dun suspected that her grandmother had consorted with a Rittacan slave, but the truth was literally in her mind. She had the genetic makeup of a Rittacan in her body, a secret which if it ever came out would cause her to resign her position on the War Council. Warmaster Yu'Dun proved herself to have a gift with alien languages, a skill that some Dilgar found to be distasteful, almost as if she had contaminated herself by learning other languages. If they knew the truth about her racial origins, then their opinion of her would have worsened a dozen-fold.

Privately, Warmaster Yu'Dun is tired of the war effort and wants to focus on something other than the killing of billions. Her involvement with alien languages has opened up questions, which combined with her racial heritage give her few answers. Knowing that any sign of weakness or her racial heritage would be pounced upon, she continues to speak like a true Dilgar to others, even though she is unsure of the very words she speaks. Regardless of her own personal beliefs, many would claim that she is as guilty as any other Dilgar in the atrocities to soon be committed.

Warmaster Yu'Dun
9th Level Dilgar Officer
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +9/+4 melee, +10/+5 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (fleet), Low Light Vision, Rallying Call, Way of Command
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +4, Will +8
Abilities: Dex 12, Str 10, Con 13, Int 17, Wis 15, Cha 13
Skills:
Feats: Alertness, Data Access, Latent Telepath, Linguist, Resist Scan, Skill Focus (Computer Use), Toughness

The Linguistics feat is used to represent a character who has a knack for learning languages, be they from races still alive or a million years dead. For details of this feat, see the Babylon 5: Crusade series book.

Office of Encryption

Almost all those who work within the Office of Encryption have some ability in code-breaking, and the ability to apply secure algorithms to messages, with the aim of preventing them being decoded by enemy spies and listening devices.

In war, the delivery of safe communications and the counter-activity against enemy signals, namely breaking them, rarely gains the prominence it deserves. In Earth history, the capture of an Enigma machine in World War 2 by the Allies had a beneficial effect on their war effort. Equally, the Dilgar War could have been made or lost on the resistance of a single communiqué. As it was, EarthForce defeated Dilgar security procedures during the war, which led them to ascertain that Warmaster Jha'Dur had fled, even though fake communications were still being sent to assure the rest of the Dilgar fleet that she was still fighting alongside them.

Much of the work undertaken by Encryption was performed in the background. Those who undertook this work tended to be highly intelligent Dilgar, often hand-picked from their education system if a dispensation towards mathematics and problem-solving was displayed at an early age.

Office of Surveillance

Lesser in terms of importance than the Office of Encryption, Surveillance is charged with monitoring both Dilgar civilian and alien civilian communication streams. News broadcasts, documentary programming and other public information mediums would be a great source of information in the coming war; not necessarily for what is shown, but also for what is *not* shown.

This is an arduous task for the several thousand who work in Surveillance, whether they are listening in on news reports or communication channels whose encryption algorithms have been cracked by the Office of Encryption. It may be a call between two lovers, an order for food, a supply requisition or a military communication, even casual information is useful to depict the makeup of an alien race. Anything they find is passed onto the Office of Alien Studies for consideration.

Of a more serious note, and one that has never been disclosed to the general Dilgar public, is that the Office of Surveillance is spying on them. Paranoid about a fifth column operating on their world, to unseat both the War Council and the Emperor, the Office of Surveillance spies on their own, ensuring that nothing interferes with their goals. Loyalty tests are conducted frequently on those who work for the Office of Surveillance, as they would be a perfect target for infiltration.

Covert Operations

The darkest art, Covert Operations handle the precise military work that none of the other avenues covered by the War Council can attempt. Whether it was an insurgent, a captain whose loyalty had come into question, or even a Magistrate who had been unsupportive of the war effort, these individuals or groups needed to be dealt with, quickly and efficiently.

The Office of Surveillance is perhaps the closest sub-office that Covert Operations is involved with. Communications are essential to prove the guilt or innocence of a target, but are also essential to providing an outline of the subject's movements, preferences, anything which can aide Covert Operations in planning a strike.

Whilst some actions were intended to be focused on the Dilgar people as a whole, should they every get out of line, a great deal of time and effort was expended on studying alien combat tactics and procedures. It was boasted that if required a Covert Operations specialist could sneak onto Zhabar, take a member of the Shadak hostage, consume one of their internal organs and then be off-world before any living Drazi realised what had transpired. This was largely bluff, as Covert Operations performed little of these tasks during the war, their efforts focused mostly on the efforts and loyalties of their own people. One of their main tasks was ensuring that a rumoured fifth column, which the War Council was convinced existed in some form, was dealt with. As far as Covert Operations were concerned, this may have been a bluff by the other Warmasters to keep them from investigating their own affairs.

The truth behind the rumoured fifth column is that Covert Operations, or at least a trusted percentage of them, knew that there was actually a secret movement that planned to depose the War Council and sue for peace. This posed perhaps the greatest threat to the war effort as far as Covert Operations were concerned, actually more than the navies of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. If the news about the fifth column ever became public, then morale across the whole Dilgar race would be effected. Productivity would fall dramatically, and so would potential recruitment. The damage that this group could do the War Council themselves was minimal, in sharp contrast to the potential huge impairment of the war effort and the continued goodwill of the Dilgar people.

To Covert Operations, this evil growth needed to be silenced, and thus was done so cleanly and swiftly. Chemical leaks, accidents caused by negligence and unexploded weapons from the Dilgar wars of two centuries before were some of the reasons given by Covert Operations to handle their activities against this fifth column.

Covert Operations officially had no sub-offices. Had this been the case, an interested party would have been able to predict the actions of that office if they had come to the attention of Covert Operations.

Warmaster Ven'Tur

Warmaster Ven'Tur heads up the Covert Operations command on the War Council, a former mercenary in the employ of the Centauri Republic. He was partly responsible for securing the information which guaranteed the Centauri's lack of involvement in the Dilgar War. Particularly ruthless even for a Dilgar, Ven'Tur is a perfect choice to investigate threats to the Dilgar from both externally and internally. Shrewd with his information, Ven'Tur does not always pass on the secrets he has learned, amassing them as evidence in case it is needed.

Warmaster Ven'Tur
5th Level Dilgar Officer / 6th Level Dilgar Agent
Hit Points: 31
Initiative: +1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 17 (+7 Reflex)
Attacks: +9/+4 melee, +10/+5 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (ground), Low Light Vision, Rallying Call, Security Systems, Sneak Attack (+1d6)
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +7, Will +8
Abilities: Dex 13, Str 11, Con 13, Int 15, Wis 14, Cha 15
Skills: Bluff +9, Computer Use +6, Concentration +5, Forgery +6, Gather Information +13, Hide +4, Intimidate +15, Listen +12, Search +8, Sense Motive +10, Sleight of Hand +6, Speak Centauri, Spot +20, Technical (Electronics) +12
Feats: Alertness, Ruthless, Toughness, Skill Focus (Gather Information, Spot), Weapon Focus (Bolter Rifle)

WORLDS OF THE DILGAR

Introduction

The statistics and details for Omelos, the doomed homeworld of the Dilgar, are presented as they were when the Dilgar began their war, before the very surface was stripped off their world by their exploding sun. The other worlds that are in the at least nominal Dilgar control are also included here, and represent the state of the Dilgar Imperium as of 2228.

Omelos

Planet: Omelos
Climate: Temperate to Wet, Warmer nearer Equator.
Weather Average: Mild 55%, Light Storms (Rain) 30%, Light Storms (Mixed) 10%, Severe Storms (Mixed) 5%

Technical Level: Advanced, multiple technologies, shipyard, weapon and ship design facilities.
Native Sentient Race: Dilgar (Thrazan, Kathran and Rittacan).
Dominant Government: Imperium. Civilian government falls under the current Emperor. All military and non-planetary affairs are the responsibility of a group of military leaders known as the War Council.

Notable Cities: Ogkarin (capital), Vhadar, Ujia, Ginasha Tirviki, Mor'inni, Rethsha Torvaka, Zha'Dak (uninhabited due to radiation damage), Tan'Azar (uninhabited due to radiation damage).
Population: 5 billion (80% is urban, 20% live in rural communities or on radiation damaged continent).
Cultural Information: The Dilgar need as a species to feel that they have a home, and even if the Dilgar had succeeded in finding a home then this dependency would have been transferred from Omelos. Many civilian Dilgar prefer to live inland, unless their living requires them to work at sea. Technological progress has not affected the Thrazan psyche in any major way, save giving them additional outlets for their cruelty and barbarity.

Planetary Notes:
With no moons, Omelos does not suffer or benefit from the tidal patterns that most other worlds with sentients. It is surmised that Omelos may have had moons at some point, as a trace amounts of debris point to an interstellar collision between two large objects in the skies above Omelos millions, perhaps even billions of years ago.

With light only tides caused by the gravitational force of the sun, the only time Omelos suffers from major storms is once every fourteen stellar months, by the closest planet passing them by. Whilst their orbits are hundreds of thousands of miles apart, the passing often causes storms and other weather problems, enhancing their natural severity.

Aside from this stellar oddity, Omelos is a stable enough planet, if a little wet. It has an above average water percentage for a habitable planet, and a good atmospheric mix. The land has three main landmasses, two of these larger continents separated by a thin channel that runs for several hundred miles. Each continent has a mix of environments, although the actual percentages vary.

The smallest single continent, as occupied by the Rittaca tribe features plains and mountains more than any other, but despite its size is the most fertile and resource rich of all the continents on Omelos. It is located in the southern hemisphere of Omelos, close to the small polar ice caps that Omelos has. The temperate environment, coupled with good drainage, ensures that the

ground is fertile enough to support plants and thus animals in abundance.

The other two continents, Kathra and Thraza feature a higher percentage of boggy moors and arid land respectively. These lands are geographically close, and the former is significantly larger than the latter. However, the most fertile lands on the Kathran continent are located a great distance away from what can be considered to be the Kathran/Thrazan front-line, and so until the cultured reaches an industrial age, and achieved the capability for long-distance transportation, this area would be unexploited.

Additional details of Omelos, and what little of it remained after their sun went nova, is detailed in the Babylon 5 Galactic Guide. Also included in this book are statistics for Innata IV, Rohric III and Wahant I, and details on the actual star systems themselves.

Whilst all of this is fine in theory, the reality is that over the years the Dilgar have effectively killed their world. The environmental damage done by the concentrated firing of nuclear missiles to lay waste to the Kathrans played havoc with the global environment; the resulting radiation damage drifted across most of the planetary landmasses, from Rittaca over the islands of Kibruna, Gran, Meloc, Bala, Kinna, Goros and most of the continent of Kathra. Even the continent of Thraza did not escape the damage caused by the unleashing of their weaponry, with the capital city of Ogkarin receiving a moderate yet significant period of radioactive activity.

Non-nuclear pollution is also rampant, with the Dilgar having expended significant amounts of fossil fuels during their race's industrial age. Smelting and other artefacts of industry resulted in a heady concoction of trace elements rising up into the atmosphere; it would indeed be an unwise Dilgar who regularly consumed rainwater without applying some sort of filtration mechanism to it.

Innata

Planet: Innata IV
Climate: Hot, Poisonous
Weather Average: Mild 70%, Light Storms (Rain) 10%, Light Storms (Mixed) 5%, Severe Storms (Mixed) 10%

Technical Level: Advanced.
Native Sentient Race: Dilgar (Thrazan, Kathran and Rittacan).
Dominant Government: War Council.

Notable Cities: None.
Population: 2,000
Cultural Information:
As a planetary installation, Innata IV is under the control of the War Council, specifically War Production. Despite the extreme conditions, Innata IV has a refinery which harvests the chemicals and gasses produced by this fiery satellite. It is located on possibly the most geologically stable area of planetary crust on the whole moon, and houses roughly eighteen hundred slaves and prisoners. The refinery installation has safety conditions which even the Centauri Republic would baulk at for its lowest classes.

The guards and members of administration staff who oversee this colony are perpetually bored, with little in the way of possible promotion or advancement until their allotted duty expires. Whilst they receive better than average food supplies (when compared to their slaves and prisoners they oversee, that is) and the best air recyclers

possible, there is a morale problem amongst the guards, with fights and incidents of alcohol and substance abuse common, which the bulky Administrator Mau'Ran simply cannot be bothered to address. More common than these incidents are those brutalities and denial of basic rights inflicted on the slaves and prisoners doomed to die on Innata IV.

Fatalities amongst the slaves and prisoners occur on an almost a day basis, and any of these injured workers that can stand are sent back out to work. Those who are too sick or injured to work are tossed into the nearest lava flow and a replacement summarily requested from Omelos. Typically, Innata is where prisoners are sent whom the Dilgar penal system has tired of punishing them, and these individuals have little or no worth as far as their genetic material is concerned.

Covert Operations often sends those whom it suspects of fifth column type activities, whether evidence exists or not, to Innata IV, safe in the knowledge that they will never escape or infect any other loyal Thrazans with their tales of rebellion and dissention. Often, those related to those suspects will also be sent to Innata IV.

Of course, very often Covert Operations is wrong, but as Dilgar generally value life so lowly compared to other civilisations they are not particularly concerned with any mistakes made.

A low, but still recognisable percentage of inmates at the Innata IV installation are slaves. Amazingly, these slaves are treated worse than some of the prisoners who are there to spend the rest of their lives extracting gases. The racist treatment of Rittacan and Kathran slaves still exists, even on the living hell which is Innata. To those poor individuals, purgatory would be a blessing rather than the existence they eke out here. Forced to eat the scraps of food which are tossed to them, or even sometimes the leftovers of the Thrazan slaves and prisoners, the average life expectancy of a Rittacan or Kathran slave is numbered in months. Even the barest of clothing is hard for them to acquire, which is often causes the horrendous afflictions which are suffered when dealing with the chemicals and gases endemic to Innata IV. In this instance, the hardiness of the Kathrans actually does them a disservice, for their natural resilience keeps them alive what is truly a living hell.

Planetary Notes: The Dilgar's first real planetary claim, Innata has little purpose in the grand scheme of things. A morale booster, if nothing more, Innata is a hot, poisonous wasteland, and is actually a moon which orbits a gas giant.

The cycle of day and night is difficult for those Dilgar on this world to get used to, as well as darkness by day, a quarter of the time of the Dilgar is spent orbiting behind the gas giant. The effects this has on the surface of Innata IV are considerable. The temperature drops over thirty degrees Centigrade, and the atmosphere, thick as it is with chemicals and gasses, becomes thicker and heavier as the effect of the cold takes hold. The surface of the world becomes dry and bitterly cold.

At all other times, conditions on Innata IV are blistering and intense. At last count, there were eighteen hundred active volcanoes on Innata IV, all spewing lava. The rates at which these eruptions occur are vastly different. Whilst some explode in the traditional violent fashion, some emit lava in a continuous stream, causing Dilgar scientists to question whether an underground 'lake' of lava, perhaps even a hundred or so miles across, is feeding these more sedate volcanoes. Two of Innata IV's volcanoes, larger than the rest combined, are so active that they frequently send their emissions up into the poisonous atmosphere, several miles high.

As far as planetary life is concerned, Innata IV has little prospect of supporting life naturally at its current stage of evolution, unable to produce or sustain anything larger or more genetically complex than bacteria. Whether the planetary core will become stable, and the surface will cool down enough to sustain life in a million year's time, and thus be able to support any type of life form is impossible to say.

Wahant

Planet: Wahant I
Climate: Cold, Moderate approaching equator.
Weather Average: Mild 90%, Light Storms (Rain) 8%, Severe Storms (Rain) 2%

Technical Level: Advanced, multiple technologies, shipyard, weapon and ship design facilities.
Native Sentient Race: Dilgar (Kathran and Rittacan).
Dominant Government: Imperium, an unelected body. Civilian government falls under the current Emperor. All military and planetary affairs are the responsibility of a group of military leaders known as the War Council.

Notable Cities: None.
Population: 3,000.
Cultural Information: Wahant would have remained uninhabited were it not for the wishes of the noted scientist Yun'Ar, who worked in the Imperial Research Arm. Her brilliant idea, which found favour with her superiors, was to investigate how a colony could grow and survive if it literally had to. Yun'Ar marketed this as an opportunity to study how an emergency settlement could survive and adapt, which would help out if the sun above Omelos started to flare earlier than predicted. Privately, a slight conducted by one of her mother's slaves against her was also a factor, leading to that particular slave being in the first batch of settlers sent to this cold, dead world.

No settlement on Wahant has survived more than a year, with the difficulty in growing crops proving repeatedly fatal to the newcomers. Rather than being viewed as a failure, and the whole concept

a naive one, Yun'Ar was acclaimed and then promoted for her idea. As well as testing agricultural methods, the methods that the settlers attempted and ultimately failed proving more satisfying to the War Council than computer based simulations. Every failed attempt was treated as a learning experience, possible due to the low importance in which the lives of the settlers was held anyway. This was of course poor consolation for those three thousand Rittacan and Kathran Dilgar whom were destined to die on Wahant every year.

Planetary Notes: As a result of its size, Wahant has a lighter than average gravity rating. Its surface is dry and cold, with lakes scattered across the planet's surface. None of these lakes ever formed together to create oceans, and given the cold state of Wahant's star, any melting of the planet's ice caps is highly unlikely.

Wahant has little weather, with occasional rains that often fall as snow away from the equator. There is not enough to properly keep any crops which grow on the surface sufficiently watered, so an irrigation or water distribution strategy would need to be adopted. The atmosphere is oxygen based, but because the atmosphere barely stretches two miles above the surface of Wahant it is not breathable without the aid of respiration devices.

There is little wildlife on Wahant, save for several varieties of furred rodent which consume particular grasses which often grow on near to the planet's numerous lakes. These rodents are docile, but are quite elusive.

Rohric

Planet: Rohric III
Climate: Hot.
Weather Average: Dry 55%, Mild 30%, Light Storms (Rain) 10%, Severe Storms (Mixed) 5%

Technical Level: Advanced, multiple technologies, shipyard, weapon and ship design facilities.
Native Sentient Race: Dilgar (Thrazan, Kathran and Rittacan).
Dominant Government: Imperium, an unelected body. Civilian government falls under the current Emperor. All military and planetary affairs are the responsibility of a group of military leaders known as the War Council.

Notable Cities: Rohric Base
Population: 5,193.
Cultural Information:
The initial belief of many Dilgar scientists, upon discovering that their sun was doomed, was that Rohric III offered the best opportunity to create a colony off-world. This impression was more than a touch optimistic, for the conditions on Rohric were proved to be intolerable. The problems which the scientists encountered were not insurmountable; with a significant initial expenditure, desalination plants could remove the vast quantities of salt from the water sources on Rohric.

The first (and only) settlement on Rohric III was only in existence for nine months. It transpired that the conditions there too irritating to warrant continuing. Airborne spores from the native fauna caused intense skin irritations in the settlers, to which the scientists behind the settlement attempt instructed air recyclers to be installed. This did not work, so the scientists upgraded the air recyclers to be more efficient. This did not work either, and the process continued six times over the course of the nine month period before the scientists gave up.

The settlers on Rohric III wanted desperately to succeed, for it meant that they would survive the annihilation threatening their homeworld. However, the effects of the spores caused so much distress that in the end the colony was abandoned. A military base is still in existence, but the tours of duty on this world are mercifully short.

Rohric III was a tragic blow to the Dilgar; if this world had been easier to live on, then perhaps their campaign of terror would never have occurred.

Planetary Notes:
A basking hot world, dry and salty, Rohric III is a harsh and unpleasant environment for any unprotected settler. Short of a fully sealed environment suit, the spores from the vegetation on the inhospitable planet are like sand in a storm, able to reach into every nook and cranny.

These plants, normally growing in shaded areas, are able to filter the salt out of the water in their environment. Twice per year, when the plants come into bloom, emit spores which are designed to fertilise one another and thus allow for fertilised seeds to be drifted away on the hot desert like winds. However, these spores are amazingly long lived, being able to survive for six of the planet's eleven month orbit around the local star. Therefore, there is a never a time when the irritating spores are not present in the atmosphere of Rohric III.

Spores of Rohric
Known Races Affected: Dilgar
Infection: Contact, Inhaled
Fortitude DC: 8
Incubation: 1d3 days
Damage: 1d2 hit points.

Rains are uncommon on Rohric III, the frequency increasing closer to extremes away from the planet's equator. The salt in the natural water comes from a high percentage of the mineral being found in the majority of the rocks on the surface of Rohric III. Also, with only one large ocean the remaining sources of water are isolated, and thus when the water evaporates from Rohric's lakes the salt is left behind. Whilst one could assume that the primary ocean on Rohric III would escape this fate, the fact that there are several submersed volcanoes in that same ocean ensures that the sea remains salty.

Dilgar Imperium Non-Player Characters

The following statistics allow Games Masters to represent Dilgar non-military characters in their own games, should the opportunity present itself. Depending on the timeframe that a game is played in, these statistics could be used to represent characters 'on the run'.

If a Games Master is running a non-canon campaign, whether set during the Dilgar War or in some fictitious setting after the fall of Omelos, the following can also be used to represent any meeting or relationships with the Dilgar civilian government.

Dilgar Diplomatic Aide

2nd Level Dilgar Diplomat
Hit Points: 9
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 10 (+0 Reflex)
Attacks: +1 melee, +1 ranged
Special Qualities: Contact, Low Light Vision
Saves: Fort +0, Ref +0, Will +3
Abilities: Str 11, Dex 11, Con 10, Int 14, Wis 10, Cha 12
Skills: Bluff +4, Computer Use +7, Diplomacy +9, Gather Information +4, Intimidate +6, Knowledge (Bureaucracy) +6, Listen +7, Move Silently +1, Sense Motive +5, Speak Dilgar, Spot +5
Feats: Alertness, Skill Focus (Diplomacy)

Dilgar Magistrate

5th Level Dilgar Diplomat / 1st Level Magistrate
Hit Points: 15
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +3 melee, +3 ranged
Special Qualities: Contact (x3), Improved Diplomacy, Low Light Vision, Power of Control
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +7
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 11, Con 10, Int 16, Wis 13, Cha 13
Skills: Appraise +4, Bluff +10, Computer Use +9, Diplomacy +10, Gather Information +9, Intimidate +12, Knowledge (Bureaucracy) +12, Listen +12, Sense Motive +10, Speak Dilgar, Spot +12
Feats: Alertness, Measure of Imperium, Persuasive, Verbal Assault

Dilgar Law Enforcement Officer

2nd Level Dilgar Agent
Hit Points: 12
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee, +1 ranged
Special Qualities: Low Light Vision, Security Systems
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +3, Will +1
Abilities: Str 13, Dex 11, Con 12, Int 16, Wis 12, Cha 12
Skills: Balance +1, Computer Use +8, Concentration +5, Drive +2, Gather Information +8, Intimidate +6, Listen +8, Move Silently +5, Search +10, Spot +8, Technical (Electronics) +8
Feats: Alertness, Investigator, Toughness
Standard Equipment: Rentil Pacifier

Dilgar Slave (Rittacan)

1st Level Dilgar (Rittacan) Lurker
Hit Points: 7
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 10 (+0 Reflex)
Attacks: -1 melee, +0 ranged
Special Qualities: Low Light Vision, Lurker's Knowledge
Saves: Fort +5, Ref 0, Will +1
Abilities: Str 9, Dex 10, Con 12, Int 14, Wis 12, Cha 10
Skills: Bluff +5, Escape Artist +4, Hide +4, Listen +7, Move Silently +4, Sense Motive +5, Spot +6, Profession (Manual Labourer) +9
Feats: Alertness, Great Fortitude, Life of a Slave, Skill Focus (Profession: Manual Labourer)

Dilgar History

Perhaps more so than any of the other younger race, the Dilgar were a race that by their very evolution became bred for warfare. For seventeen hundred years the Dilgar tribes quarreled with one another, over resources, land, and the simple desire to spill the innards of their opponent. This bloody history prepared the Dilgar to wage war on a galaxy, initially under the auspice of finding a habitable world to replace the place of their birth.

Before the age in which the Dilgar rose to dominance, there was little of note on their world to stand it apart from evolution on a dozen other worlds. One race rose to dominance, but it was what happened when that one race rose to dominance that would affect billions.

All dates are provided in the standard human Julian form, for ease of comparison.

The Age of Slaughter

The End of Roaming – 200 A.D. to 1261 A.D.

It was around the second century by the human Julian calender that the roving packs of Dilgar first began to settle down in various areas of their homeworld, divided as it was into three primary continents. These lands all had varying degree of natural resources, as well

as differing predators, flora and fauna that would test their inhabitants differently.

The first of the great Dilgar cities, Zha'Dak, was formed in 223 A.D, with a simple name that literally meant 'safe' in the tongue of the Rittacan tribe. Located on a small plateau, away from predators and high enough to spot a potential attack from afar, the placement of this settlement from which the Rittacans could grow was perfectly placed.

The continent populated by the Rittaca was blessed with many natural resources that a growing civilisation could benefit from. Fossil fuels, ideal for the future discovery of steam and electrical power, would benefit the Rittacans well into the future, should evolution be kind. Whilst the Rittacan lands had a dispensation towards wet weather and tall grasses, this would not prove to be a hindrance. The natural predators which infested other continents were only present in tiny numbers, separated from their kin when the Rittacan plates shifted many millennia before the tribes even discovered the concepts of fire, language and farming. This meant that the Rittacans became less used to the concept of warfare and constant struggles for survival, a trait which would cost them dearly in the long run.

Unlike the fortunate Rittacans, the Kathrans and Thrazans did not have it so easily. The two other main sub-races of Dilgar were located on tracts of land separated at the narrowest point by a channel just sixty miles wide. Both continents were less fertile than the distant lands of the Rittaca, and therefore it was inevitable that these two tribes would come into conflict over the less plentiful resources they possessed.

Both sides regularly launched raids on one another, initially to steal food, valuables and take captives. Over time, both sides needed some form of leadership, and both formed governments to better control their people, although in reality to better control the war effort against the foreign aggressor. The Thrazans grouped themselves under a single leader from the most powerful branch of the tribe, a virtual monarch. The Kathrans meanwhile bandied themselves under a group of experienced leaders.

These wars continued for several hundred years, a state of perpetual conflict that ebbed and flowed like the tide. Both sides trained to defend their villages, fortified their sea fronts, even the civilian Dilgar were instructed in rudimentary military arts. The tales of the opposition and what they had done to captives turned both the Kathrans and Thrazans into a bitter, suspicious people, traits that their cultures would find difficult to lay aside.

This time allowed both sides to make scientific advances, as warfare often provides discoveries that would have been impractical to prove and test in peacetime. The Kathrans were especially good at this, having made valuable leaps in metallurgy, creating bladed weapons that were literally a cut above and beyond those used by the Thrazans. This battlefield advantage allowed the Kathrans to make the first real difference in the ongoing war, by seizing a portion of the main Thrazan coastline, together with some outlying islands, and managing to hold them for several decades. The denial of ports along this stretch of coast had a crippling effect on the Thrazan's ability to launch a counter attack. Believing that change of order was coming, and scared of being put to the sword, several feudal Thrazan lords close to these captured lands swore fealty to the Kathran invaders, foolishly believing that their lives would be saved by a kind word.

In response, the current leader of the Thrazans swore an oath, that they would not rest until the last Kathran had been humbled, and could no longer call themselves a Dilgar. Then, and only then, would the Thrazan people ascend to their rightful place as the dominant force, and especially that of their leader. The leader, Riel'Kurna, denounced his former title and adopted the title of Regent. He announced that no Thrazan could hold the title of Emperor again until the Kathrans had been beaten. Regent Riel'Kurna did not expect that would take hundreds of years.

The Shadow War – 1262 A.D. to 1301 A.D

Away from the other two Dilgar tribes preoccupied with killing and maiming one another halfway around the world, the Rittaca were about to receive knowledge that would for most part die with their eventual enslavement, remaining only as rumour and legend.

Late one evening, Rittacan astronomers observed a series of flashing lights in the skies above their world. The timing of the battle, and the conditions in the skies above, meant that the Rittacans were clearly able to ascertain the truth; there was a war going on, and there were metallic vessels of some kind in the heavens above.

As if in response to their wonderment, a shooting star passed over the Rittacan capital of Zha'Dak. This star crashed deep into a primary mountain range a hundred leagues away from the main bulk of Rittacan inhabitation, and the population was in uproar over what had transpired, the presence of this huge star descending from the heavens impossible for the Rittacans to hide, even if they deemed it necessary. The meaning of this shooting star was whispered in serving houses, in work establishments, in the fields where crops were gathered and animal husbandry took place.

The answer to this riddle, as to what the shooting star truly meant, was answered not in a public but rather a private manner. One of the Rittacan leaders, a wise and open-minded individual named Nid'dur, received a guest in the middle of the night. Something told the sleepy Nid'dur that this was no dream, for the sign of a being of light floating in through his balcony doorway was too clear, too *perfect* to be a dream. It bore the face of a Dilgar, with wings that glowed like the sun that warmed their world at the height of mid-day.

The visitor spoke for the most part to Nid'dur in riddles, in what felt to Nid'dur like a soothing, almost parental tone. Something had happened in the mountain range on the edges of the Rittacan lands, and Nid'dur would need to ensure that no attempt was made by his people to find out what the shooting star had been, if it had been a star at all. In return, Nid'dur was promised a gift to the Rittacan people, and was imparted with some advice from this mysterious being of light, this traveller from lands afar.

As instructed, Nid'dur sent messengers out in the middle of the night, directing them to the very fringes of Rittacan control, instructing that the strange light and the mountain range where it had fell were to be left well alone. Taking riding beasts, the Rittacan messengers hurried to Nid'dur's bidding and saw that his will was obeyed. They, like those whom they passed on the message to, had no idea of why Nid'dur had made the instruction, but the word of this particular Rittacan was believed to be both informed and measured. Nid'dur had no idea of knowing that he had been selected for the visitation for these precise reasons by the being of light.

It was three full hours later when another light, slower and more controlled, descended from the heavens to exactly the same place where the shooting star had landed before. Against Nid'dur's express wishes, a group had travelled to the site, believing that it heralded Dilgar travellers from afar, and witnessed a battle between dark clothed warriors, their features hidden, and a strange creature that almost seemed like it did not belong in this material realm. It phased and shifted, sometimes illuminated by lights that came from strange-shaped crossbows. The beast was huge, five times taller than any living Dilgar. Despite its size, the beast was moving, and straight towards the Dilgar who had broken ranks to investigate. Attempting to flee, it cut through the fascinated Dilgar onlookers in seconds, leaving none alive.

From the relative safety of the Rittacan lands, Nid'dur and the rest of his Rittacan tribesmen looked on at the mountain range, waiting for dawn. The sun was not the first light in the sky that fateful morning, the sunrise beaten into existence by a great fiery radiance which shook the sky, and made the ground tremble. For that one moment Rittacan sages would insist that the night became as day, that the very sun itself had launched an attack on this place. The nuclear blast that the shrouded figures, members of the Anla-Shok, had left behind to cleanse the entire area of the taint of the Shadow Servant was perfect in execution, purging the whole area. The area contained more than just a taint of the Shadows, the Anla-Shok had discovered. The Shadows had been intent on constructing a base on this world, managed by their alien allies. The Anla-Shok had departed, doing their Entil'Zha no disservice in the dedication they put into their ordained task.

Several years passed by, and the events of that night passed into legend. Some Rittacans believed it to be nothing more than a great hallucination, brought about by something in the Dilgar wines harvested in the south of their lands. However, all who saw the lights knew that *something* strange, and both wonderful and terrifying had transpired that night. Nid'dur forgot much about much of that night, believing that his strange visitor would never return to fulfil the promise offered. He tried to convince himself that it was nothing more than a co-incidental dream, and that he was simply in error.

One night, almost nine years to that very night after he first appeared, Nid'dur's traveller returned, and spoke in much more direct tones, with less of the riddles that had been the manner before. The traveller gave his name, and said that he was a servant of order. Several individuals in the most outlying Rittacan tribes had been taken away from several nights, fitting with reports that Nid'dur had received, believing predators to be responsible. These individuals had been returned in perfect health, and would go on to live long and happy lives, and have children of their own. Nid'dur bid his Vorlon guest farewell, not having any real idea what the reward was. Perhaps, Nid'dur assumed, these Rittacans that had been taken away had been sick, and the traveller had healed them. In any case, Nid'dur watched the figure disappear, and fade into nothingness, after admitting that the gift would not be seen for a long time, after Nid'dur himself had died.

Although he tried to uncover exactly what had happened to those outlying visitors, the truth was not forthcoming. As the Vorlon had stated, the answer would not come in Nid'dur's lifetime, as the Rittacan leader died six years later from a flu brought on by an unusually harsh winter. This did nothing to prevent Nid'dur from becoming something of a cult figure, and his private notes, written on scraps of parchment, had reached the hands of elements in Rittacan society that wanted something greater than themselves to believe in.

The Time of Upheaval – 1301 A.D. to 1400 A.D.

Whilst a great portion of humanity dozens of light-years away were locked in crusades that were fought more on political will and for personal reasons than religious vision, the Thraza and Kathra tribes were still locked in their bitter, bloody feud that saw no sign of ending. The Thrazans had, over the course of a hundred years, managed to exorcise the Kathran presence from their lands, but at a truly terrible cost. The very fortifications that the Thraza had constructed to keep the Kathrans at bay, towers and fortresses of stone and rock, were now used to ensure that the Kathrans stayed. These constructions were used against their builders, but the Thrazan will was resolute, and saw through as the Kathrans grew tired of a distinct lack of progress. Food shortages, and a series of harsh winters, made a Kathran presence on the Thrazan mainland unsustainable. Basking in the glory of a victory brought about by the elements more than their own military skill, the Thrazans took great violent pleasure in confronting the descendants

of the Thrazan lords that had signed accords with the invading Kathrans many years. Retribution, even though years old, found itself to be truly brutal.

Life away from the frontlines in this continuing war was not without hardship for those members of the Thrazan and Kathran tribes not actively participating in the armed conflicts. A year after the captured Thrazan coastline was abandoned, a vicious plague swept the Kathran homeland, sending thousands of Kathrans into a coma-like sleep from which they never awoke. This plague would resurface many times in Dilgar history, with varying numbers of casualties. Initially it was blamed on the Thrazans, assumed to be some new devious weapon of war, a belief which gathered pace for many years until a report reached the Kathrans that the Thrazans had also suffered an outbreak of this strange malady.

The Thrazans had their own problems, namely in the sharp winters that had forced the Kathrans to return home. When the invaders departed, the winters started to grow longer, even affecting the summers in the south of the Thrazan lands. Harvests were truly poor, which actually led to famine amongst several of the more distant tribes. Like the plague that afflicted the Kathrans, situations like these had an effect on the balance of power between the Kathran and Thrazan tribes, by forcing them to periodically address their own internal needs rather than the eternal war with one another.

THE AGE OF INDUSTRY

The War on Peace – 1401 A.D. to 1403 A.D.

In 1401 A.D., a strange sight was spotted in the narrow channel that divided the Thrazan and Kathran domains. Tall sea-going vessels, with hulls made from both metal and wood, carried explorers from a far-off realm. They had learned the Kathran tongue, after rescuing a lost Kathran sea vessel years before, and returned some of the crew. These newcomers, who identified themselves as belonging from the Rittacan tribe, had come to both return the lost mariners and open negotiations for peaceful co-existence. They had arrived with grain stocks as a gift, together with knowledge of farming techniques that had boosted Rittacan harvests. They had even mastered advanced metallurgy, one step above what even the Kathrans, masters of iron and steel, had been able to manufacture. They sent ambassadors to both governments, offering to share all of this knowledge.

This race was clearly unknown to the Kathra, who received back their mariners with caution. The Thrazans were not surprised however by this newcomer, having received extensive reports from their spies. The Thrazans were well aware of the advances in technology that this far off tribe, the Rittacans, had made, and desired it for themselves. However, even the most bloodthirsty Thrazan commander was forced to acknowledge that there were only a small number of ways that this could be acquired.

The options were considered by the Thrazan warlords, but the brutal truth was that there was no physical way that they could conquer this more advanced (if apparently pacifistic) rival whilst preventing their lands from being conquered by the Kathra. It was also the general opinion of the warlords that the Kathran would in all probability have come to a similar conclusion. Therefore, without the knowledge of the visiting Rittacan ambassadors, a secret delegation was sent to the Kathran capital Shem'Azar, to discuss how to deal with this newcomer that had upset the bloody status quo that had existed for as long as the Thrazans had written records.

Both sides in this clandestine meeting were paranoid on two distinct counts. In the first instance, each believed that the Rittacan would offer the lions share of secrets and knowledge to the other. The second instance for suspicion and just as important was the concern that the Rittacans would keep their most advanced knowledge to themselves, after conducting what could be seen as an extensive scouting expedition on their main two rivals. As the Rittacan ambassadors departed for home, elements within the Thrazan and Kathran governments begun making invasion plans. Of course, the Thrazan military planners already had some albeit sketchy information on the Rittaca, thanks to their spy reports. The Thraza already knew coastal outlines, major rivers and centres of population of a sizeable chunk of the Rittacans' lands. They chose not to share this knowledge with their temporary partners, as there was no real or even perceived advantage in doing so.

In the spring and summer of 1403 respectively, the Thraza and Kathra invasion forces made landfall on Rittacan soil. Important headway was made in those few months, with the suspicions of both sides in the dubious alliance proving correct – the Rittaca were more than unskilled in the matter of warfare; they did not have the stomach for a fight. Both of the invaders knew they could not allow the passive inhabitants of this fertile land to gain a taste for bloodshed.

The Rittacan cities of Meta'kur, Shal'Brun and Bel'Nar fell to Kathran hordes within the month of their landing on Rittacan soil. The Thrazans had notable successes of their own, taking control of the coastal port of Fel'tor and the farming community of Kel'Par. Whilst the Kathran assaults were fast and deadly, relying on mass numbers of eager fighters, the Thrazan approach was much more measured, with a greater degree of planning and co-ordination than that exhibited by their Kathran associates. By the autumn of 1403, Thrazan losses were in their thousands, where Kathran losses were close to ten times that number. What passed for a Rittacan army was generally not a major obstacle. This poorly armed militia was primarily equipped with muskets of a primitive design; useful against full frontal assaults in which the militia could co-ordinate their fire against an approaching horde of foes. It was this firepower that caused so many deaths in the Kathran army.

Conversely, the Thrazans were much more adept at scouting operations, and strikes against ammunition dumps and the flanks of the enemy were worth the additional expenditure in time and effort.

The invasion slowed over the winter. However, rather than hide in their makeshift barracks and await the arrival of spring, the Thrazans elected to take advantage of this lull by going after softer targets. Their key aim was literally the burning of Rittacan villages. During these raids, which were sporadic in an attempt to unnerve their enemy, the Thrazans cut loose with the full fury of their hatred for their enemy, and some of that which had been delayed against the Kathrans. The acts perpetrated by the Thrazans were horrific by the standards of any other race in the galaxy, with acts of depravity and on a level of obscenity too horrific to retell.

In the spring of 1404, the southernmost Rittacan tribes were broken. Reports of the atrocities committed with no rhyme or reason had filtered down through those towns and villages that had been spared the random attacks of savagey. When the Thrazans legions resumed their invasion with renewed vengeance, they found that half their work had been done already; the Rittacans were a shattered people. It took an additional four months for the Thrazans to conquer their agreed portion of the Rittacan lands. The Thrazans were happy for the survivors to flee north, knowing that they would fall on the Kathran swords. Those that did not flee north found themselves without rights or representation, no courts to appeal to or advocates who would raise voices in their defence. Zha'Dak, their home city, was set on fire using oils from a nearby reserve. The citadel burned for eight straight days, until nothing was left that had not been touched by flame. All was ash.

The Return to Form – 1404 A.D. to 1698 A.D.

The lands once owned by the Rittacans were now the province of the invading Thrazan and Kathran forces, and any wish by those few Rittacans who were spared that peace would return were sadly mistaken. Within days of the war ending, the Thrazans and Kathrans started to launch minor raids on one another which escalated over a series of months. The land had already been stripped of all useful knowledge by the invaders, and was put to use making newer and deadlier weapons of war.

Chief amongst these acquired technologies that benefited the Thraza was advances in cartography, which would allow them to map out their domain fully for the first time. Allied with this was information about astronomy, as the Thrazans learned that the Rittacans were obsessed with all things above their world, as if they were waiting for a visitation of some kind. These two advances gave them the ability to navigate at sea with a much greater degree of accuracy, and attacks and raids on Kathran soil could be conducted more effectively. Rittacan slaves and some Kathran captives were put to work on building sea vessels, as these advances in knowledge meant that the Thrazans were no longer limited to attack up and down the channel that separated the two dominant nations.

Word of this new armada reached the Kathrans, courtesy of a well-paid spy network. The Kathrans were of the opinion that this new armada had one intent; to put an army onto an undefended section of the Kathran coastline and strike directly at the very heart of the Kathran government. A strike was required, and it required some ingenuity coupled with their own advances acquired from the Rittacans. The Rittacans had believed, but not proved, that it was possible to construct cities underwater if air could be kept underwater and prevented from rising to the surface. The Kathrans took this pipe dream and, on a cloudy autumn morning in 1458, three submerged vessels with air locked inside them surfaced in the middle of the Thrazan fleet, in their main military harbour. As well as air, these three submerged vessels had an additional cargo, oils taken from the same reserve that had been used by the Thrazans to burn the Rittacan capital over fifty years before. These submerged barges were set alight, ramming the new galleons and cutters. Most of the ships never had the opportunity to sail out of the harbour.

This setback damaged the general morale of the Thrazan people for years. In their arrogance, they had believed that their opponents were too stupid, indeed too bloodthirsty to attempt something so underhanded, devious, and so… Thrazan. The noble house was thrown into disarray and would have fallen had the current ruler, Regent Raz'Dur, not executed most of his cabinet and senior advisers. He believed that they were conspiring against him in any case, and felt safer replacing these key positions for now at least with members of his own family. Thus, in a ceremony in the Thrazan capital of Ogkarin, the heads of these betrayers were thrown off the ramparts around the main government buildings as a simple reminder to the Thrazan people what the penalty for treason was. The message was well received.

The Kathran scientists who had made these discoveries had done so by adopting a different tact with the Rittacan survivors than the Thrazans had. Whilst the majority of the imprisoned slaves in their lands were treated the same as their Thrazan fellows, the scientists and researchers were handled differently. They were given food, water, blankets and writing material; the bare essentials, but way above what their brethren could expect. Their ideas, when forged with the Kathran way of thinking, enabled the creation of weapons with which to defend themselves, in particular variants of artillery that could shell opposing vessels from a shoreline that were still half a mile away. They also developed agricultural improvements, which the Thrazans could only seethe at from a distance come harvest-time.

This battle for intellectual power was becoming typical for the

genetically gifted Dilgar, and the Thrazans were forced to acknowledge that the advantages being made by the Kathrans were putting them at a serious disadvantage. The real worry was that at some point Kathran advances would be enough to allow them to proceed past the ongoing raids and skirmishes, with a real tip in the balance of power in their favour. In 1597, after several attempts to invade Kathran lands were foiled by their artillery and sea defences, the monarch decided that something needed to be done, and appointed advisers to find the best way of dealing with the Kathrans.

It is important to note that the battles between the Dilgar nations were not continuous – indeed, sometimes months would go without a major skirmish. The two core sides, the Kathrans and the Thrazans, degenerated the mindless assaults over time into a calculated game of chess, of move and counter-move. Feints were often more common than the actual assaults, designed to test the defences of an opponent.

The mission was ingenious, bold and incredibly risky for those participating. In 1597 A.D., a group of Thrazans managed to locate and enter a subset of buildings in the Kathran capital Shem'Azar, which had been identified as a centre of learning. It was a suicide mission, but victory would mean that the Kathran research and development would be crippled for years, thus giving the Thrazans the time to make up for all of the lost ground. Against all odds, the mission succeeded, and one saboteur even managed to make it back into Thrazan lands with some engineering diagrams before his wounds claimed him. This discovery was for a new type of engine, based around the burning of fossil fuels. The success had the intended benefit of putting the Thrazans back into the race for supremacy whilst derailing the Kathrans for the time, whose culture was slowly becoming affected by the former Rittacans in their midst. This was also due to the fact that that public sympathy was swelling in Kathran lands for the Rittacan slaves who had been working on their behalf alongside free Kathrans.

A military response was required, and attacks on the Thrazan coastline were renewed with vigour, along with more attacks on the battlelines in the former Rittacan continent. These assaults did not lead to significant gain, and thus the Thrazan response was the same, as it always had been. This cycle was to break in 1698, with the birth of the first Warmaster.

The First Warmaster – 1698 A.D. to 1815 A.D.

The change in the nigh on eternal tit-for-tat of pre-emptive strikes and border raids began with the birth of Jel'Tur, who during his long and distinguished career would be granted with the title of Warmaster. His promotion, and undeniable military ability, would pave the way for future military leaders who would all hold the same title.

Entering military service in his late teens, the expected age for a young Thrazan to do so, Jel'Tur displayed a flair for military manoeuvres and precision at an early age. His first taste of warfare came when the coastal port where he was stationed was attacked by a Kathran war party. Jel'Tur was left in command of more experienced soldiers when a Kathran suicide squad managed to eliminate the port's commanding offers in a devastating strike. Despite being badly wounded, Jel'Tur managed to light the beacon which would alert nearby Thrazan legions camped down the coast. His injuries plagued him for a while, but his valiant efforts were rewarded, and Jel'Tur was promote, having proved himself without redoubt on the field of battle. In return for this promotion, Jel'Tur was instructed to participate in retaliatory raids on Kathran soil, and seemed to have a knack for being in the right place at the right time, or as his fellows often stated, Jel'Tur was simply 'Dilgar lucky'.

The mission that proved to be the making of Jel'Tur was in the spring of 1722 when the warrior was in his mid-twenties. He was believed killed, along with his unit, when the supply line to an extensive campaign in Kathran lands was lost. For a whole year, unheard of in any Thrazan records, Jel'Tur and his company managed to stay alive, determined to rip the heart out of the Kathran nation before they were found and killed. They destroyed villages, poisoned wells, burned storehouses packed with food, even integrated themselves into Kathran society where possible to increase the damage they could sow. This was easier than Jel'Tur had expected, for they were able to use natural plant colourings to dye their fur and wear disguises that masked any other visual differences.

Jel'Tur's chief lieutenant, Jha'Ban, was a skilled operative and in some other life would have made an excellent spy. He revealed to Jel'Tur, without any wish for personal promotion or advancement, that he had uncovered evidence that a major offensive was being planned. A weakness in the Thrazan defences had been identified, and the Kathrans had decided to exploit it ruthlessly. Barges packed with the elite beserker units of the Kathran army were destined for this weak spot, and would swarm into the unprotected Thrazan homelands in wave assaults that would cripple the Thrazans as a whole, and leave them open for a major invasion. Jel'Tur knew that the timing for this attack, at the next instance two planets came into the same point in the night sky, was just over two solar months away. There was no time to be lost, and with his company Jel'Tur made for the coast, knowing full well that this information had to be returned, of more importance to their Regent and the Thrazans than their very lives. Along the way, they had the misfortune of running into a Kathran patrol, but managed to defeat them, taking a Kathran army captain as hostage. This individual would also serve as an added bonus for the Regent if they were able to make it back alive.

Having stolen a small sea-going interceptor, Jel'Tur and his soldiers managed to reach safety despite the death of his loyal lieutenant Jha'Ban from a musket wound sustained in the battle with the Kathran patrol. Bitter at the loss of

his friend and collegue, Jel'Tur tried to regroup mentally, convincing himself that Jha'Ban's sacrifice would not be in vain, and that a statue would be erected in Jha'Ban's honour in his home village as a mark of respect.

During the war against the Non-Aligned Worlds, invoking the name of Jel'Tur became a common insult, similar to that which the Warrior Caste invoked the name of Valen. That said, Jel'Tur was in no way regarded as a religious figure by the Thrazans, merely an inspirational one.

The reception that greeted Jel'Tur and his fellows was not what any of them were expecting. They were all accused of treason and betraying the current Regent. Tortured for a full week, two of Jel'Tur's companions who had served him loyally and without question died under interrogation, accused of the same crime as Jel'Tur. Made to suffer, afflicted by the application of red hot irons, daggers, ice, acid and fire, Jel'Tur stood his ground, locking his torment and anguish away in the darkest corner of his mind. It was only when intelligence confirmed that something was indeed afoot in the Kathran military that Jel'Tur was spared his scheduled execution and released from custody.

Jel'Tur never forgave his captors, and privately swore an oath that those who killed his compatriots would squeal like animals before they died. Jel'Tur firmly believed that he would have an opportunity to do this in the future, but accepted that for now his private vow had to wait. His word now taken seriously, Jel'Tur debriefed his seniors about all aspects of Kathran society, gained from his time spent living in Kathran territory. What he revealed gave his superiors more useful information than a decade of spy reports. With Jel'Tur as an advisor, they crafted a response to this assault, in which Jel'Tur displayed flashes of dark genius that would resonate well around the Thrazan populace.

On the night prior to the grand invasion, as ships set sail from relatively safe Kathran waters, the Thrazans launched a pre-emptive strike with typical Dilgar precision and efficiency. The spirits of the Kathran soldiers went from eagerness for battle to shock in the first few moments, as the shells hit home and damaged the Kathran ships so badly their crews were forced to evacuate. Inspired by an idea from Jel'Tur, recalling his military history and the attack on the Thrazan fleet in 1458 which was literally burned to a cinder in their harbour, oil was poured into the water. The oil was set alight, burning thousands of the veteran Kathran soldiers alive in the water, a fiery signal sent back to the Kathran capital of Shem'Azar that something had changed in the balance of power. Several Thrazan vessels were also affected by the flames and also burned alive, but this had been accepted as an acceptable level of risk; the elimination of so many veteran Kathran soldiers was deemed worth the price. In response, the Kathrans panicked, which was precisely the desired result. Shockwaves in Kathran military circles resulted in several Generals being executed for their failure, which in turn created a vacuum of experience at the upper echelons of command that would harm the Kathran's military efforts in the years to come.

As a result for the success of this operation, and as part of the celebrations, Jel'Tur found himself in the spotlight. Surprising all of the military generals, Jel'Tur was given a new military rank, created as the first part in a series of sweeping changes that the Regent wanted to make to the military, to make it more efficient. Jel'Tur, with immediate effect, was to take on the title of Warmaster. His sole aim was nothing less than the total destruction of the Kathrans, utilising any method or any resource that he saw fit. The Warmaster would answer to the Regent, and the Regent alone. This sent shockwaves through the military, in particular from those in a high rank. The lower ranks loved Jel'Tur, who had demonstrated that a lowly soldier can accomplish great things, for the glory of all Thrazans. Those generals and commanders who Jel'Tur had effectively passed by were incensed at this promotion, in their view a sign of insanity in the Regent. However, popular opinion was behind Jel'Tur, and if the Regent knew anything, it was the will of the people.

Throughout the next fifty years of his life, Warmaster Jel'Tur focused himself on destroying the Kathrans, which he did triumphantly well. For a time, he had to weather a military hierarchy that despised him, but it had given Jel'Tur an opportunity to avenge his former team mates, and fulfil his vow. Sure enough, Jel'Tur made his deceased compatriots' killers scream for their lives before ending them in as brutal way as he could devise. Then, as he had sworn, a statue was indeed erected in Jha'Ban's village when the blood of his companion's murderers had gone cold.

An assassination attempt in his fourth year in office badly wounded him, crippling his leg, but Jel'Tur had fostered enough loyalty underneath him that the perpetrator was identified and executed. The invasion of Kathra had begun, on a scale never before seen, and the legend of Jel'Tur had spread so far that even the Kathrans began to doubt that they could prevent the Thrazan storm from taking their homes. He did not see his work completed, dying at the respectable age of 76, and when he passed on a full scale service was held for him as if a Regent himself had died. Even though his passing was mourned, many consoled themselves with the fact that Jel'Tur still managed to see the flag of the Regent flying high above the newly conquered capital of Shem'Azar before he died.

Even though he passed on, his work continued. The advances that the Thrazan forces had made under Jel'Tur sealed the end of the continual alternation of military control between the Thrazans and the Kathrans. The back of the Kathran tiger had been effectively broken, and from 1774 onwards the operation was pretty much mopping up of pockets of Kathran resistance. That was at least what the Thrazans had assumed.

What became evident to the next Thrazan Regent was that the Kathrans had the sense to realise that at that point the war

was effectively over. The bulk of their military might was transferred to the former lands of the Rittaca, in a bid to stabilise their position there. With Thrazan resources stretched to enable them to conquer the lands of their former foe, this consolidation of Kathran forces was made possible. In 1779, the Thrazans declared victory over the Kathrans, in a statement that was geographically correct but technically false.

With the Thrazans consolidating their hold on the former Kathra, the refugee Kathrans made a difference to their fellow legions in the former Rittacan homeland. It took twenty years, but the Kathrans were able to force the Thrazans to leave Rittaca. It was a troubling loss, but it was not presented as such. The Thrazans were not about to degrade their recent victory, and offered as an answer the fact that they had invaded Rittaca once; they could very easily do so again.

THE AGE OF ARMAGEDDON

Isolated and Alone – 1816 A.D. to 1933 A.D

With now only one continent to call their own, and the Thrazans in charge of their former homeland, the Kathrans were forced to rebuild from scratch. With their usual pacifistic nature, the Rittacans who now considered themselves as part of the Kathran Republic worked hard to ensure that the formation of this new homeland went smoothly. As they did so, something startling began to occur in Kathran society, a legacy that was traceable back to a promise made several hundred years before.

Social changes had allowed monumental something to take place in Kathran society. Something in the genetic code of the Rittacans, when combined with that of the Kathrans, unlocked the potential for telepathy. This had the unexpected effect on Kathran society of both placing the Rittacans in a position of more importance and encouraging a greater level of integration between the two. As part of a more progressive culture, the Rittacans were content to accept themselves as Kathrans, but with a different heritage. Indeed, some pointed back to tales passed down from slave to slave, of a wise Rittacan called Nid'dur who was given a prophecy that something wonderful would happen to the Rittacans in return for a favour requested by a traveller from the stars. No one could prove that this was the legacy bequeathed to the Rittacans for Nid'dur's compliance, but the idea took hold, and spread.

The Vorlon manipulation of abducted Rittacan tribesmen was well executed, and intentional. By altering the DNA of the Rittacans enough so that it contained the potential for telepathic advancement, but required unlocking with the presence of another set of DNA, would ensure that interaction between the different sub-races would be required. Sadly, this grand Vorlon dream never came to pass, or at least in the manner that it was envisaged.

Initial reports of this genetic development reached the Thrazans, who greeted this news with alarm. It was seen as a weapon that could be used against them, and as if often the case paranoia accentuated the ability of these mild telepathic abilities. In the Thrazan media, which was now firmly entrenched with printing presses being commonplace as a means of informing the general population, this was reported as a sign of Kathran decadence, that they had begun to breed with their former slaves, and in doing so becoming nothing less than an affront to the victory against the Rittacans many hundreds of years before. Ironically, as history is always rewritten by the victor, the Rittacans were perceived as being an untrustworthy and insincere race, and unworthy of any form of respect by any Thrazan citizen.

Both sides discovered air power almost simultaneously in the 1880's, which changed the nature of Dilgar warfare in a major way. For most of the previous fifty years, naval power had ruled supreme in the minds of military theorists, with the Kathrans possessing a navy comprised of a significant number of sub-surface craft. The best defence that the Kathrans now had, in their opinion, was to be the strongest seafaring nation possible, to ensure that their enemies never even got close to the only remaining lands the Kathrans could call their own. With the discovery of air power, both sides realised that naval forces were only one part of the defensive solution for their nations.

The great discovery was made in 1921, which would change Omelos forever. Thrazan scientists had, almost by accident, chanced upon a discovery for nuclear power. Whilst the concept of almost limitless energy generation was a great achievement for the Thrazan utility sector, the Warmasters noticed a more immediate usage for such a release of energy. Such power would make a warhead of unimaginable power.

Investigations began into this weapon, and ways to deliver it to their targets effectively. The need for a delivery system saw major improvements in the atmospheric craft the Dilgar used to traverse the skies over parts of their world. The requirement was for a vessel to perform a complete loop of their world, dropping one of these explosive devices. The Kathran armed forces, in particular the air forces, had grown skilled at intercepting missiles fired into their territory from Thrazan ships and vessels. Therefore, a manual solution was desirable, of a crewed airship or aircraft to pass over the target at an altitude so high the Kathrans would struggle to identify it, let alone reach it.

The first dedicated bomber, named the *Athraskala*, came off the Thrazan production lines in 1931. It was an ungainly vessel, not particularly aerodynamic and incapable of flying if the engines failed, but it was a means to an end. Capable of rising to the edges of the atmosphere of their homeworld, albeit with a significant expenditure in fuel, it was the perfect vehicle to carry the new bombs to their

targets. The Thrazans did not rush the deployment of their new weaponry, building two other bombers to launch a devastating and repeated assault on their enemy.

In the winter of 1933 the onslaught began. The first bomber passed over Rittaca, dropping three nuclear devices on its trip. The targets of this first raid were not military or utility targets, rather civilian population centres. Estimated deaths were in the millions, and these were just those who were incinerated by the initial blasts. Governmental communications were Spartan but crazed, as the Kathrans had no idea what was going on. The second bomber destroyed two coastal ports and the second largest city in Rittaca, effectively crippling the Kathran's ability to utilise their naval power in a retaliatory offensive. The third bomber, carrying the last batch of nuclear explosives, destroyed two more cities and a major army base in the Kathran's northern territories.

The Kathrans were beaten; the once fertile lands now an irradiated wasteland with radioactive rains bringing fallout down all to pollute further. They gave the surrender order, believing that the Thrazans had many more such devices. The truth was that they only had one, and that was dropped on the main Kathran capital city, Tan'Azar, within hours of the surrender being received. The Kathrans had made their final mistake, of assuming that their primary enemy would be merciful in victory.

The cost had been high, but the Thrazans had won. That is, if a world ravaged by the almost hedonistic usage of nuclear weapons can ever be truly classed as a victory.

Report Begins:

Noble Matriarch Jalakki, most supporting of all Abbai matriarchs, please bear me no ill will for this tragic and disturbing news that I must pollute your most understanding of ears with.

The race who are nominally identified as the 'Dilgar' have fired on one another with weapons of mass destruction, with lasting and devastating consequences to the environment of their world. These weapons utilised a nuclear payload, which has caused radioactive debris to rain over half of their world and adversely affecting their ecology forever.

I humbly recommend that we watch these Dilgar further, to ensure that they do not take up aggressive actions against your reign and people.

Your humble servant, Leisokka

:Report Ends

In accordance with ancient Thrazan texts, with their victory assured the current ruler could take his place in legend as the Dilgar who led his tribe to victory. Ren'Dar proclaimed himself Emperor, and such was the joy felt by the Thrazans that no one questioned the announcement. As his first declaration, he announced that his people, the Thrazans, were called as such no longer. As they were victorious, and avenged the blood of untold numbers of Thrazans butchered by their foes over the years, they needed to identify themselves as Dilgar'Thraza no longer. They were Dilgar, the victors in their struggle. By doing so, the memory of the other two tribes, the Dilgar'Rittaca and the Dilgar'Katha, would die out from history like their very corpses. They were not worthy of the name Dilgar; the former Thrazans had now proved themselves worthy.

Living with Calamity – 1933 A.D. to 1938 A.D.

The newly christened Dilgar nation, spanning the lands of their main opponent as well as their own, found that conquering a foe did not always lead to a blissful and trouble-free future. Indeed, the problems of running a nation as large as theirs had logistical problems that the Dilgar had not fully appreciated before.

Part of the problem for Emperor Ren'Dar and his noble house was focus. For almost two thousand years their tribe had been at war with their neighbours. There had been an ultimate aim to everything that the Thrazans had done, namely to extinguish their foes from the face of Omelos. Social unrest was an issue, with some of the elements at the lower ends of society complaining about their lot, and the injustice of this governmental hybrid of monarchy and imperium.

The other key problem for Emperor Ren'Dar was the nature of the swift victory over the Kathrans and their Rittacan allies. Dilgar scientists had not correctly estimated the devastation that so many nuclear detonations, even though small scaled as they were, would do the global climate as a whole. Indeed, had the dropped weapons exploded on the air, there would have been much less fallout generated. This fallout was the main problem, as the wind direction on that fatal day had been back out across unpopulated regions of Rittaca, and then out to sea. This had the effect of ruining many fish stocks, which would only be the part of the environmental problem caused by the attacks. The first harvest after the nuclear assault was poor, and they were to get worse. Some water supplies were polluted, and sickness was reported in many areas. These seemed to come mainly from those who worked outdoors or in marine fields; eventually the scientists responsible for the creation of the nuclear devices were forced to admit that radiation was the factor responsible for this sudden change. Torture followed for a slow death was the reward considered appropriate for the scientists who provided the tools to win the war against the Kathrans.

Less important than this but growing in significance was the problems begin suffered by the Dilgar economy. In Thrazan times, the economy was dedicated to the pursuit of war.

Now, there was little neeed for a military economy like this. The pursuit of knowledge that the Rittacans had made, creating a more stable environment for their culture to grow, now seemed anything but the folly the Thrazans had believed it to be. Equally, the workforce had been trained to focus on warfare and the weapons of warfare. With the food problems, and the rampant sickness caused by the radiation damage that been afflicted on their world, the new Dilgar empire, this Imperium, faced ruin even before it had been able to establish itself.

Swift and decisive measures were required. Emperor Ren'Dar instituted a plan of marshal law on an unprecedented level. Ren'Dar curtailed much of the freedom and choice that the Dilgar had appreciated during the war with the Kathrans, establishing a series of severe but necessary directives. Prices were frozen, and the Dilgar currency, still called the Thraza as homage to past times, was devalued appropriately. The buying of property was disallowed, as was the expansion of any family with more than two children. The penalty for crimes was increased, as the prisons were not needed. Execution became the default punishment for any crime more harmful than personal attacks or simple theft. There was not enough food to support a blossoming population, and the only way that the Imperium could control the crisis was to limit the population growth to three broods per year. Any Dilgar family breaking this decree were immediately sterilised to prevent further childbirth. The rule of Imperium was refined further, with clearer definitions made to all levels of Dilgar government.

Labour was needed, constructing new buildings to contain food stores and refugee shelters should they be needed. Greenhouses and other contructs were required to enable plants to grow properly, even digging drainage channels to encourage crops to grow. There was also a requirement for those areas affected with radioactive material, often fallout, to be cleaned up as much as possible. This work was almost always fatal to those who undertook it, but there was a need, and Emperor Ren'Dar was adamant that it would be done. Dilgar prisoners and slaves, including those captured Kathrans, were put to work on these unpleasant tasks. Where a slave or prisoner questioned their work or dared to falter at their work, they were executed on the spot.

There was resistance to this harsh regime, but realisation soon dawned on the Dilgar populace as a whole that there was little choice in the matter. The decisions made by Emperor Ren'Dar were harsh but necessary, and soon became accepted. Indeed, as the first harvest came in after the nuclear assault the requirement for hard measures proved to be false, as poor weather and large areas of crops rendered inconsumable by radiation damage. These crops were given to the slaves to eat, in the full knowledge that they would eat whatever they were given, or starve to death. A tight military grip was kept, to ensure that no rebellions took place. Whilst there were some protests, they were dealt with harshly but quickly. The measures that were taken still resulted in thousands of deaths, but the programmes implemented by the reborn Imperium kept the Dilgar alive, even if it was without any civil liberties.

Conditions of the nuclear-blasted Rittaca were even worse. The whole land had been declared as being off-limits to all Dilgar, but the nuclear assaults had not destroyed Kathran society completely. With the cities levelled and still emitting fatal amounts of radiation, there was no hope for the Kathrans to return there. Equally, a vast portion of their lands had suffered the majority of the fallout, and the average radiation level in those areas was actually higher than that of the ruins of the Kathran cities. The skies over Rittaca and the surrounding seas were dark, as a high level of radioactive dust up in the atmosphere blocked some of the sunlight. This level of darkness, although dominant above Rittaca, was slowly spreading out across the whole of Omelos.

The Legacy of Mistrust – 1939 A.D. to 1947 A.D.

The discovery of strange metallic objects in orbit around their world fuelled Dilgar paranoia, a trait which the early Thrazans possessed in abundance. Fully believing that they were being watched, scientists and government officials met in secret to discuss the shocking discovery.

The old legends that Rittacan slaves had sometimes spoken of, of a traveller from afar, troubled the Dilgar for many reasons. It meant that the Dilgar were not alone in the universe. There had been suspicions that there was a good chance for life around other stars, but no proof. This had the immediate effect of galvanising scientific research in a particular direction, because there was no way to establish whether the aliens who had placed these metallic objects around their world were peaceful.

A secondary worry was that the former travellers from afar would return and want to find out what had happened to the Rittacans. As those few remaining were slaves, Emperor Ren'Dar was more concerned about this element than any other. Combined with the legends of bright lights burning the mountains, and winged visitors from afar, Ren'Dar knew if the legends were true then the level of the destructive power that this visitor possessed was equivalent to what they had used to defeat the Kathrans a thousand years before. This troubled all of Emperor Ren'Dar's advisors and aides, for they feared revealing their suspicions; there were forces out there amongst the stars that were more advanced than the Dilgar. These forces also knew about the Dilgar, for spy satellites had been placed there. The advisers need not have worried, for all of these facts were painfully obvious to Emperor Ren'Dar, who was feeling particularly unwell of late.

Whilst in no way can the Abbai Matriarchy take any of the blame for the atrocities committed by the Imperium during the Dilgar War, the fact remains that the discovery of the spy satellites around their world had a major effect on the paranoia of the Dilgar race. Had the spy satellites not been detected, then it is less likely that the Dilgar would have made such a focused effort on achieving space flight. This would have had

the effect of placing the Dilgar in a vastly different situation when the discovery of their sun's demise was made.

Over a few short months, Ren'Dar's health began to fail, as it became apparent that he was suffering from the effects of radiation. Despite the advice he had been given, Ren'Dar was partial to shellfish, particularly a variety that accumulated on the eastern shoreline, and thus over time the cumulative effects of trace amounts of radioactive material in that area would become a death penalty,.

Ren'Dar and his aides were well aware that a plan of action was needed. The succession of the throne from Ren'Dar to his eldest son of Ren'Ghur would be difficult enough, given the current economic and domestic climate. A stable structure was needed, so that the transition for his son would be as seamless as possible. Ren'Dur's considered opinion was that the Dilgar needed to almost forge themselves once again into an army of war. Turning to the past for a solution, Ren'Dar recalled the tale of Jel'Tur, the first Warmaster. Since then, there had only been a single Warmaster, advising the ruling family on matters of conflict and battle. This needed to be expanded, because the task ahead of them, of protecting themselves against this unknown race, was more than clever tactics and skill at troop deployments. There would need to be more than one Warmaster, with a particular focus above and beyond what had been required by the Warmasters of the past. The Warmasters would be bound to the service of the Emperor, and a guarantee was required to ensure that they would attempt to usurp the power of the Emperor.

Turning to history, the inspirational move by Ren'Dar was seen as insane, almost heretical. He brought a group of elderly slaves of mixed racial descent and asked them to speak to him. When their mouths opened, he struck them each, firmly on the side of the head. He asked them to speak to him again, expecting them to follow his train of thought. One of them was able to do so, Ren'Dar hearing a brief curse in his mind. Knowing that the old stories were true, Ren'Dar did not order the Dilgar with the Rittacan bloodline taken from his sight. Instead, he laughed and embraced the Dilgar. The others, who did not have the gift, were taken away, and Ren'Dar discussed his plan with the slave.

A group of telepaths, of only five in number, would take up residence in the lower levels of the Imperial Palace. At the discretion of the current Emperor, this group of slaves with the telepathic gift would be allowed to scan a Warmaster, and report on their loyalty to the Emperor. To ensure the loyalty of the telepaths, their families would be held under permanent house arrest, and executed if the Emperor was displeased with their service. They would have no additional rights, no station above that of a slave, save perhaps unpolluted food, clean clothes and drinkable water. It would be their service to the Emperor, and given the improvement to living conditions, the slave agreed.

THE AGE OF EXPANSION

An Imperium Takes Hold - 1948 A.D. to 2031 A.D.

The funeral of Ren'Dar was a state affair of previously unseen magnitude. In accordance with tradition, the procession was led by the chosen candidate to replace the outgoing leader, Ren'Dar's son Ren'Ghur. All dressed in white, the funeral procession passed by the both the Imperial Palace and the Government Ministry. An impressive monument had been erected on the shores of Ren'Dar's home province, looking out to the seas that he felt so fondly for. The dead Emperor was buried beneath the monument, bearing his full name of Dilgar'Thraza-Ren'Dar.

After two days of mourning, the newly anointed Emperor Ren'Ghur took his place as head of his people. Having been ghosting his father for the last few months, Ren'Ghur already had an idea of how to govern his people, and how to handle the War Council. By giving them a token of additional power, Ren'Ghur demonstrated that he was keen on continuing with the War Council in principle, but kept enough power to himself to make sure that his way was the same as that of his father.

Of real and significant importance to Ren'Ghur and the War Council were the satellites in orbit above their world. After a period of extensive study, military researchers reported back to the War Council that, in their educated opinion, these satellites were not offensive in nature, and simply designed to watch their world. Suspected cameras and purported communications equipment had been identified, and the War Council was satisfied that there was no immediate threat. However, there was no evidence to state that the alien forces that had placed the satellites there did not have a battle fleet capable of reaching their world. Therefore, a great deal of subtlety was required.

Much new technology was tested in underground caverns and large sheltered storage yards that were safe from the prying eyes above. Jet engine technology was perfected in short order, as was the usage of nuclear reactors as energy generators for Dilgar vessels that would undoubtedly patrol the heavens around their world, acting as the first line of defence. Another key research topic in this time was to listen in to the communication signals that these satellites were sending back. This was accomplished in relative short order, and a series of recording the signals that were transmitted back to the hosts began, by a satellite on the edge of the Omelos system. This one satellite was evidently the control node, had no recording capacity of its own and was too far away to do so in any case. The War Council decided that for two whole years the transmissions being fed back to this alien race would be recorded. Dilgar signal generators on the surface of Omelos would then start beaming the signals that the transmitters had once made, on a two yearly loop. The presumption was that this dual signal would

confuse the transmitter, and then, in a calculated strike, a co-ordinated low-orbital strike would knock out all of the transmitters save the master one relaying the signal. This part went without a hitch.

The next two years, from 1964 to 1966 had a definite goal. At the end of this period, the alien race that had been spying them would know what was going on, in all probability realising that they had been watching a loop. There was a chance that this would be picked up before that time, but it was a chance that the War Council elected to make.

The first Dilgar starship, carrying a powerful payload of explosives, made orbit in late 1965. It was not optimised to leave the atmosphere unaided, requiring an atmospheric vessel to get it into space. This typified later Dilgar starship development, of being focused around a particular design goal and following it to the letter. It performed several dozen orbits of their world before a relief vessel was sent up, a second vessel with a purely utilitarian purpose, to refresh the crew and bring fresh supplies.

In 1966, on the eve of the signal running out, the Dilgar had a dozen of these primitive vessels in orbit, packing enough firepower to destroy their homeworld five times over. Feeling themselves ready, and with Dilgar planetary defences on the highest state of alert since the nuclear assault was unleashed on the Kathran nation, the War Council ordered the signal cut. Nothing happened for three tense days, until a strange energy emission was detached on the fringe of their solar system. Moments later, the transmission relay that now had no signal exploded, and there was a strange enemy emission shortly after. Then there was nothing, just a slowly dawning realisation that there was to be no grand alien invasion, no planet killing monstrosities appearing out of nowhere to wipe them from the void of space, nothing.

By 2011, the Dilgar had explored most of their solar system, despite the major environmental problems back home. The innermost planets had unsurprisingly received the most attention, but those on the fringes of the system had mainly been limited to just probes and drone craft, without any sentient Dilgar life onboard. A permanent base had been setup above Omelos, which was continually expanding to meet the blossoming needs of the Dilgar space programme. Above and beyond the advantages of being a space going race, there was the overriding knowledge that the Dilgar were not alone in the universe.

In 2030 a discovery was made which would change the course of history forever. Several thousand miles away from the site , a hairs-breadth in space terms, was a huge pronged construction that scientists theorised was a gateway of some sort. This tracked with earlier scientific reports of the strange energy emission that had been detected before and after the alien transmission relay exploded. This, the scientists explained to the War Council, could be how the aliens had arrived in the system to place the spy satellites. The key to unlocking the jump-gate was discovered, and the Dilgar was surprised and in some way disappointed that this was not a direct entry point to another place in space and time, instead a realm both strange and wonderful, but totally deadly.

After several months of analysis the Dilgar located signals which, whilst difficult to track seemed to stretch from the jump-gate outwards. The first two Dilgar ships to attempt to follow this signal were lost in hyperspace, but the third attempt, using upgraded sensor equipment was able to follow this signal to a point in hyperspace where the quality of the signal strength was at an optimum peak, and moving away from it only reduced the quality of the signal. Going on a hunch, the explorer captain sent the same signal that was used to open the jump-gate on the edge of their home system, and a vortex appeared before them. Going through this jump-gate, the crew of this Dilgar vessel, loosely translated as *Warrior's Pride*, became the first Dilgar vessel to leave one star system and travel to another. Quite rightly, these brave individuals were welcomed back as heroes.

The Exploration of the Abyss – 2032 A.D. to 2210 A.D.

The confirmation of other star systems with planetary bodies near to Omelos had been confirmed by scientific study of the heavens by powerful receptive equipment, but there was nothing as satisfying to the scientists and military minds alike that hard, physical proof that there were other domains for the exploration and control. In 2032, the system around this nearby star had been named.

This new system was named Immata, and despite having no planets that were suitable for supporting life there were several that could function as industrial sites. This world, Immata IV, contained minute traces of Quantium-40 in a particular geographical layer. Dilgar scientists were amazed by this discovery, as for a long time the ability of this amazingly rare mineral to make jump-gates possible had been known. It also meant that the Dilgar could attempt to build vessels with jump-engines, to travel further, but their scientific efforts were not yet advanced enough to make this possible. In the short term, it was imagined minute amounts of this material could be traded, in exchange for knowledge.

By 2180, the Dilgar space fleet was well established, with four systems mapped and visited near to their home. An upgrade to the communications arrays on these primitive Dilgar vessels allowed beacons of a much lower signal strength to be detected. There was another jump-route out of the only minimally charted Rohric system, and this went to an alien system called Utriel. The Dilgar were in for a shock here, as this lead to a world owned by the race who had planted the spy satellites above their world. The minimal amount of trade conducted by the Dilgar with the alien worlds close to Omelos told them that this race were called Abbai, and were largely pacifistic. They

were however an advanced race, with many technological advantages and powerful weapons in case an active defence was required.

The areas of space closer to the galactic core were simply inaccessible. There was a powerful race here, called the Tal'Kon'Sha, who guarded these borders with extreme vigilance. Any Dilgar ship sent to investigate, whether it was armed or not, was instantly obliterated. After several abortive attempts, the War Council reluctantly accepted that this border was not breachable.

This all changed when other vessels were sighted on the edge of the Immata system, apparently focused around a small moon. A small flotilla of Dilgar cruisers were sent to investigate. What they found was a small asteroid base, by a group of aliens in ships of differing configurations, many of them clearly suffering from combat, but repairs bodged up with simple metal plating. Believing them to be some form of stellar pirates, the War Captain in charge of the flotilla was greeted with other vessels coming through the jump-gate, clearly having returned from some sort of operation.

The War Captain launched missiles, the primary armament of Dilgar vessels at that time. He clearly did not expect a group of the Raiders, in highly primitive fighters, to shoot their powerful warheads out of the sky. He lost two vessels before he wisely sped a retreat, clearly outmatched.

Dilgar offensive procedures were examined in the wake of the War Captain's failure. Clearly, faster weapons were required to complement the physical systems that were fitted to all Dilgar vessels. Whilst missiles could get faster and faster, something was needed. The Dilgar had previously experimented with laser and plasma weapons, but were rarely treated with the respect that their development deserved.

The first vessel packing laser and plasma weaponry was the Senschuka patrol boat, and was an instant success. A year after the introduction of the Senschuka, a Dilgar fleet under a different war captain engaged the Raider base, with his vessels engaging the Raider fleet whilst the older vessels with missile technology took down the pirate base.

The century ended with the Dilgar on something of a self-content high. Their borders were relatively secure, Much of the inhabited lands on Omelos were free of radiation damage (chemical and pollution damage, and the state of the blasted Rittaca was another matter) and the Dilgar now had one system firmly under their control, that being Immata. Their feared enemy, who had planted the spy satellites in orbit above their world, was technically strong but spiritually weak by comparison.

The Face of Disaster – 2210 A.D. to 2228 A.D.

It was a truly a dark day in Dilgar history when the most noted group of scientists presented a comprehensive analysis of scientific reports to the court of Emperor Ren'Turrin, a less politically astute descendant of Ren'Dar and Ren'Ghar. He flew into a rage, and in older days would have had then tortured or possibly killed for daring to give him such news. When the anger subsided, Ren'Turrin had the common sense to gather the War Council. The entire Dilgar race had a new enemy. It was not an alien armada, radiation poisoning or atmospheric pollution. It was time itself.

At some point in the next hundred years, the sun which had warmed Omelos in the coldness of space for a near-eternity was coming to the end of its life. Their sun was destined to go out in a blaze of glory that was typically Dilgar, the explosions and stellar radiation causing permanent and everlasting damage to every world in their solar system. The evidence from the Omelos sun was too intermittent and sporadic to make an accurate judgement about how long the Dilgar had left, but the general consensus of opinion was that it was at some point in the next hundred years. This revelation was overhead by a palace slave, who was then indirectly responsible for every living Dilgar in knowing that their culture was threatened with extinction.

There was panic in the streets, Dilgar from the fields, suburbs and cities united in their cries for answers. On a scale not seen in decades, the Dilgar people revolted, smashing monuments to past Warmasters, defacing and pulling down buildings. In the end, the military were ordered to intervene, and the crackdown was wholly brutal. No warning shots were fired, no barricades were raised. Instead, an order was given for the protesters to disperse, and after ten seconds the Dilgar military opened fire on anything in their way. Any injured protesters were gunned down in the streets, and executed where their dying bodies lay. Wounded Dilgar were not treated with anything save a single shot to the head.

Warmaster Voth'An, in charge of the Imperial Research Arm for the War Council, was charged with conducting an extensive investigation into whether any other world could be used. Despite the fact that she was advancing in years, and would in all probability never see the end of Omelos, she faced this unenviable task with typical diligence. The truth was obvious; whilst establishing small colonies was entirely possible, there was no way that the population could be saved. Even small colonies would not be sustainable in the long term.

There was a need to control the general populace, aside from domination by the gun. Whilst chaining the actions of the populace could be achieved, the willpower of the Dilgar race would drain away if hope was lost. Many Dilgar built shelters under their homes, in a vain attempt to save themselves from their sun going nova. It stood to reason that this would be ineffectual, but those Dilgar who built these structures felt like they were doing *something*. Governmental organisations did the same, more out some bizarre notion that their groups and policies could survive the total annihilation that a supernova would deliver.

The only solution was presented, in a much-diluted form, to the Dilgar people. They were told that the future for the Dilgar was out amongst the stars, and possibly a new home. A leaked scientific report, carefully doctored, suggested that the actual date for their sun going nova would happen in the dwindling years of the century, even though the truth was that Dilgar scientists actually had no idea of when it would be. The lie, embedded within the shell of a truth, would helped focus the Dilgar on space travel and the expansion of their domain whilst managing for a time the fading hope of the Dilgar populace.

The Dilgar attempted to expand into the nearest realm, that of an alien race called the Tal'Kona-Sha who were situated towards the galactic core. This was doomed almost as it began, for this elderly race was millennia older than the Minbari, even if not as old as the Shadows or Vorlons themselves. With organic craft they jealously guarded their borders against Dilgar incursions. Even during the Dilgar War proper, years later, the Imperium would still send patrols into Tal'Kona-Sha space with the same response. Clearly, the Tal'Kona-Sha liked their isolation, and wanted to keep it that way.

In 2214, the Dilgar began an industrial expansion into the Rohric system, many of the moons and planetary fragments in that system having minerals worth mining. The Narn Regime felt the same, but wished to mine a different area of the system, namely the three planets closest to the Rohric sun. Their early dealings with the Narn Regime were without incident; in truth the Dilgar Imperium had a respect for the Regime. They had fought off their oppressors, a self-gratifying race known as the Centauri, by changing their very society into a weapon, using the weapons of the aggressor against them. Whilst the Narn Regime would be a worthy opponent for Dilgar forces, they had a technological edge over the Imperium, and any conflict against them would surely result in a Dilgar loss. Also of note was the fact that the Narn Regime was wholly preoccupied with their hate against the Centauri Republic, which meant that Dilgar operations would operate without incident. Some of the War Council held a measure of respect for the Narn Regime, for they had done what the Dilgar had feared they would have to do against the Abbai – fight off an aggressor on their own soil.

For the first few months of 2214, this pact between the Imperium and the Narn Regime was cordial and profitable. However, the intense mining of this system came to the attention of Raider bands, and the Dilgar Imperium found themselves the most favourable target. The Narn Regime was simply too well known to the Raider bands, and the military strength of the Imperium in this system was open to question. Far from buckling under the challenge, this was seen as a prime opportunity by the Dilgar to field test new weapons and ships against this Raider force. This included a new type of weapon that had only recently come out of the Imperial Research Arm, the bolt cannon, or more commonly known as the bolter. In future times, this weapon would be reclassified as a light bolter, but at the time it was the first of a new breed of Dilgar weaponry.

The light bolter was fitted to a new classification of Dilgar vessel, the Ni'tratha, which had the additional benefit of being the first ship in the Imperium's army capable of generating its own jump point. In the early days of the small-scale conflict referred to in Dilgar history as the Raider Wars, this ship was the bane of the Raiders' existence. It was able to drop out of hyperspace when called, in the region that it was required. This caused the Raiders many problems, until they worked out ways to counter it. In a surprising move, the Raiders co-ordinated their efforts, disparate groups now acting together, at least for the most part. In response, this drew additional Dilgar attention to the system, as well as additional Narn ships.

The final battle for the Rohric system was actually lost by the Raiders three years later, rather than won by either the Narn or Dilgar. They set up a conflict to draw the two allied sides into battle with one another, but botched the mission severely. Both sides were hesitant to be led into the battle by their noses, and this hesitation forced the Raiders into action. They attempted to take down the Dilgar by themselves, and to their credit managed to force the Dilgar to flee. However, the result of the battle had badly damaged one particular Dilgar vessel, killing the best friend of the most promising Dilgar of her generation, despite her chequered mental history. That Dilgar who lost her friend was Jha'Dur, and an oath was swore to eliminate every single Raider from existence. Her plan, utilising hidden transmitters surgically implanted into crewmembers whose transport ships were allowed to be captured by the Dilgar, worked to perfection. The data provided by these hidden transmitters allowed the six main Raider bases in the Rohric system to be identified and dealt with in swift order. The crews of the captured ships, and the ships themselves, were lost, but overall the operation was judged to be a great success.

Even though Rohric had been declared Raider free, this young Dilgar officer continued her campaign against the Raiders. Warmaster Voth'An spied something special in this young Dilgar, already thinking about her retirement and the individual she would select to replace her. A specific order caused Jha'Dur to cease her campaign in destroying the Dilgar utterly, and her compliance in doing so gave rise to a promotion ordered by Warmaster Voth'An – Jha'Dur, now holding the Dilgar rank of Battle Leader. Jha'Dur was promoted to captain the very same ship that had been the thorn in the Raider's side in Rohric, the first of the jump-

capable Dilgar cruisers, the Ni'tratha. The ship and crew of this ship had gained much experience in that conflict, and were as competent a crew as any in the Dilgar fleet. Battle Leader Jha'Dur and her crew continued to participate in the Raider Wars for the next few years.

The individual who would become Deathwalker had a tragic history, not that it excused the actions that she would undertake of her own free will. The result of genetic experiments herself, Jha'Dur had a poor mental state for much of her life, and the loss of parental influence would only hinder matters.

She was identified at an early age as having potential, and was given the full benefit of Dilgar military indoctrination. Jha'Dur gathered a cadre of loyal officers around her as her military career progressed, but the simple truth was this was as much for self-protection as it was for their counsel. Jha'Dur did not have the best military mind of her generation, not that she would admit that to anyone but herself. What she was however was an exceptional scientist and visionary, in the darkest sense of the word.

The military buildup continued despite victory in the Raider Wars; Battle Leader Jha'Dur had a fleet under her control, and another promotion to boot. The launch of the Mishakur Dreadnought was a major milestone; a hyperspace vessel that the War Council believed could stand up to any equivalent fleet in the Narn Regime. The War Council had no intention of going to war with the Regime, but were content knowing that their sometime ally no longer had such a significant technological lead over them. Expecting to be named as the Captain of this ship, after submitting scientific proposals to the War Council, Jha'Dur was gutted when hers was not the name selected, and the suicidal Jha'Dur had to be subdued by her closest associates. In time, Jha'Dur would learn that Warmaster Voth'An had already selected the young Dilgar as her replacement on the War Council. A scientific mind with a distinct lack of morals, Warmaster Voth'An saw a great deal of herself in Jha'Dur, and appointed her to be her deputy, until such time that Warmaster Voth'An stepped aside.

There were many technical achievements made by the Dilgar in 2225 and 2226. The newly promoted Jha'Dur proved her worth, by bring many new developments to the War Council. Amongst them were advanced cybernetics and weaponry based on biological principles. She built up a skilled staff underneath her, above and beyond what even the accomplished Warmaster Voth'An had done. Tho'Ran, a specialist in viral technologies and Ehrol'Ki, a leading light in energy-based weapon design, were two of the individuals who helped Jha'Dur's career to rise further and faster than expected. This was not a problem for the two scientists, or indeed anyone who had worked with Jha'Dur previously. She seemed to garner an unsuspecting loyalty in those underneath her, but signs of telepathic heritage and ability had already been discarded as possible reasons.

Jha'Dur's most notable achievements that the War Council appreciated were in starship technologies. An upgrade of the medium bolter, which first saw light in the latter years of the Raider Wars, produced the heavy bolter, which was for its size an immensely powerful weapon. Her shining glory was a new starfighter design, which surpassed its predecessor in every single way. This design, the Thorun class or more simply Dartfighter, would go on to make a huge contribution to the Dilgar war effort. As a reward, Jha'Dur was promoted again, to War Commander. She did not hold this post long however, as Warmaster Voth'An retired, naming Jha'Dur as her successor and new holder of the rank of Warmaster.

In early August of 2227, the other Warmasters revealed to Jha'Dur their grand plan to carve their name on the galaxy which had been in the preparation stages for much of the last decade and a half. A new homeworld was required, but a sizeable buffer around it was also required. This would not be a problem, as the members of the Non-Aligned Worlds were weak, with little interest in building empires of their own. The Abbai had a flair for diplomacy, and thus could not be allowed to consolidate the efforts of the League. The Drazi were a different matter altogether, and would require brutal suppression. Warmaster Jha'Dur in particular relished the thought of conquering the Drazi, already having plans on how to use captives to further her experiments. What she had wished to research, but the Office of Research and Development and the subordinate Imperial Research Arm had struggled to investigate due to a shortage of test subjects would now be possible.

Thus, the stage was set for the greatest military campaign in recorded Dilgar history. The collected Warmasters forged their plans with great detail, believing that the spirit of Jel'Tur, the first and greatest Warmaster was with them. They would bask in glory or die, spitting defiance in the face of an enemy as they fell. The League of Non-Aligned Worlds would not be allowed to stand in their way of a quest for a new home.

Dilgar Technology

The Dilgar Imperium was possibly the largest military force ever to exist in the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, even during the height of the Shadow War. In that conflict, the Shadows were primarily concerned with getting the League members to fight amongst themselves, intervening directly when this was not the route that the younger races chose not to comply.

Very little of the technology that made up the Dilgar war machine survived the war intact. The biggest consumer of Dilgar technology was actually the Earth Alliance, who used the captured technology to make several leaps and bounds in their own research, particularly in the medical area. The League races took some elements of Dilgar tech, but on the whole did not exploit it as much as they could have done. One can only imagine is that this is due to the horrific acts and atrocities that the Imperium heaped upon the members of the League during their reign of terror.

Dilgar Capital Ships

The Dilgar navy was comprised of many different vessels, all with different flight profiles. Where appropriate, the more common variants that saw active service are highlighted, although these models were almost always used in a limited capacity.

EarthForce identified Dilgar variants during the war by an initial letter. As there were a great many variants of each ship type, especially the Jashakar Frigate, simply stating the name of the vessel could carry a nasty surprise, especially if an EarthForce Captain was expecting a base model and instead found his ship confronted by a Leader or Gunship variant.

Some of the variant codes, as used by EarthForce, can be found in the table below. These variants were only used where the base design had been altered – a base Tratharti Gunship was never referred to as a 'G' unless it was the modified version, for example.

Variant Code	Explanation	Examples
B	Carrier vessel. This was a vessel designated as carrying fighters.	Mishakur Supercarrier Dreadnought
D	Command / Leader. This vessel typically served as the command vessel in a Pentacan.	Ochlavita Destroyer Leader
G	Gunship. This vessel possessed an increased level of weaponry of greater damage potential, often vulnerable to fighters.	Tratharti-G Heavy Gunship
H	Hospital / Medical vessel. This was a scientific craft.	Eskrafat Medical Cruiser / Hospital Ship
M	Missile Destroyer. Increased missile payload.	Ochlavita Missile Destroyer
N	Minesweeper	Jashakar Minesweeper

Abrithi Assault Cruiser

One of the few Dilgar capital ships with atmospheric capability, the Abrithi Assault Cruiser is the primary means for armed forces to be deployment on a planet's surface. Although officially a naval vessel, the Abrithi has the closest relation to Dilgar ground forces. Capable of carrying two full divisions of Dilgar soldiers at maximum capacity, the Abrithi's default load-out was a standard division and a battalion of heavy armour, typically Nishram Battle Tanks and Hikkan Armoured Personnel Carriers.

Possessing light and medium cannons, coupled with a short-ranged plasma torch, the Abrithi is not built for the height of combat. Designed to be able to sweep minor opposition aside, the Abrithi is still able to enter the field of battle when the result has been virtually decided, and put troops down onto a planet's surface with an excellent chance of survival. To enable these soldiers to be deployed exactly where they are needed, the Abrithi carries 14 Olgata class assault shuttles.

The Abrithi participated in the subjugation of Alaca in the opening stages of the Dilgar War, and the remnants of the Alacan navy was not strong enough to risk damaging this angular-looking vessel.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2226-2232):
Abrithi Light Carrier (2232): Limited, used as sacrificial units, only used in closing stages of war.

Abrithi Assault Cruiser
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 300; DV 8 (-10 size, +-8 agility); DR 15; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +3; Stealth 5; Cargo 50,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 4 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 50 Crew

Weapons:
Two Medium Laser Cannons; 2 Front; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Two Light Laser Cannons; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire
Two Plasma Torches; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +2 (Targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 18-20; Range 1

Craft:
14 Olgata Assault Shuttles
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Athraskala Heavy Bomber

The naming of the Athraskala Heavy Bomber typifies an atmospheric vehicle, but this is clearly not the case. Indeed, the naming of the Athraskala was done in respect for the original atmospheric vessel which bore the same name, and carried nuclear weapons destined to obliterate their enemies.

This vessel fits perfectly into the standard Military doctrine of bombing a world from orbit before depositing armed forces. With additional evidence, it could be argued that this class of bomber was the cause of more destruction and death than any other ship in the Dilgar fleet. An ungainly looking vessel, each Athraskala has an immense payload, and able to deliver it with a high level of accuracy to both stellar and ground based targets.

Development of new Athraskala bombers during the Dilgar war could be accomplished with relative ease. The base hull design for the bomber is inherited from the same template as several Dilgar support ships. It does have

a significant weakness, as its hull strength is not in line with the level of priority that an opponent will place on its destruction. This is especially true for the Liberation Navy, whose very worlds were threatened by the payload of these vessels, whether they are traditional, chemical, biological or nuclear.

It is rare for an Athraskala to be deployed in the first wave of an assault, often being brought into the battle late in the day. Like most Dilgar vessels, the Athraskala does not possess a jump-engine by itself, and so must be brought into play by either another vessel opening a jump-point, or by using a jump-gate. It also has no fighter capacity, and just two shuttles for the transference of crew and cargo.
Despite these limitations, the Athraskala has the capability to carry a good mix of bombs and missiles to soften up larger targets, particularly starbases and either slow moving or immobile starcraft. The main weapon to be utilised in planetary suppressions is a single mass driver, located underneath the main fuselage. Due to the manner of the mass driver delivery system, as with all Dilgar mass drivers, the vessel must be travelling either dead slow or be at full stop to unleash the weapon correctly. Some Dilgar captains have attempted to fire their mass drivers whilst moving, with often fatal consequences.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2229-2232):
Athraskala War Bomber (2232): Limited, used as sacrificial units, only used in closing stages of war.

Athraskala Heavy Bomber
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 280; DV 6 (-10 size, +6 agility); DR 15; Spd -; Acc 3; Dec 3; Han +0; Sensor +4; Stealth 5; Cargo 100,000 lbs; 2 Officers, 4 Pilots, 6 Sensor Operators, 30 Crew

Weapons:
One Mass Driver; Boresight; (See Dilgar Vehicle Technology section for details)
Four Missile Racks; 2 Boresight, 2 Aft; Guidance 2; Damage 40+4d10; Critical 20; Speed 4; Fuel 20; Reloads 20
Four Bomb Racks; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20 (when used in missile configuration); Critical 20; Range 10; Ammunition 8; No Reloads
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Delegor Suicide Frigates

Less competent naval vessel and more flying coffin, the Delegor Suicide Frigate only appeared during the final stages of the Dilgar War. The actual reason for the development of this craft was never truly explained, but the most likely theory was that the Dilgar, or elements within the War Council, had come to accept that the war had been lost. Therefore, there was little to lose by using those more fanatical soldiers, to take the fight directly to their enemies.

These attacks, known as the Blood Wind, were brutal in execution and their cost to those ships engaged in combat with the Dilgar. On some rare occasions, the Dilgar even stripped the innards out other classes of vessel and packed them with explosives, in an attempt to catch an enemy unawares.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2232):

Delegor Suicide Frigate
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 180; DV 12 (-8 size, +10 agility); DR 12; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 1; Han +3; Sensor +4; Stealth 3; SQ Ramming; Cargo 50,000 lbs; 2 Officers, 2 Pilots, 2 Sensor Operators, 10 Crew

Weapons:
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 2 Front; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Special Quality – Ramming: When a Delegor Suicide Frigate makes a successful ramming action, the base damage caused by the collision to both the moving vehicle and the object it strikes is doubled, prior to any other effect. This represents the fact that the ramming vessel has been optimised to cause damage in this way, normally by the use of explosives which detonate at the moment of impact.

Garasoch Heavy Carrier

With well rounded lines, the Garosoch Heavy Carrier is indistinguishable from the Tratharti Gunship from a distance. Chances are, that by the time an opponent has made visual confirmation about which particular vessel they are facing, they will already be engaged in the fighters that the Garosoch carries.
With the typical Dilgar mindset, the role of fighter carrier falls to the Garosoch.

Dual hangar bays allow fighters to be recovered and deployed quickly. Dilgar combat doctrine dictates that a Garosoch Heavy Carrier, as one of the few Dilgar capital ships fitted with a jump-engine, is not required to remain on the field of battle after its Dartfighters are deployed. The Garosoch does have some (albeit minor) defensive armaments, but these would not stand up to a one-on-one confrontation with any enemy vessel, of corvette size or larger. These weapons are simply designed to discourage

attackers as the Garosoch makes its way to the nearest jump-gate or recently opened jump-point.
The Garosoch carries many more fighters than any other Imperium vessel, forty-eight in number, comparable to the Earth Alliance's *Avenger* class carrier. Indeed, the general combat effectiveness of the Garosoch is also comparable to the *Avenger*, along with that other vessel's limitations. Typically, these will be Thorun Dartfighters, but may contain some Stingers, particularly during the early days of the conflict.

The sighting of a Garosoch was uncommon at the start of the war, as many captains of these vessels were wily enough to keep their ships out of combat. Of course, this had a negative effect on the morale of Garosoch crews, who were often denied any opportunity to prove themselves as warriors of the Imperium. Tensions sometimes strained between Dartfighter pilots and Garosoch crews, for this very reason, but such incidents were dealt with harshly by the command staff. During the latter stages of the war, there was little opportunity for the Garosoch class ships to flee from battles, as there was nowhere safe for them to go. This had the effect of virtually guaranteeing the Garosoch crews their chance for death or glory. For the Garosoch class itself, the glory days were actually the early part of the war, where their Dartfighters were the scourge of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds.

No Garosoch cruisers survived the Dilgar War, spared a future of being disassembled and melted down. The last surviving Garosoch cruiser, translated loosely as the *Damnation Song*, was successful in a ramming action against the flagship of the Earth Expeditionary Force, killing Admiral Hamato.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2231-2232):
Garasoch Command Carrier (2232): Used as Pentacan command vessels late in the war.

Garasoch Heavy Carrier
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 425; DV 8 (-10 size, +8 agility); DR 15; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 4; Han +1; Sensor +5; Stealth 8; SQ Jump Engine, Long Ranged; Cargo 100,000 lbs; 6 Officers, 60 Pilots, 6 Sensor Operators, 52 Crew

Weapons:
Two Dual Pulsars; 2 Front; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 14+2d10; Critical 20; Range 5; Rapid Fire (four shots per round)
Four Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
4 Jashkala Crew Shuttles
48 Thorun 'Dartfighters', commonly Mark II's.

Jashakar Frigate

Without a shadow of any doubt, the Jashakar Frigate was the most common space-going capital vessel produced by the Dilgar Imperium. Carrying a variety of bolter and laser cannons, the Jashakar was easily the match for smaller EarthForce vessels, and especially at close ranges, with a close ranged energy weapon nicknamed the 'plasma torch' that could inflict serious damage by itself. It could go toe-to-toe with larger EarthForce vessels, such as the Artemis and Olympus class vessels; several Jashakar Frigates were quite capable of taking a lone Hyperion down.

Service on a Jashakar Frigate was unglamorous at best; Dilgar officers saw the Jashakar as little more than a promotion opportunity. However, the ship had a valid role to play in the Dilgar war effort, something that the Warmasters and Warleaders were keen to insist upon Jashakar commanders that argued against being posted to one.

There were more variants produced of the Jashakar Frigate than any other vessel. Despite this, the Jashakar was undemanding from a technical or resupply level, being something of a military workhorse. It did its job, even if the crew often wanted to be assigned a more glorious command.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2224-2232):
Jashakar Escort Frigate (2229-2232): Limited. Intended to defend vessels from fighter attack.
Jashakar Minesweeper (2228-2232): Limited. Primarily used against the well-defended Abbai.
Jashakar Pulsar Frigate (2231-2232): Limited. General offensive improvements against large ships.

Jashakar Frigate
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 250; DV 14 (-8 size, +12 agility); DR 15; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 4; Han +4; Sensor +3; Stealth 5; Cargo 5,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 4 Pilots, 3 Sensor Operators, 20 Crew

Weapons:
Two Medium Laser Cannons; Bore; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Two Light Laser Cannons; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Medium Bolters; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 35+1d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Two Light Bolters; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 25+1d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Plasma Torches; 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 18-20; Range 1

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Leskrati Jump-Cruiser

It is fair to state that the Dilgar war effort would have been significantly impeded without the presence of the Leskrati. The Leskrati replaced an earlier vessel, called the Ni'tratha, which had a long and valid history in the Dilgar's early striggles with the Drazi Freehold and the Narn Regime, not to mention their ongoing struggle with the Raider community.

In the Dilgar War, these vessels both functioned as command ship and jump-point creators in the place occupied by Mishakur Dreadnoughts in larger engagements. They lack the awesome arnament as carried by the Mishakur class, not being designed for front-line participating. Instead, a Leskrati often functions as the command vessel in Dilgar Pentacans, carrying enough short-range weaponry to discourage a direct attack. Indeed, should a Leskrati come under direct fire, it is often viewed as a failure on the part of a Leskrati captain to utilise the ships in his Pentacan to full effect. For military officers, a position on a Leskrati was seen as a good career move. These vessels were almost always command vessels in their Pentacans, and so ensured a healthy chance for promotion to a larger vessel.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2221-2232):
Leskrati Command Cruiser (2229-2232): Limited. Intended for use in smaller Pentacans.

Leskrati Jump-Cruiser
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 300; DV 8 (-10 size, +8 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 4; Han +3; Sensor +3; Stealth 6; SQ Jump Engine, Long Ranged; Cargo 25,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 6 Pilots, 6 Sensor Operators, 40 Crew

Weapons:
Two Medium Laser Cannons; Bore; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Four Energy Pulsars; 2 Left, 2 Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+1d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire
Eight Scatter-Pulsars; 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right, 2 Rear/Left, 2 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Mishakur Dreadnought

The Mishakur Dreadnought, above any others, is the one vessel that caused all opponents to pause in their steps. The first one entered service in 2227, but the production rate of these huge ships, the largest manufactured by the Dilgar, was so slow that no more than eight were produced during the whole of the Dilgar War.

Betraying most of the core Dilgar fleet design doctrines, the Mishakur contained elements of most of the other vessels in the Dilgar fleet. The Mishakur Dreadnought is bristling with firepower, with everything from Heavy Bolters through to missile racks and close-ranged pulse weapons. It is hardly the most manoeuvrable ship in the fleet, indeed, the Mishakur is not particularly nimble when compared to other vessels of its type belonging to other races, but given the offensive armament that this vessel carried, the Imperium was not overly concerned.

Mishakurs often acted as command vessels, always occupying the command role within any Pentacan that it was a member of. This meant that the Mishakur became a priority target by default in engagements with EarthForce or League forces, as it was known that the vessel was a designated control vessel in the Dilgar Navy. EarthForce dreadnoughts almost always sought out an opposing Mishakur, and as a result there were few of them that survived until the latter days of the war.
Some Mishakurs were upgraded further, despite the fact that so few of them actually entered service. The most notable upgrade was actually for the personal Mishakur of Warmaster Jha'Dur herself. The small fighter complement was sacrificed, to make way for a dual Mass Driver delivery system. Other upgrades were made to the vessel, but most noticeable above all was the change to the vessel's livery, a black and red creation that made the vessel appear all the more menacing.

The crew on board a Mishakur tended to be the most loyal to the Imperium, if not necessarily the best skilled. This loyalty often extended to the command officer, who would not have the crew on board if they did not swear fealty. In the case of Jha'Dur, she actually left her dreadnought before the final battle above Omelos, but her crew helped keep the secret, such was their loyalty to the individual known across the League as Deathwalker. To others in the fleet, a position on a Mishakur Dreadnought was seen as the pinnacle that a Dilgar officer or crewman could achieve in a military career.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2227-2232):
Mishakur Command Dreadnought (2231-2232). Extremely limited. Warmaster Jha'Dur's flagship.
Mishakur Supercarrier Dreadnought (2232): Extremely limited. Sacrificed weaponry for additional hangars.

Mishakur Dreadnought
Colossal III Spacecraft; hp 500; DV 6 (-12 size, +8 agility); DR 18; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +1; Sensor +4; Stealth 6; SQ Jump Engine, Long Ranged; Cargo 150,000 lbs; 12 Officers, 18 Pilots, 16 Sensor Operators, 80 Crew

Weapons:
Six Heavy Bolters; 4 Boresight, 2 Aft; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 45+1d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Two Missile Racks; 2 Front/Left/Right; Guidance 2; Damage 40+4d10; Critical 20; Speed 4;
Fuel 20; Reloads 20

Four Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 2 Rear/Left, 2 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire
Two Medium Laser Cannons; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Two Quad Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 14+2d10; Critical 20; Range 5; Rapid Fire (4 shots per round)
Two Plasma Torches; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 18-20; Range 1

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles
12 Thorun 'Dartfighters', commonly Mark II's.

Niitratha Jumpcruiser

Holding an important place in Dilgar military history, the Ni'tratha was the first Dilgar vessel capable of opening its own jump-point. Many technical advances at the time were evident in this vessel, and to the War Council it stamped their ability to place their military might at any point in known space they deemed necessary. On a technical level, it demonstrated their ability to harvest, extract and manipulate Quantium-40 on a level precise enough to make hyperspace travel possible without the reliance on existing jump-gates.

The halcyon days of the Ni'tratha were the Raider Wars, and the skirmishes with the Drazi Freehold and the Narn Regime before the invasion of Alaca. A wide and ungainly craft, the Ni'tratha did not possess the smooth lines and forward pincer-like arms common of Dilgar vessels which came after it.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2214-2227): First jump-engine equipped Dilgar capital ship. Still maintained after the final production date, but no longer manufactured from new.

Ni'thratha Jumpcruiser
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 300; DV 12 (-8 size, +10 agility); DR 12; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 4; Han +2; Sensor +2; Stealth 5; SQ Jump Point; Cargo 15,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 4 Pilots, 3 Sensor Operators, 20 Crew

Weapons:
Eight Light Bolters; 2 Front/Left/Right, 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 25+1d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Heavy Plasma Cannons; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 40+2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 3
Two Medium Plasma Cannons; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 30+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Protra Scoutship

Lightly armoured and possessing only two weapons systems, the Protra Scoutship is nevertheless a crucial element of the Dilgar Imperium's naval line, and without it the efforts of the Imperium in waging war would have been much, much harder.

Before the start of what became the Dilgar War, there was a requirement to study other races, those who could either be trusted as an ally (in the short term anyway), or who would be ripe for conquest and ultimately exploitation. The Protra was developed with this aim in mind. It was to spy on enemy races, using the most advanced sensor equipment that the Dilgar could manufacture. Equally, the Protra had to remain hidden from enemy sensors, so extensive efforts were placed in making sure this vessel did not alert a foe whilst surveillance was undertaken.

By focusing on baffling engine and sensor emissions rather than weapons payload, the Dilgar technicians managed to produce a relatively stealthy craft with powerful surveillance abilities. Of concern was that if the situation that a Protra was in became compromised, then the Protra would need to retreat. One of the smallest vessels in the Dilgar fleet to be fitted with a jump-engine, the Protra was able to do its job well, giving the Dilgar Imperium information that they would not have had otherwise.

When the war started, the Protras received a modest upgrade to their weaponry, as some of the sensor-dampening equipment was removed. At that point, stealth and subterfuge was considered less of a requirement.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2218-2232):

Protra Scoutship
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 250; DV 14 (-8 size, +12 agility); DR 12; Spd -; Acc 3; Dec 3; Han +2; Sensor +4; Stealth 10; SQ Jump Point; Cargo 15,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 3 Pilots, 5 Sensor Operators, 17 Crew

Weapons:
One Heavy Plasma Cannon; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 40+2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 3
Two Plasma Torches; 2 Rear; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 18-20; Range 1

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Ochlavita Destroyer

The second most common Dilgar vessel seen on the stellar battlefield, the first Ochlavita Destroyer to be produced rolled off the production line in 2227, just a single year

before the offensive against the Alacan Republic began. A powerful vessel, the Ochlavita was intended to be an agile gun platform, and in this regard it was a great success. Indeed, the deftness of the Ochlavita's present at the assault on Alaca in 2228 was proof that the ships was everything the designers intended. Indeed, so successful were many elements of the hull design that they were replicated in the Tratharti, which was only just starting to enter full-scale production.

Despite this, the Ochlavita was a desperately unpleasant vessel for a Dilgar to serve on. With little thought given to crew amenities, the vessel was often only poorly lit, with most of the space given over to weapon arrays, charging banks, and other technical constraints. The power plant on the Ochlavita was large, but the resulting power from this gave the vessel an excellent power-to-weight ratio. As a result, there was little space for crew quarters, so much so that some of the crew slept at their stations, or in crawl ways underneath power conduits. It is perhaps for this reason that the record for number of incidents of crew misbehaviour was held by an Ochlavita Destroyer.

The Ochlavita was successful in other ways, as seen in several variants. Possibly the most notable variant was one in which firepower was sacrificed to make way for a hangar bay capable of carrying twelve Dartfighters. This variant was much more popular with the crew, as the removal of some of the weapon banks had the knock-on effect of making a little more living space. However, many Dilgar military planners disliked this, as it affected their tactical planning, and where this new variant should be placed in Pentacans. This variant was in production from 2230-2311, and was only stopped when the first Garasoch Heavy Carrier rolled off the production line in 2231. Ironically, this particular variant of the Ochlavita was respected more than any others by EarthForce, as it had the firepower to get involved in heavy combat, the armour to stand up to enemy hits, the agility to put itself into advantageous positions and also the ability launch fighters exactly where they would be required. Some EarthForce analysts cited this variant of the Ochlavita as an example of exceptional starship design, as they produced the Omega Class Destroyer score years later, the efforts of their labours producing a similarly specified vessel.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2228-2232):
Ochlavita Missile Destroyer (2228-2230): Very limited, unpopular and not particularly robust.
Ochlavita Escort Destroyer (2229-2232): Limited. Close support variant.
Ochlavita Destroyer Leader (2230-2232): Very limited, intended to take lead in Pentacans where more suitable vessels were not available.
Ochlavita Carrier Destroyer (2230-2232): Limited. Carried 12 fighters.

Ochlavita Destroyer
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 375; DV 11 (-10 size, +11 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 3; Han +3; Sensor +3; Stealth 5; Cargo 25,000 lbs; 5 Officers, 4 Pilots, 5 Sensor Operators, 32 Crew

One Bomb Rack; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20 (when used in missile configuration); Critical 20; Range 10; Ammunition 8; No Reloads
Two Medium Laser Cannons; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Four Medium Bolters; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 35+1d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Two Quad Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 14+2d10; Critical 20; Range 5; Rapid Fire (4 shots per round)
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft: 2 Shuttles

Ochlavita Destroyer Leader
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 375; DV 11 (-10 size, +11 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 3; Han +3; Sensor +3; Stealth 5; Cargo 25,000 lbs; 5 Officers, 4 Pilots, 5 Sensor Operators, 32 Crew

One Bomb Rack; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20 (when used in missile configuration); Critical 20; Range 10; Ammunition 8; No Reloads
Two Quad Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 14+2d10; Critical 20; Range 5; Rapid Fire (4 shots per round)
Two Laser Cannons; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Two Medium Bolters; 2 Rear; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 35; Critical 20; Range 4
Four Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 1 Left/Rear, 1 Right/Rear; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft: 2 Shuttles

Rishekar Frigate

The first true Dilgar battleship, the Rishekar Frigate was used extensively in the Raider Wars in the 2210's. The primary role of this vessel was to ensure the safety and integrity of the Omelos system, and the neighbouring systems. As time passed, the Rishekar was effectively left behind, with larger and better armed vessels performing the tasks that it once had. During the Raider Wars, one of these vessels was captured by a group of Raiders, in a failed attempt at subterfuge.

The Rishekar was heavily armed with plasma cannons, which were the weapon of the day for the Dilgar navy. A concentration of medium plasma cannons in the boresight of this vessel gave the Rishekar

powerful frontal profile, with light laser cannons covering the arcs that the medium plasma cannons could not cover. Lighter versions of the plasma cannon were mounted on the rear of the vessel, in an attempt to discourage an attacker approaching the vessel from behind.

The largest surprise when examining the profile for the Rishekar is that it is capable of descending into a planet's atmosphere and landing. Taking off again requires an immense amount of power from the vessel, unsurprising given the size of the Rishekar

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2210-2232): Used in Raider Wars (no new models produced after 2227)

Rishekar Frigate
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 300; DV 14 (-8 size, +12 agility); DR 12; Spd 30; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +2; Sensor +2; Stealth 5; SQ Atmospheric capable; Cargo 15,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 4 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 22 Crew

Weapons:
Three Medium Plasma Cannons; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 30+2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 3
Two Light Laser Cannons; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Light Plasma Cannons; 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2.

Craft:
1 Jashkala Crew Shuttle

Senschuka Patrol Ship

Notable for its role in Dilgar space-going history, the Senschuka was an early design whose heyday passed long before the closing stages of the Dilgar War. For a period of time, most notably the early days of the Raider Wars, the Senschuka held the title of being the most common vessel in the Dilgar navy.

For such a simple design when compared to those that came after it, the Senschuka was not a bad vessel. It was quite an agile vessel, which was all the more important given the appropriate level of armour that was fitted to it. A later version of the Senschuka possessed bolter weaponry instead of plasma based weaponry, but this was essentially an afterthought, to bring the Senschuka up to the same level as the other, newer, ships of the line.

During the Dilgar War, Senschuka class vessels were still seen, but did little more than occupy the fringes of smaller Pentacans. It took up a largely picket role, whereas in times gone by the Senschuka was classed as a warship.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2218-2232):

Senschuka Patrol Ship
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 275; DV 14 (-8 size, +12 agility); DR 10; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 4; Han +3; Sensor +2; Stealth 8; Cargo 10,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 5 Pilots, 3 Sensor Operators, 22 Crew

Weapons:
Two Medium Bolters; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 35+1d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Four Light Bolters; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 25+1d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Plasma Torches; 1 Front/Left/Right, 1 Rear/Left/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 18-20; Range 1

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Targath Strike Cruiser

Replaced in the latter days by the Garosoch, the Targath was replaced not by any inadequacies in the base design, but by the desire by the Dilgar Warmasters to have a ship which carried as many fighters as the EarthForce 'Avenger'. A well respected design, the first Targaths were produced in 2226, and continued at a ferocious rate, from the start of the war proper until the deployment of the jump-engine enabled Garosoch in 2231. Dozens of these ships were produced, and many had a long and valid history, at least until the Battle for Omelos.

The Targath carries two squadrons of Dartfighters, as well as having two forward firing Heavy Bolters to eliminate any sizeable opposition. Aside from this, the Targath had a respectable, but not excessive, array of pulsar weaponry to discourage attackers. Against smaller or less technically advanced opponents, the Targath was able to defend itself quite adequately.

Having an excellent reputation for reliability, the Targath was a Dilgar crewman's dream vessel. Whilst almost every ship has technical problems of some description, the Targath had no major outstanding problems. It simply *worked*. Much of the success attributed to the Thorun Dartfighters, the scourge of the League, must also be attributed to the Targath Strike Cruiser, and the fact that this unspectacular yet reliable vessel put those fighters were they needed to be. Perhaps, at some point in the future, the Targath will be given credit for the role it played, but this is unlikely, the Targath remaining the unsung hero of the Dilgar naval machine.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2226-2232):

Targath Strike Cruiser
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 300; DV 10 (-10 size, +10 agility); DR 13; Spd -; Acc 3; Dec 3; Han +2; Sensor +2; Stealth 8; Cargo 100,000 lbs; 6 Officers, 32 Pilots, 6 Sensor Operators, 36 Crew

Weapons:
Two Heavy Bolters; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 45+1d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Two Quad Pulsars; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 14+2d10; Critical 20; Range 5; Rapid Fire (4 shots per round)
Two Energy Pulsars; 2 Rear; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+1d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire
Four Scatter-Pulsars; 2 Front1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles
24 Thorun 'Dartfighters', commonly Mark II's.

Tratharti Gunship

With the pincer-shaped nose section typical of many Dilgar capital ships, the Tratharti gunship seems to large for its name, as military gunships tend to be fast moving vessels, on par with corvettes in a picket or anti-fighter role. The Tratharti is a competent vessel, capable of taking on many agressors.
The Tratharti carries no fighters, and only two shuttles. However, its true purpose is in defeating opponents and taking their fight to their homeworlds. Bristling with weaponry, the Tratharti has a single mass driver, similar to the Athraskala Heavy Bomber, but it was rare for the Tratharti to enter combat with this weapon enabled. Instead, this primary weapon was only used once all other opposition had been eliminated.

For offense, the Tratharti possesses an excellent array of forward-firing weaponry. Two medium laser cannons and dual twin-linked Heavy Bolters proved powerful enough to sully the day of any EarthForce or League Captain who was unlucky enough to find his ship in the sights of the Tratharti. Equally, for any pursuing vessel, the Tratharti had two rearward-firing Heavy Bolters, to help cover the vessel's escape.

The Tratharti, for several reasons, was never the command vessel in Dilgar pentacans. As the Dilgar liked their command ships to have jump-engines, the Tratharti was ill-suited in this regard. Also, the firepower of the Tratharti was more useful 'up-front'.

The real heyday of the Tratharti was in the early days of the campaign, before the recapture of Balos. The dual ability of the Tratharti, to remove opposition above a world and then power up its mass driver in order to destroy ground targets, was noted by military planners from the League and EarthForce alike. Thus, the destruction of these vessels was often sought after, and very often League opponents would attempt to destroy these as quickly as possible. These were amongst the most common of all Dilgar vessels seen in combat, ranking behind the Jashakar Frigate and the Ochlavita Destroyer.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2228-2232):
Tratharti-G Heavy Gunship (2231-2232): Increased firepower to combat Nova Dreadnoughts, but unreliable.

Tratharti Gunship
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 375; DV 8 (-10 size, +8 agility); DR 15; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +2; Sensor +3; Stealth 6; Cargo 125,000 lbs; 8 Officers, 12 Pilots, 16 Sensor Operators, 50 Crew

Weapons:
One Mass Driver; Boresight; (See Dilgar Vehicle Technology section for details)
Six Heavy Bolters; 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 45+1d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Two Medium Laser Cannons; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Dilgar Orbital Installations
Whilst the majority of the Dilgar space fleet was associated with acquiring new targets and rendering them incapable of offering any resistance, there was a requirement for an area of space to be controlled where there was no need for a ship to remain on-station. Orbital installations fall into this area, as they allow an element of control without the wastage of a ship's real potential.

Orgolest Weapons Platform

It would be fair to argue that a Dilgar stationed on a weapons platform such as the Orgolest had both the lowest career prospects and the lowest chance for survival out of any posting, save perhaps on board a Delegor Suicide Frigate. All but entombed inside an orbiting metallic container, bristling with weaponry, the Orgolest was the last line of defence above Omelos during the final assault on the Dilgar Homeworld.

The Orgolest carries a variety of laser and pulsar based weaponry, both with automatic and manual controls for usage by the crew. The Orgolests are often deployed in groups, and almost always around planetary bodies. Some

Orgolests were deployed close to Koratyl Starbases, and these crews were luckier than most as they could be rotated around on a more regular basis.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2230-2232):

Orgolest Weapons Platform
Gargantuan Spacecraft; hp 200; DV 6 (-4 size, +0 agility); DR 10; Spd N/A; Acc N/A; Dec N/A; Han N/A; Sensor +4; Stealth 10; Cargo 1,000 lbs; 2 Officers, 1 Pilots, 3 Sensor Operators, 7 Crew

Weapons:
Two Quad Pulsars; 2 Front; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 14+2d10; Critical 20; Range 5; Rapid Fire (4 shots per round)
Two Scatter-Pulsars; Turret; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire
Two Light Laser Cannons; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3

Craft: 2 Shuttles

Koratyl Starbase

Like its counterpart, the Mishakaine Planetary Garrison, the Koratyl Starbase was an exceptional design which could be easily constructed when the control of a system had been accomplished. Using components from other vessels in a different configuration, the Koratyl Starbase became the most common of Dilgar large scale space installations for the simple reason of cost. Funds that were saved by the cost-efficient nature of the Koratyl Starbase were put to work on creating bigger and better craft.

Developed in the months after the subjugation of Alaca, this construction like the Mishakaine proved to be a necessary development to support the coming war. It would free up military vessels for other purposes, and could be left to secure much of the area of space around a controlled world. It carried 36 fighters, and these were commonly the older Thoruskha class 'Stingers', especially in the early days of the war as the more advanced Thoruns were destined for the front lines.

Vessels approaching a Koratyl Starbase soon learned that all Dilgar creations exist for one specific purpose, and this installation proved to be no different. The Koratyl is bristling with firepower, and could handle much that came its way. For this specific reason, the Koratyl became something of a target for EarthForce ships and fleets, as they were able to deal with this huge construction better than many of the ships of the League members. The EarthForce Sagittarius was invaluable in this regard, as were the Artemis and Olympus, as they could pound the Starbase from a distance before the other vessels moved in. Of course, this was one of the logistical nightmares that plagued EarthForce, which the Dilgar were well aware of. Destroying a Koratyl Starbase often put an EarthForce fleet or a section of such a fleet out of actions for several days whilst they waited for re-supply.

Koratyl Starbase
Statistics:
Colossal III Starbase; hp 600; DV –2 (-12 size, +0 agility); DR 17; Spd N/A; Acc N/A; Dec N/A; Han N/A; Sensor +2 (sensor array); Stealth 4; SQ Immobile, Long Ranged; Cargo 450,000 lbs; 34 Officers, 28 Sensor Operators, 220 Crewmen.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2229-2232):

Statistics:
As a Koratyl Starbase is a very large object, it is treated as a station rather than a starship for purposes of damage and combat. The Koratyl has siz quadrants that equate to its defence grid and a number of critical sections that determine its overall hit points.

Damaging the Koratyl
Every section of the Koratyl is assumed to have DR 15 and 80 hit points. Once this damage has been scored, a vital area of the hull will be breached and any further damage that gets through its damage reduction will knock out that section. See individual sections below to determine what befalls the Koratyl if this occurs. Specific sections can be targeted; they are large enough that if an attacker wishes to attack a particular section, it is hit if the attack roll beats a DV of 10. Missed attack rolls do not hit the base at all. Instead of attacking a specific section, an enemy can simply assault the superstructure; attacks against it are at a DV of –4 (-14 size, +0 agility)

Superstructure; 480 hit points. If destroyed, the Koratyl breaks up in 1d6 rounds and is effectively disabled. A number of Dilgar personnel on the outpost would in all likelihood survive in the short term, although many would still die and the base still out of action, perhaps permanently.
Weapons Platform; The base has six of these, one for each quadrant. If this section is destroyed, the Koratyl's weapons cannot fire in this particular arc and attacks made in all other arcs suffer a –1 circumstance penalty to hit.

Crew and Troop section; At any time, each of the Koratyl's six primary sections holds 5 officers, 4 Sensor Operators and 30 Crewmen. Of this section is holed, enough essential personnel are killed that the section concerned suffers a–1 circumstance penalty to all significant actions it is required to make. If the section is destroyed, all other sections suffer a –1 cumulative penalty to all significant actions it is required to make. Thus, if two sections are destroyed, then all other sections are at –2 penalty.

Docking and Cargo Section: If this section is holed, then the hangar bay in that section cannot launch fighters or any other vessels until repairs outside of combat are possible. If

the section is destroyed, then any vessel or cargo in this section is also destroyed.

Command and Control; If this nexus is hit and holed, all significant actions are treated as being unfavourable (at a –2 penalty). If this section is destroyed, the Koratyl is shut down and cannot move or fire, although other Dilgar personnel on the outpost are (largely) unaffected.

Sensors and Stealth
The Koratyl is fitted with standard sensor equipment, but little consideration to the stealth profile of the base. It has a Sensor score of +2 and a Stealth rating of 4.

Koratyl Defence Grid:
The defence grid is divided into six facing, corresponding to the base's previously defined sections. Each has a 60 degree field of fire and the following weaponry in each facing:

Two Heavy Bolters; 2 in each facing; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 45+1d10; Critical 20; Range 4
One Missile Racks; 1 in each facing; Guidance 2; Damage 40+4d10; Critical 20; Speed 4; Fuel 20; Reloads 20
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 2 in each facing; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire
Two Medium Laser Cannons; 2 in each facing; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5

Dilgar Support Vessels

With any ongoing military operation or campaign, a supply line is vital. Weaponry is expended on the front lines, often at a frightening rate. Ships are damaged, crew are killed, sometimes whole task forces are obliterated. The soldiers on the front line need weapons, communications equipment, even food and water to continue the fight. This uncelebrated task, of supporting the war effort, is undertaken by supply vessels and crews.

The very nature of their work makes them a valid target for attack. If an enemy can weaken the supply lines of his foe, then the enemy will be weakened, in one or many respects, even before they arrive on the battlefield. The lack of a supply train can also have a damaging effect on the morale of crews, as they are forced to make do, and sometimes even scavenge what they need to survive.

Eskrafat Refuelling Barge

The main supply vessel for the Dilgar Imperium's war effort, the Eskrafat was the original source for the successful Athraskala ship frame. Capable of carrying a sizeable amount of cargo for its size, this should not prove to be entirely surprising, as the Athraskala modifications are capable of carrying a multitude of bombs, missiles and even a single mass-driver. The classification of the Eskrafat, as a refuelling barge, is something of a misnomer as the vessel can carry any type of cargo.

A standard Eskrafat does not have a large crew, normally around twenty or so Dilgar. Many of the systems are automated, meaning that the Eskrafat does not need a highly qualified crew to perform its task. This had the unfortunate offset of meaning that the crew are often not highly trained or motivated, and generally respond poorly when the convoy or flotilla that they are part of comes under League or EarthForce attack.

The Eskrafat is without a jump-engine of its own, forced to rely on jump-gates and jump-points created by larger vessels to travel the distances between re-supply points and the needy target vessels. It also has little in the way of weaponry, only two scatter-pulsar weapon stations, as any more is considered a wasteful venture by the War Council.

Some Athraskala Heavy Bombers were stripped back down to the Eskravat shell and were put to other purposes. In particular, some modified Eskravats functioned as so-called hospital and medical ships, but there was nothing beneficial to sentient life with the true function of these vessels. Thousands of sentients were tortured and died aboard these ships, the subject to experiments too twisted for a sane mind to contemplate. These vessels sacrificed cargo space for disease incubation chambers, isolation laboratories and surgical suites, along with hangar space to support six Olgata assault shuttles.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2229-2232):
Eskravat Medical Cruiser / Hospital Ship (2229-2232): Limited. Rarely participated in front-line conflicts. Prime targets for opposing forces.

Eskrafat Refuelling Barge
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 280; DV 6 (-10 size, +6 agility); DR 12; Spd -; Acc 3; Dec 3; Han +0; Sensor +4; Stealth 5; Cargo 150,000 lbs; 2 Officers, 5 Pilots, 2 Sensor Operators, 10 Crew

Weapons:
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Front/Left/Right, 1 Rear/Left/Right; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
3 Jashkala Crew Shuttles

Eskrafat Medical Cruiser / Hospital Ship
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 280; DV 6 (-10 size, +6 agility); DR 12; Spd -; Acc 3; Dec 3; Han +0; Sensor +4; Stealth 8; Cargo 70,000 lbs; 2 Officers, 5 Pilots, 2 Sensor Operators, 18 Crew, 200 Medical/Scientific personnel.

Weapons:
One Bomb Rack; Boresight; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20 (when used in missile configuration); Critical 20; Range 10; Ammunition 8; No Reloads
Two Scatter-Pulsars; 1 Front/Left/Right, 1 Rear/Left/Right; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
3 Jashkala Crew Shuttles
6 Olgata Assault Shuttles

Jashkala Crew Shuttle / Olgata Assault Shuttle

Whilst the Eskrafat Barge was able to transport supplies across much of the conquered League space, a different vessel altogether was used to move crew around between vessels and assignments. This role fell to the Jashkala, an uncompromising vessel that had perhaps the longest level of service of any ship in the Dilgar fleet.

The first Jashkala was produced in 2196, originally intended to handle orbital logistics above Omelos. Whilst it fell down in a cargo capacity, the Jashkala was more than able to handle crew reassignments. The Dilgar military mindset at the time was favouring vessels with specific purposes, and this gave the Jashkala a new lease of life.

All standard shuttles on Dilgar capital ships are Jashkala class and are well respected by the engineers who work with them. The shuttles do their job well, not complaining, not fussing, a true workhorse. They are able to carry twenty passengers in a moderate amount of comfort, or thirty in an emergency.

An upgraded military version of the Jashkala exists, named the Olgata. It is the preferred atmospheric transport of the Dilgar ground forces, and with an additional layer of surface armour the Olgata is not a particularly speedy craft but competent enough to get the job done. The Olgata cannot be carried on launch mountings designed to carry the Jashkala, and so is only used on those vessels modified to carry it. The Abrithi Assault Cruiser was the most common vessel to carry the Olgata, although a sizeable number of these assault shuttles were carried on the much hated Dilgar medical cruisers. The main difference between the vessels, aside from an improved defensive rating is the fitting of a light bolt cannon, similar to that fitted on the Thorun Dartfighter, Mark II.

Like the Jashkala, the Olgata is easy for engineers to work with. Reliability on extended campaigns is often more useful to a ground force than an extra foot of storage space or a two-percent increase in thrust capability.

Jashkala Crew Shuttle
Historical Summary:
Base Model (2196-2232):

Gargantuan Spacecraft; hp 50; DV 8 (-4 size, +2 agility); DR 7; Spd -; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +0; Stealth 8; SQ Atmospheric Capable; Cargo 2,500 lbs or 20 passengers; 1 Officers, 1 Pilots, 1 Sensor Operators, 2 Crew

Weapons:
None

Olgata Assault Shuttle
Historical Summary:
Base Model (2226-2232):

Gargantuan Spacecraft; hp 50; DV 12 (-4 size, +6 agility); DR 12; Spd -; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +0; Stealth 8; SQ Atmospheric Capable; Cargo 25,000 lbs or 20 passengers; 1 Officers, 1 Pilots, 1 Sensor Operators, 2 Crew

Weapons:
One Light Bolt Cannon; Boresight; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+1d4; Critical 19-20; Range 1

Shinkar Mass Carrier

Rarely seen outside of Dilgar space proper, the Shinkar Mass Carrier is to the Eskrafat what the Garosoch fighter carrier is to the Targath. Capable of carrying the equivalent amount of cargo as a dozen Eskrafats, only four of these gargantuan vessels were ever constructed. A full mile long, these ships carried refined metals and alloys, huge canisters of chemicals and vats of propellant liquid from the former home of the Alacans back into Dilgar space, and back again.

The most striking thing about these vessels was that they were unarmed. It was intended that, after the claiming of their new homeworld these huge vessels would be utilised to carry Dilgar, rather than mere cargo, to their new home. They sadly never were able to live up to their designated purpose, instead remaining as little more than a footnote in the armed conflict, performing much of the transportation for the components that would make up the Dilgar war machine.

No Shinkars were ever engaged in combat by EarthForce or the Liberation Navy – it was presumed by all parties that these vessels were melted down for scrap, to be used on other vessels.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2227-2231):

Shinkar Mass Carrier
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 325; DV 6 (-10 size, +6 agility); DR 10; Spd -; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +1; Sensor +0; Stealth 2; Cargo 1,800,000 lbs; 2 Officers, 4 Pilots, 1 Sensor Operators, 40 Crew

Weapons:
None

Dilgar Starfighters

Unlike the number of capital ships operated by the Dilgar, there are comparatively few fighter variants. Technical difficulties played a large part, although some Dilgar engineers working within the Imperial Research Arm viewed the entire concept as being weak. Their voices were in a minority, as the sheer need for a fighter outmatched their willingness to not design one.

Torushka class 'Stinger'

For many years, the predecessor to the Thorun Dartfighter was the pride of the Dilgar starfighter forces. Produced by the Imperial Research Arm, answerable to Warmaster Voth'An and later Warmaster Jha'Dur, this fighter was the first real example of its type build by the Imperium.

During the early years of the Raider Wars, it was painfully obvious that the Dilgar navy had a real disadvantage against single man fighter craft. Time and time again designs were brought to the drawing board, but dropped when the actual implementations of those designs were found wanting. The Delta V fighter, the most common variant operated by Raider bands, had limitations itself but even these could not be addressed. As the Raider wars went on, some Raider bands were able to arm themselves with Narn Gorith fighter, which made the lack of a decent fighter model of their own all the more of a concern.

Whilst the design which actually made it into full scale production had flaws of its own, it had no real opposition simply because there was no vessel in the Dilgar fleet which could challenge for its role. Another design problem was the requirement for the fighter to be able to function in an atmosphere, as there was little point in building a fighter to counter the Delta V when the target could hide in a planet's atmosphere.

The Stinger, tested on the fringes of the Immata system, had a horrendous time in testing with the main problem fitting such powerful engines onto a vessel so small. Over two dozen test pilots gave their lives in trials of this fighter, but the resulting vessel was loved by those who got the chance to fly it. The position of a fighter pilot became respected, and was coveted by many new inductees to the Dilgar armed forces. Many of the early pilots of the Stinger were political appointments, conducted solely on their relationship to either the War Council or the Dilgar aristocracy.

The Stinger was made redundant by the introduction of the Dartfighter in later years, fulfilling a peripheral role as a light support fighter before it was wholly phased out. The historical value of the Stinger could not be doubted, for without the technology pioneered in this rudimentary yet revolutionary fighter, the Dartfighter may never have ever been constructed.

In later days, the Stinger would be relegated to atmospheric duties, which it was well suited. The ability to travel at altitude higher than a dedicated fighter plane was not lost on the War Council.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2215-2229)

Toruska class fighter, aka 'Stinger'
Huge Spacecraft; hp 20; DV 12 (-2 size, +4 agility); DR 5; Spd 35; Acc 6; Dec 4; Han +2; Sensor +2; Stealth 10; Cargo 100 lbs; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
One Light Particle Gun; Boresight; Attack +0 (Targeting computer); Damage 2d8; Critical 20; Range 1

Thorun class 'Dartfighter'

The Thorun, or Dartfighter as it is more commonly known, was responsible for more starfighter casualties than any other fighter. It enabled the Dilgar Imperium to win dogfights against League fighters time after time, and was able to give the Starfury Tiger a run for its money. It was only when the Starfury Nova was introduced that the Thorun found itself outclassed, with that EarthForce fighter having a slight edge in almost every single department.

The Dartfighter was one of the most outstanding achievements of the Imperial Research arm, as headed up by Warmaster Jha'Dur. The prior issues that had plagued the development of the Stinger, that of engine power and distribution, did not affect the Dartfighter, which is surprising given the notable increases in the power-to-weight ratio of the Dartfighter over the Stinger. An additional benefit was the alteration to the mission profile of the Imperium's fighters; with the Raider Wars over there was a much reduced requirement for the production of a fighter capable of flying in both atmospheres and space.

Two versions of the Thorun Dartfighter participated chiefly in the Dilgar War, with the main difference between these two sub-classes of fighter concerning the armament. The Mark 1 Dartfighter was initially fitted with light particle guns, but after the assault on Alaca and the intended lull before the invasion proper, the majority of the Imperium's Dartfighter s had their weapons array upgraded to use bolter technology, in line with the rest of the Dilgar fleet. A third (later) version, one with a navigator and missile capacity rarely saw service, mainly towards the end of major engagements.

Throughout the Dilgar war, the Thorun was well and truly the thorn in the League's side. It was such a competent, all round package that the assorted races that the Dilgar faced found it impossible to face. The skill exhibited by the average Thorun pilot was also above and beyond that of the League, with an almost religious zeal about the manner in which their craft were flown.

Human military planners would find it difficult not to concede improvements to the Starfury programme were the result of the acquirement of Thorun wreckage from the Abbai. The main change in between the Tiger and Fox Starfury variants was the realignment of the distribution of engine power away from a separate arrangement.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (Thorun Dartfighter II) (2228-2232): Fitted with same light particle gun as Torushka class
Thorun Dartfighter I(2226-2228): Weaker offensive weapons
Thorun Dartfighter III (2228-2232): Navigator present, slowest variant, missile capacity, but rare

Thorun I class fighter aka 'Dartfighter'
Huge Spacecraft; hp 24; DV 14 (-2 size, +6 agility); DR 5; Spd -; Acc 7; Dec 5; Han +5; Sensor +2; Stealth 12; Cargo 100 lbs; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
One Light Particle Gun; Boresight; Attack +0 (Targeting computer); Damage 2d8; Critical 20; Range 1

Thorun II class fighter aka 'Dartfighter'
Huge Spacecraft; hp 25; DV 14 (-2 size, +6 agility); DR 5; Spd -; Acc 7; Dec 6; Han +5; Sensor +2; Stealth 12; Cargo 100 lbs; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
One Light Bolt Cannon; Boresight; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+1d4; Critical 19-20; Range 1

Thorun III class fighter aka 'Dartfighter'
Huge Spacecraft; hp 28; DV 13 (-2 size, +5 agility); DR 5; Spd -; Acc 7; Dec 5; Han +4; Sensor +3; Stealth 12; Cargo 100 lbs; 1 Pilot, 1 Sensor Operator

Weapons:
One Light Bolt Cannon; Boresight; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+1d4; Critical 19-20; Range 1
Two Dogfight Missile Racks; Boresight; Guidance 4; Damage 15+2d10; Critical 20; Speed 5; Fuel 3; Reloads 0

Dilgar Military Ground Vehicles

Nishram Battle Tanks

The main battle tank of the Dilgar, the Nishram is an old design from the late 22nd Century that warranted little in the way of upgrades to help the Imperium achieve dominance of the League and the acquisition of a new home.

Larger than its standard equivalent in any of the armies of the primary races, the Nishram Battle Tank is a full forty meters long. Part of the reasoning behind this was to allow for the maximum amount of firepower to be carried to the battlefield. This manifests itself in a twin-linked Bolter Cannon, similar to that to the troop variant. Addition venting and capacitor banks means that the Nishram does not suffer from the hand-held's risk of overheating, and thus may fire as and when required. Although somewhat unpredictable in terms of damage dealt, a square hit from the Nishram's powerful main weapon can decimate the tank of any other race, regardless of armour present. The main weapon loses power as range increases. Such a vehicle would suffer from an infantry action, and so to offset this a close ranged plasma weapon is fitted. The shots fired by this weapon, common on almost all Dilgar vehicles, is too inaccurate to be used effectively on large objects, where the armour tends to shrug off the staccato of plasma fire. Infantry are not as lucky.

Carrying this weighty construction into combat are four main tracked sections, located at the main corners of the base structure. These sections have a difficult job to do, as the Nishram is anything but light. The vessel struggles in soft ground, and is next to useless in marshy or boggy environments. The centre of gravity is underneath the main structure for the weapons platform, which is well armoured to prevent critical strikes against the ammunition stores.

Despite these limitations, the Nishram is a well respected element of the Dilgar ground forces, and its presence would be missed if this old design was retired. It was the key target of EarthForce ground units that participated in the Dilgar War, such as their main foe, the Rolling Thunders.

Nishram Battle Tank
Huge Surface Vehicle; hp 35; DV 8 (-2 size, +0 agility); DR 14; Spd 18; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +1, Sensor +3; Stealth 8; Cargo 700 lbs; 1 Officer, 1 Driver, 1 Gunner

Weapons:
One Twin-Linked Bolter Cannon; Turret; Attack +2, +0 (against infantry); Damage 5d6; Range 10; SQ Ground targets only; Ammunition 20; No Reloads

One Rapid-Fire Pacifier; Turret; Attack +2, +0 (against non-infantry); Damage 2d6; Range 2; SQ Ground targets only; Ammunition 20; No Reloads; Rapid Fire

Hikkan Armoured Personnel Carrier

The vehicle of choice for Dilgar troop deployments, the six-wheeled Hikkan is a fast and dependable vehicle that is everything that the Nishram is not. Its profile deems that it must be able to traverse most planetary combat environments with ease, and be fast enough to get troops to where they need to be with the minimum of fuss.

A bulky and somewhat boxy vehicle, the Hikkan has a rear deployment ramp for the dozen troops it can carry, so these disembarking soldiers can utilise the cover provided by the vehicle itself. Almost as an expectation that this vehicle will come under a moderate amount of fire, the Hikkan has a well-armoured front, which can absorb the impact of most small arms fire for a short time. A single cannon on top of

the Hikkan provides fire support for the deployed troops, although this weapons installation is often a key target by troops firing on a Hikkan and the deployed soldiers.

Hikkan Armoured Personnel Carrier
Huge Surface Vehicle; hp 25; DV 9 (-2 size, +1 agility); DR 15; Spd 22; Acc 3; Dec 2; Han +2, Sensor +3; Stealth 7; Cargo 200 lbs; 1 Officer, 1 Driver, 1 Gunner

Weapons:
One Rapid-Fire Pacifier; Turret; Attack +2, +0 (against non-infantry); Damage 2d6; Range 2; SQ Ground targets only; Ammunition 20; No Reloads; Rapid Fire

Transport Capacity:
12 Dilgar soldiers

Tarakar Patrol Vehicle

For fast reconnaissance and the conduction of rapid strikes against lightly armoured or poorly defended targets, the Tarakar Patrol Vehicle is the Imperium's craft of choice. A light armoured shell allows the wheeled vehicle to have impressive maneuverability and turn of speed for a military vehicle. Whilst the vehicle has an armoured shell, it would not last long against concentrated or co-ordinated firepower directed against it. The mission profile of the Tarakar is to get in fast, strike, and then get out again. If the target survived an initial attack by one or more Tarakars, then it would be rare for these fast strike vehicles to stay for another strike.

Tarakars are often grouped in three or more vehicles, often using co-ordinated lightning raids to take out targets. As the Dilgar War went on, those ground forces which were regularly trounced by Tarakar squadrons often were forced to learn the tactics of the aggressor, and develop their own tactical response.

Tarakar Patrol Vehicle
Large Surface Vehicle; hp 15; DV 12 (-1 size, +3 agility); DR 6; Spd 25; Acc 4; Dec 2; Han +4, Sensor +3; Stealth 7; Cargo 25 lbs; 1 Driver

Weapons:
One Rapid-Fire Pacifier; Front; Attack +2, +0 (against non-infantry); Damage 2d6; Range 2; SQ Ground targets only; Ammunition 20; No Reloads; Rapid Fire

Vintar Command Carrier

It is rare for Dilgar officers of Battle level and above to take the field personally, although sometimes even skilled and fanatical Dilgar soldiers need battlefield direction. To facilitate this, the Vintar command carrier was designed in early 2223 to allow the safe carriage of such elite personnel, typically on journeys between deployed garrisons and field centres. Over time, the usage of the Vintar expanded to battlefield use, although in extreme environmental conditions the Vintar struggles. The Vintar was always used in the command role, being unable to carry more than four passengers.

A well-armoured vehicle with a lower overall profile than the Hikkan, the Vintar nevertheless has two small cannon installations, identical to the single variant as fitted to the Hikkan. Flatter and wider, the Vintar has a well armoured underbelly, to protect the occupants from mines. Entry and exit to the vehicle's innards is via a toughened door on the left hand side, just aft of the front wheel.

Hikkan Armoured Personnel Carrier
Huge Surface Vehicle; hp 27; DV 9 (-2 size, +1 agility); DR 16; Spd 22; Acc 3; Dec 2; Han +2, Sensor +3; Stealth 7; Cargo 200 lbs; 2 Officers, 2 Drivers, 2 Gunners

Weapons:
Two Rapid-Fire Pacifiers; Turret; Attack +2, +0 (against non-infantry); Damage 2d6; Range 2; SQ Ground targets only; Ammunition 20; No Reloads; Rapid Fire

Transport Capacity:
4 Passengers

Dilgar Military Ground Fortifications

Mishakaine Planetary Garrison

Whilst not a vehicle, any detailing of Dilgar planetary forces would be remiss without mentioning the Mishakaine Planetary Garrison, one of the many tools that allowed the Dilgar to quickly pacify worlds upon the suspension of an orbital bombing campaign.

Taken from a Thrazan word for 'citadel', the Mishakaine garrison is build from pre-constructed sections, which are interchangeable depending on the needs of the particular installation. A standard garrison consists of five interlinked sections, and each potential section of the Mishakaine is detailed below. Each section contains all of the living accommodation, utilities and food and water supplies to last its inhabitants, or those who work within it, for three months without resupply.

Command Segment: Any military installation needs a command and control element to function correctly, bringing the disparate parts into a cohesive functionality that allows the tasks required of it to be carried out. The Command Segment of the Mishakaine contains dual control centres (in case one is destroyed), officer quarters and staff rooms, a small brig and interrogation suite, and a small hangar bay that can hold six Jashkala crew shuttles or three Olgata assault shuttles. Roughly eight officers and their considerable support staff can be housed in a Command Segment, which like the Military Segment has a good supply of consumables to last

if there are logistical problems or the garrison finds itself under a lengthy siege.

Energy Segment: Essential in a military base, the Energy Segment contains all of the power required to sustain a base, regardless of the power requirements of the other segments. The nuclear reactor within the energy segment also has the provision to be set to self-destruct, should the base fall to enemy forces.

Research Segment: The main construct which hosted most of the war crimes commited by the Dilgar Imperium on living sentients, the Research Segment contains extensive laboratories and analysis stations. As well as this most obvious element, the Research Segment also contains space for drilling and mining vehicles amongst many other types of research vessel to analyse the world on which the garrison is located.

Military Segment: This potential Mishakaine section contains all of the necessary support structures for running a military campaign. It contains barracks, training rooms, firing ranges, armouries, all necessary features for a minor military base of its own. It also features a small power generation facility, enough to power the segment alone in case main power is lost in a strike. A military Segment contains enough space to house and support a full division of Dilgar soldiers, in addition to a single heavy support division. Some Military Segments were modified to take a hangar of eight Torushka class 'Stinger' fighters, often assisting in ground operations.

Technology of the Dilgar Imperium

With the exception of their starcraft, which tend towards a poorer design, much of the Dilgar equipment is well made and manufactured. The Thrazan aesthetics for strong and purposeful design flows into much that they do. Art for art's sake is frowned upon by the majority of Thrazans as being an overly excessive waste of time, pointing to the conquered Rittacan society of what happens when weakness is allowed to take hold.

If using the rules for racial equipment templates as presented in The Zocalo, use the following rules below to represent Dilgar equipment.

Dilgar Template

The Thrazan obsession with strength and rigid construction translates into game terms as their items having an excellent level of overall robustness. Metals are favoured over any other material, even plastics and other synthetic materials tend to be often shaped around a metal core or frame. This fixation hampered some of their early efforts in advanced sciences such as laser and plasma generation, but the Dilgar handled this by enhancing the structural integrity around the weakened item.

If using the rules provided for racial items in *The Zocalo*, then consider all of the items in this chapter to have already factored in the rules for racial templates.

Any item may be made 'Dilgar' by adjusting it in the following fashion:

Increase the weight of the item by 25%. Stronger materials are favoured by Dilgar craftsmen wherever possible. Sculptures and ornaments made out of materials such as china are almost unheard of on Omelos – they are weak, and the Dilgar have a dislike of anything weak.

Decrease the availability of the item by one. This reflects the reluctance of the Dilgar to allow anything of their construction into the hands of others before and during the Dilgar War, and also to reflect the increased rarity of the item afterwards.

If the item uses an energy charges reduce its maximum effective charge by one (number of hours of use or number of uses, for example). The Dilgar still have not achieved the maximum level of miniaturisation in their industries, which this limitation represents. Should they be able to do so at some point in the future, then the precise manipulation of gravitic technologies should become possible.

Dilgar Equipment and Gear

The following equipment represents those Dilgar inventions that are above and beyond those similar to other races, or exist as a reflection of Dilgar scientific endeavours or historical importance. Most of the equipment in this section would have been available to be either purchase or be acquired by Dilgar military personnel for the duration of the Dilgar War. After this, and the blockade of Omelos preceding their sun going nova, the acquisition of items of Dilgar origin was immensely difficult.

Weapon Descriptions

Bolter Cannon – This huge weapon takes its inspiration from the models of bolter weaponry fitted to Dilgar fighters. Whilst attempts to scale the technology down further have proved difficult, this weapon was rarely found outside the Dilgar armed forces, for very good reasons. Capable of punching a hole in the thickest of armour, the Bolter Cannon is a shoulder mounted weapon, and the sheer size of it reduces the speed that a character may move by 10 ft per round, regardless of their physical attributes. In addition to this, firing the weapon stresses out the internal components to such a degree that it cannot be used on the turn immediately following a firing of the weapon, whether the attack was successful or not. This is to allow the weapon to vent the immense heat generated by the plasma coils within the Bolter Cannon. Indeed, were it not for the robust construction of this weapon there is a good chance that the physical integrity of the Bolter Cannon itself would be compromised.

The weapon is prevented from firing again when overheating by internal fail-safes; if this failsafe is removed for any reason, then the owner must make a Reflex Save versus a difficult of 20 or suffer two automatic critical hit from the weapon, including the area of effect to simulate the explosion of the weapon.

A Bolter Cannon has one additional disadvantage to offset its standard size. It is not easily reloadable, and requires a full minute for the power pack to be extracted from inside the casing. This is intentional, in case there is an internal explosion.

Bolter Rifle – Despite being called as such, the Bolter Rifle owes more to the phased plasma weapons utilised by other races, just with a different calibration and focusing matrix. Unlike the comparable rifles used by the other races, the Bolter Rifle has no rapid-fire option. Instead, shots are charged and fired in a similar manner like that of the much larger Bolter Cannon. The shot discharged is much larger, and actually has an area of affect caused by the discharge of the plasma shot hitting a target. Visually, the Bolter Rifle is smoothly designed and a visual appealing weapon, but distaste for its use by the League prevented the weapon from being inherited by non-Dilgar after the War. Certain mercenary groups however learned to appreciate the unusually designed but reliable weapon.

Firing the weapon in rapid succession stresses out the internal component like its larger cousin. If the weapon is fired for three consecutive turns, on the fourth turn it cannot be fired due to the weapon needing to cool down. Internal fail-safes prevent this from happening; if this failsafe is removed for any reason, then the owner must make a Reflex Save versus a difficult of 20 or suffer an automatic critical hit from the weapon.

Candelar – A weapon of Rittacan origin, the Candelar became a favoured weapon of the Dilgar hereditary aristocracy during the reign of Emperor Ren'Dur. A long pole just over a meter and a half in length, the Shenakar is fitted with a diamond tipped segment at the both ends, which if hitting a foe with full force does a horrendous amount of surface damage. In historic times, a skilled practitioner was able to strike their foe with a Candelar, then whilst the weapon is still in contact with the victim's flesh roll the body of the weapon. The resulting damage, inflicted by the rotating diamond tipped segment often pierced the skin akin to a power drill, the tip coming into contact with internal organs if the victim proved to be especially unlucky. In later times, an impact sensor fitted on each end of the weapon causes the diamond tipped segment to spin automatically for a period of two seconds, achieving the same effect with less effort.

Candelar, Masterworked – Occasionally, a rare example of the Candelar surfaces on the black market. These weapons were often crafted for Ren'Dur to give out as gifts to those Dilgar whom pleased him or wished to impress. A masterworked Candelar grants a +1 circumstance bonus to all attacks made with it.

Jhalan 'Shredder' Grenade – Whilst armoured troops are better protected against this weapon than most, even reinforced armour struggles to stop the full impact of a Shredder grenade. Inside this advanced weapon, tiny shards of glass and sharpened metal are packed, and detonated. These shards, often red hot by the fiery heat of the initial explosion, have an excellent track record in puncturing exposed flesh, and if the target is close enough, through body armour.

This weapon was the bane of many of the armed forces of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Whilst expectedly the Drazi had a better survival rate against this weapon, other races without the advantage of natural body armour cursed this weapon, and the millisecond's high-pitched sonic scream that signalled the weapon was about to detonate.

Rentil Pacifier – Distributed to Dilgar armed forces when facing an insurgency or public revolt. Rather than focusing on putting targets down in a single shot, the Rentil puts out so many shots that the target is literally saturated with a shower of miniature PPG shots. The dispersal of the energy pulses and the reduced damage they do at range means that this weapon is really only intended for close-in targets; the effects of such a weapon in the dark hallways of Grey Sector on Babylon 5 would be devastating.

Shenakar – A huge weapon, favoured by Kathran beserkers, the Senakar is slow and ponderous but devastating in the hands of a skilled practitioner. The blade itself is amazingly heavy but is sharpened to a devastating edge. The weight of the flat edges of the blade themselves are enough to stun an opponent.

Like all Dilgar bladed weapons, the Shenakar is bears some similarities to the scimitar of ancient Earth history. The back of the blade has a curved section several inches across, which has a secondary purpose other than the tips being useful for gouging. This curved section, in the hands of a veteran, is full capable of severing the limbs of opponents if a thrust or swipe is executed correctly.

Vanukur Knife– A traditional Thrazan blade, the Vanaukr Knife is a foot long blade, slightly curved with an undulating edge. Traditionally the blade carried by Warmasters and Warleaders, the Vanukur's edge often severs the skin enough to open the flesh of the victim out more than it would otherwise do so. In duels where a matter of honour was at stake between Dilgar officers (although honour in the Dilgar sense is not the same as what a human would consider honour) it was common for these blades to be coated with virulent poisons.

Vanukur Sword– A larger version of the traditional Thrazan Vanukur Knife, this weapon is a two foot long blade with the same undulating edge and curve as its kin. Military officers normally carry the

Vanukur sword as both a symbol of their position as well as the fate that will meet any enlisted service personnel who disobey their orders.

Armour and Clothing Descriptions

Uniform of the Warmaster – Imbedded with energy-absorbing fibres, the standard dress uniform of a Dilgar Warmaster is designed for real use, and not simply for ceremony. The uniform of the Warmaster grants the owner DR 1. In addition to this, the image of a Dilgar Warmaster in full regalia is an imposing sight, especially for aliens from the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. When dealing with members of the League, the (Dilgar) wearer of this item gains a +2 equipment bonus to their Intimidate checks, and a -2 equipment penalty to their Diplomacy checks. This represents the imposing figure a character wearing this armour cuts, but also the fact that others, reminded of all the Dilgar said and did, are reluctant to trust the wearer.

Thrazan Infiltration Garb – Constructed from advanced synthetics that have a natural tendency to absorb a measure of natural light, Thrazan Infiltrators saw little use in the Dilgar War. Historically, Thrazan Infiltrators often conducted lightning raids on Kathran holdings on their former territory. Thrazan Infiltration Garb grants a +2 equipment bonus to Hide and Move Silently checks if the target is already partly obscured.

Slave Clothing - Dilgar slave clothing is primitive, but is at least warming to the skin in winter, and cooling to the skin in summer. It would be rare for a non-Dilgar slave to wear this, these items of clothing being the province of Kathran and Rittacan Dilgar who work at their master's command. Dilgar produced slave clothing grants the wearer a +1 equipment bonus to Fortitude Saves against hot and cold temperatures.

Melee Weapons

Weapon	Cost	Damage	Area of Effect	Critical	Ammo	Range Increment	Size	Weight	Type
Candelar	2,750 cr	1d8*		x2			Large	5 lbs	Bludgeoning
Candelar, Masterworked	3,5000 cr	1d8*		x2			Large	5 lbs	Bludgeoning
Shenakar	1,000 cr	2d6		20 x3			Large	18 lbs	Slashing
Vanukur Knife	500 cr	1d6		x2					
Vanakur Sword	650 cr	1d8		19-20 x2			Medium	4 lbs	Slashing

Grenade Weapons

Weapon	Cost	Damage	Area of Effect	Critical	Ammo	Range Increment	Size	Weight	Type
Jhalan 'Shredder' Grenade	125 cr	1d10 **	10 ft			20 ft	Tiny	1 lb	Projectile

Pistol Weapons

Weapon	Cost	Damage	Area of Effect	Critical	Ammo	Range Increment	Size	Weight	Type
Rentil Pacifier	1200 cr	2d4		x2	20	10 ft	Medium	8 lb	Energy, Rapid Fire

Rifle Weapons

Weapon	Cost	Damage	Area of Effect	Critical	Ammo	Range Increment	Size	Weight	Type
Bolter Rifle	4,000 cr	2d6	3 ft	x2	20	20 ft	Medium	15 lb	Energy
Bolter Cannon	25,000 cr	5d6	10 ft	18-20 x2	4	30 ft	Large	40 lb	Energy

* Causes subdual damage only, unless an automatic success (20) is scored on the attack roll. In this case, the Candelar causes actual damage (and by implication a critical hit).
** Any target in the blast range that does possess any items that confer Damage Reduction, or does not have a natural Damage Reduction suffers an additional 1d4 points of damage.

Dilgar Vehicle Technology

The following section details the advanced technical discoveries and upgrades fitted to Dilgar vessels.

Mass Driver: By utilising magnetic principles and the limited (and imprecise) knowledge of gravitics that the Dilgar had uncovered from other races, the Dilgar were able to propel an asteroid at great speed towards its target. Whilst crude and simplistic in nature, the effect of a Mass Driver is brutal, especially when fired at a planetary target. In starship combat, assume that a hit from a Mass Driver causes 6d10 damage with a critical multiplier of x2, with no bonus to hit (as the weapon is not easy to aim) and a range of 10. As it is entirely a solid projectile, a mass driver blast ignores the DR of the target.

When fired at a planetary target, any structure within an 8 mile radius of the impact point is destroyed, with serious damage caused for an additional 4 miles after that. Any living sentients caught in this initial 8 mile radius are killed instantly, with no saves or avoidance of any kind possible. Outside this primary radius, for the next four miles, the player must make a Fortitude save (DC 15) to avoid being blasted off their feet and killed in the impact against a permanent structure or even the ground. Making this save does not prevent the individual from damage, taking 2d10 damage from the sheer force of the blast.

Those with an eye for detail may note the differences between the rules for the mass drivers as used by the Centauri Republic (as detailed in the Coming of Shadows season guide) and the Dilgar variant highlighted here. The differences are due to the limited understanding of gravitics that the Dilgar have; unable as they are to focus gravitic forces effectively or with any kind of real precision. Dilgar technology had not reached the potential to emulate the effects on gravity and new engine drives with gravitic technology, although estimates by Earth Alliance scientists reveal that the Dilgar would have achieved this capability two or three years after the fall of Omelos.

Dilgar vessels must be travelling at 0 speed to fire a mass driver blast, and have been aiming at a target for three rounds without performing any kind of manoeuvre (as listed in the Vehicle Manoeuvres table in the *Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book*). This delay represents the asteroid spinning up to the desired velocity, and also makes them incredibly vulnerable during this time. A vessel firing a mass driver blast cannot fire any other weapons in the round that it fires, and the weapon itself can only be carried on a vessel of Colossal II size, or larger.

Bomb Racks: Packing a payload much smaller than that of the mass driver. Bomb racks have an advantage over Mass Drivers, in that the launching vessel does not have to remain stationary to fire them. Use the rules as presented above for standard bomb racks, except that the damage caused is 5d10 rather than 6d10, and the inner radius of a bomb blast when fired at a planetary target is limited to the first 3 miles. Bomb racks may be carried on any vessel of Colossal I size or larger.

Bolter Weapons: Comprised of three distinct types, bolter weaponry is based around principles similar to Earth Alliance pulse weaponry, but with a greater emphasis on the 'punch' delivered by a projectile. Bolter weapons are a tad slower than many of their equivalents in other races, although this rarely has ever caused the Dilgar to lose a battle. To make up for this slight loss in speed, bolter weapons have an impressive impact potential on a target, causing tremendous damage. Bolter weapons fitted to capital ship scale vessels come in three distinct varieties, light, medium and heavy.

The damage scales of the standard ship-installed bolter weaponry, from 25+d10 for light weapons up to 45+d10 for a heavy bolter, is indicative of the nature of the blast caused by the weapon. When compared to other ship scale weaponry in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game, Dilgar bolters cause a higher predefined amount of destruction but have less opportunity for random damage.

Plasma Torches: A short ranged stream of plasma is fired on one salvo, forming a distinctive pear drop shape. Despite its appearance, any small vessel caught wholly within the stubby burst from the plasma torch stands virtually no chance for survival. The potency of the weapon diminishes with range, unsurprising given the incredible amount of energy required to power a plasma torch. With these limitations, plasma torches are almost always used as a weapon of last resort, or by those vessels that are fleeing a pursuing foe.

Scatter/Energy Pulsars: Primarily an anti-fighter weapon, scatter weapons are intended to literally shower the vacuum of space with a rain of energy. The energy consolidated matrix of the Scatter Pulsar is configured to fire in short, rapid bursts, producing a rate of fire that is surprising to many attackers. Energy Pulsars are an earlier design, and weaker in almost all respects. An unconfirmed report points to the weapons of the Vree for the inspiration behind this design.

The Legacy of Jha'dur – Destruction on Planetary and Cellular Scales

Weapons of Mass Destruction

The Dilgar were remembered historically for the great injustices and crimes of sentience, never mind mere humanity, inflicted on billions of individuals. Whilst many Dilgar

were tainted with the effects of these murderous acts, one individual above all others was responsible for allowing these crimes to take place.

The Dilgar made much use of orbital bombardment during their war against the League. The payloads delivered varied greatly, although all were designed to provide damage to some effect. Commonly, where there was no requirement to retrieve anything useful from a planet, it was bombarded with mass driver blasts. Often indiscriminate, the use of this weapon horrified any who saw it, and the use of this weapon by the Centauri Republic in 2259 would remind many in the League of the horrors inflicted by the Dilgar Imperium. Some aliens from League worlds uttered the name 'Centauri' and 'Dilgar' in the same sentence, and with relation to one another, but at the time the Centauri Republic was in ascendance, and simply didn't care.

The usage of tactical nuclear weapons was not beyond the Dilgar either, having a historical precedence which meant they were well regarded and respected by the Dilgar military. Indeed, the Dilgar (then Thrazan) victory over the Kathran nation would not have been accomplished so easily were it not for the timed and focused use of nuclear explosives to bring the Kathrans to their knees.

Poisoning of Mind, Body and Soul

The fact that the unleashing of poisons and diseases was so well known about the Dilgar can be traced back to the efforts of the Imperial Research Arm, and the efforts of Jha'Dur and her scientists in particular. The following diseases are indicative of those unleashed by Jha'Dur; there were hundreds of thousands of variants produced in the laboratories under her command, many never seeing the light of day.

Stafford's Plague: Using a hardy bacterial base as its origin, Stafford's Plague is perhaps the most well known of all of the diseases and maladies unleashed by the Dilgar during their war against the League. Most oxygen breathing sentients are affected by Stafford's plague. It is unknown if the disease effects Minbari physiology, but given the many comparisons between the two races, it is presumed that there would be an effect.

The initial manifestations of the plague are seeping boils that appear on the flesh of victims. These sores, a dirty brown in colour, weep frequently, the ooze from them more infectious than the airborne manifestations of the plague. These sores varied in size, the largest being several inches across.

The secondary phase of Stafford's Plague takes hold after the dermatological effects of the condition have consolidated. The blood stream of the host to the plague becomes poisoned, affecting the internal organs. Death follows usually within several days, and is usually a highly painful affair.

Stafford's Plague is named after the Earth Alliance scientist who first analysed the bacteria fully. The Dilgar pronunciation is far less pleasant on the ears of any non-Dilgar listeners.

Stafford's Plague:
Known Races Affected: Abbai, Centauri, Drazi, Human, Narn, Yolu
Infection: Inhaled
Fortitude DC: 20
Incubation: 1d4 days
Damage: 1d4 hit points, 1d6 Constitution (after d6 days following the incubation period)

Wailing Weeping: One of the more unpleasant ailments, the Wailing Weeping is a particular favourite for some War Scientists due to the effects that it causes. The bacterium alters state after the initial infection and actually becomes less infectious, which has become a prime concern for the scientists under Jha'Dur.

The initial stage begins with sores followed by extended bleeding from all orifices, being a sickly green colour. Whilst not infectious, these fluids cause almost instantaneous vomiting if the fumes are inhaled by any third parties present. The infected blood then attacks the orifices themselves, such as eyes, ears and mouth, consuming the flesh around the orifices. Once the virus has reached this stage, the bacterium basically consumes the host until it burns itself out.

Of all of the species within the League, the Drazi are especially affected by this, as the bacterium seems to be exited by Drazi biology once it has changed state. The Abbai as a species are largely unaffected by this condition, given the general biology of the Abbai and their semi-aquatic nature.

Wailing Weeping
Races Affected: Drazi, Centauri, Human, Narn
Infection: Inhaled
Fortitude DC: 18 (initial infection), DC 15 (after incubation for non-Drazi), DC 20 (after incubation for Drazi)
Incubation: 1d4 hours
Damage: 1d4 Constitution, 1d4 Charisma (permanent), 1d4 hit points.

Migrandil's Stone: Named after first acknowledged victim, a Descari refugee, the bacteria does not spread throughout the body from the site of the initial rashes, but rather caused a neurotoxin to be develop in the host which affects the central nervous system. This neurotoxin does nothing except prevent the muscles in the body of the host from relaxing, which might not seem particularly dangerous to the host.

Initial stages of the infection target smaller muscles, i.e. facial and those close to manipulatory appendages. The disease goes on to further affect the host, building up

potency to affect larger muscles. In most sentient species one of the most important muscles pushes blood around the host, the heart, is a perfect target for the bacteria. In time, the body is unable to do anything for itself, and dies. By that time, the body of the host is like a rock, hence the unfortunate naming of the condition.

Migrandil's Stone
Known Races Affected: Abbai, Balosian, Centauri, Descari, Drazi, Human, Narn, Pak'ma'Ra, Yolu
Infection: Inhaled
Fortitude DC: 17
Incubation: 1d10 hours
Damage: 1d4 Dexterity

Interfacing with the Living

To the Dilgar, there was very little that was taboo for research. The moral issues which concerned other races did not trouble them, the goal of advancement of the Dilgar people being the only doctrine worth following. The reason for this are open for debate, but one opinion, held by many Earth Alliance theologians, is that the lack of a religious following of any sort, in any current or historical capacity, did not outline a set of moral guidelines for the Thrazans to follow in their cultural expansion.

The one area of technological development which eluded Jha'Dur and her team, and that was the development of telepathic ability amongst those Dilgar with mixed Kathran and Rittacan bloodlines. They had identified that there was no one key gene in the Dilgar DNA sequence which was responsible, and no therefore no single or simple way for the alteration of a Dilgar's DNA or the implantation of a technological device to make this possible for those without the bloodline.

Despite the fact that those with this bloodline were protected from the War Council by the centuries old mandate of Emperor Ren'Dur, this did not stop those of the bloodline being kidnapped. In the two decades preceding Omelos's sun going nova, this became such a frequent occurrence that the Emperor placed those telepaths and their families under military guard, preventing them from leaving the palace alone. These military guards, outside the control of the War Council, had order to shoot on sight any individual who attempted to take one of the Emperors's protected. The number of kidnappings dropped substantially; this was due more to the realisation that there was little more the scientists could do rather than the threat of the Emperor's guards.

The examples presented below are just illustrations of the many different avenues researched and developed by Jha'Dur and the Imperial Research Arm. Games Masters, if they wish to develop their own templates, are encouraged to be as dark and devious as they possibly can be. There was no limit to the level of darkness that Dilgar research, and in particular Jha'Dur, would not go.

These templates have been designed to allow a simple 'overlay' of the abilities and problems assigned with Jha'Dur's cybernetic experiments to be placed over an existing character's statistics. This will allow the characterisation and roleplaying around the acquisition of this dark and twisted technology to
take place, with the rules being simple and straight forward. Whilst the most famous of all the Dilgar creations, the anti-agapic, required the sacrifice of others to make, it is important to note that all of the experiments conducted by Jha'Dur resulted in deaths, often in their tens of thousands. Any character who used these templates would therefore need an impressive level of flexible morality.

Mental Capacity Template

Designed to utilise the thirty percent of the Dilgar brain that was not well utilised, this set of biological modifications was originally intended to allow those mental pathways within the brain of a Dilgar to allow these areas to be utilised for usage by the rest of the brain. This, it was hoped, would allow the Dilgar a greater ability to store facts and figures, and recall them. This would give the Dilgar, or those who were fitted with it, intellectual superiority over other races within the galaxy.

Whilst this set of alterations to a host may result in the advancement of mental powers, there are many things that can go wrong with this procedure. Indeed, in many cases the host can simply go insane. This was common on most of the test subjects, until the key combination of drug therapies, genetic treatments and technological implants was found. Over eighteen thousand individuals from a multitude of different races went insane from the pieces of hardware integrated into their brains. The father of Na'Toth, the one-time aide to the Narn ambassador to Babylon 5, suffered this fate. Others were experimented upon as they went insane, their brains dissected to see the effects induced.

Hit Points: As Host.
Speed: As Host.
Initiative: The mind of the host is a whirl of thoughts and processes, but can affect the interaction a host has with their environment if forced to make snap judgements. The host suffers a penalty to their initiative, which is random, depending on the mental state of the Dilgar who is host to this template. The penalty suffered is 1d4, and is re-rolled whenever an initiative test is required.
DV: As Host.
DR: As Host.
Damage: As Host.
Special Attacks: None.
Special Qualities: A individual with the Mental Capacity template retains all of the host's special qualities and gains the following additional ones.

Mental Agility: The host gains the Data Access feat, ignoring all pre-requisites. Sifting through vast amounts of data now comes naturally to the host. If the Data Access feat has already been gained, then this special quality has no further effect.
Fast Reasoning: Once per day, the character may re-roll one failed Intelligence based skill check. This is to represent the powers of deduction that the character now has, in that even if the actual answer is not known, a process of elimination and almost inspired leaps of logic can usually point them in the right direction.
Inner Focus: The character is so focused on their own reasoning and logic that common sense is often compromised. Whenever the character makes a Wisdom based skill check, their Intelligence modifier is applied as a negative bonus. For example, a Dilgar character with this template who has an Intelligence score of 18 will have a -4 modifier applied to any and all Wisdom based checks.
Save: The implants in the body of a host increase their mental fortitude and capacity. However, this has a detrimental effect on their ability to react to external stimulus around them, and thus the implants in this template reduce the Reflex save of the host by -2.
Abilities: As Host, except for a +2 bonus to the Intelligence score provided by this template above and beyond the abilities listed above.
Skills: As Host.
Feats: As Host.

Nerve Stimulation Package

Boosts nerve signals. The host becomes more alive to the world around them, in his mind connected to the universe in ways that can never be explained to someone who does not have this series of upgrades fitted. To outsiders, an individual with this upgrade seems permanently jittery. It is common for an individual with this package to have trouble sleeping, which over time will bring its own mental problems.

The development of this upgrade was particularly barbaric. Many hundreds of innocent captives were forced to suffer degrading experiments as a variety of implants were inserted into their bodies, stimulated by electrical impulses in order to see if the transmission of nerve signals could be improved. These experiments almost always left the protesting host permanently crippled, and the Dilgar were not known for their humanitarian policies when dealing with the less physically able.

Hit Points: As Host.
Speed:. As Host
Initiative: As Host. However, see the Feats section below.
DV: As Host.
DR: As Host.
Damage: As Host.
Special Attacks: None.
Special Qualities: A individual with the Mental Capacity template retains all of the host's special qualities and gains the following additional ones.

Faster than Light: The character gains a +4 template bonus to their Reflex save.
Overburdening the System: The host is sometimes vulnerable to an extensive amount of external stimulus which can overload their senses and them to become incapacitated. The character becomes stunned, for 2D6 rounds. If the character fails a Reflex save which results in deafness or blindness, the duration that the negative effects would be suffered is doubled.
Lack of Concentration: The side effect of external stimulus, even though it may not be intended to cause harm, often causes an individual with this template to have trouble focusing on any one task for a period of time. If the host has the Nerves of Steel trait, it is lost, otherwise this feat may never be taken. Any Concentration check the character is forced to make has a 1d4 negative modifier applied, after the player has made their check.
Save: The above changes aside, the host's saves are unaffected.
Abilities: As Host.
Skills: As Host.
Feats: The Host gains the Improved Initiative feat if they do not already possess it, to represent the fact that their central nervous system is working above and beyond its normal capacity. If the host already has this feat when the template is applied, then the bonus applied from Improved Initiative is increased to +6 rather than the default bonus of +4.

Biological Defense Package

Whilst it seemed like the natural law of progression for an individual to be born, mature and finally expire, the quality of life is an important to most doctors from the many races in the galaxy. Freedom from disease and maladies are the wish of almost every sentient, although this is sadly hardly ever the case for the younger races.

This set of treatments and implants template gave rise to certain revelations to Jha'Dur, and led to her discovering the key principles behind the development of an anti-agapic. Like the anti-agapic, this template also requires the retrieval of genetic material from the host's race to function at full effect. It is possible that this could come from a cloned source, although the fact that a living breathing sentient must be harmed to produce this package still applies.

Hit Points: The host of this template generally joins excellent health, and so gains +4 hit points.
Speed: As Host.
Initiative: As Host.
DV: As Host.
DR: As Host.
Damage: As Host.
Special Attacks: None.
Special Qualities: A individual with the Mental Capacity template retains all of the host's special qualities and gains the following additional ones.

Cellular Improvements: The host gains many biological improvements with the application of this template. The implants in the body of a host increase their physical well-being, encouraging their bodies to fight off infections. A host with this template gains a bonus of +6 to their Fortitude save to resist the effects of poisons, toxins and disease.
Reduced Life Expectancy: With the body of the host being forced to work at a much faster and harder rate than it was intended to, the simple fact remains that sooner or later the body will simply stop. The life expectancy of an average Dilgar is reduced by 1D10 years.
Medical Resistance: The host's immune system works well to protect the host from harm, but also impairs attempts to perform any kind of medical assistance on the host as the treatments and implants attempt to reject any chemicals used in treatments. All Medicine attempts on this character suffer a –2 penalty.
Save: Above and beyond the benefits mentioned above, an individual who has their biology altered to make use of this template had a +2 template bonus applied to their Fortitude Save.
Abilities: The all round general health-improvements this template provides manifests itself as a +2 bonus to the host's Constitution score.
Skills: As Host.
Feats: As Host.

THE DILGAR WAR

In future times, historians would struggle to establish which the most costly war was for the League of Non-Aligned Worlds; the Shadow War or the Dilgar War. In both conflicts, the invading forces obliterated whole worlds with impunity. Both operated under the auspices of reasons for going to war; for the Shadows it was allegedly to allow the younger races to prosper, whilst for the Dilgar it was to find a replacement for their doomed homeworld of Omelos. In both cases, the reason for the fight often served second thrift to the actual conflict itself.

In a way, perhaps it is merciful that the Dilgar War happened at the time that it did, thirty years before the Shadow War. If the Shadows had been able to ask that fateful question to the Dilgar, it would have been the Dilgar who gave the correct answer, perhaps even better than the Centauri.

Lay of the Land

The system map, as included in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book, is useful material to study whilst reading this chapter. The jump routes as detailed on that map are still in existence in the timeframe of the Dilgar War, with the exception of the jump route between Sector 83 and Zagros. If this jump route had been in place, the Dilgar would not needed to ally themselves with the Narn Regime, simply being able to proceed directly into the heart of Drazi space.

THE SUBJUGATION OF BILLIONS (2228 – 2229)

The Opening Salvo

Without warning, the Dilgar War began with a well-orchestrated attack on the Alacan Republic by the Dilgar Imperium. Beginning with an assault on the Alacans mining facilities on and around the seventh planet in their solar system, timed during an eclipse, the mining vessels and fighters were destroyed within an hour. When the Alacans attempted to resume contact with the mining colony, there was nothing, just static.

The second prong of the plan was a direct assault on Alaca III, and the Alacan naval forces were caught unawares. In a swift and undeniable victory, the Dilgar wiped out most of the Alacan vessels that stood in their way. Indeed, the closest ship to pass for an Alacan command vessel was blown apart in the opening salvo, preventing any of the other defending ships from rallying to an effective defence. The Alacans launched some notable strikes, but they were borne out of desperation – unlike the Dilgar, the Alacan navy was comprised wholly of volunteers, and members of the civilian at that. They had no combat training, no military schooling, and such were in truth outmatched before even the first shot was fired. In essence, it was a miracle that two Alacan vessels managed to escape via the local jump-gate.

With the space fleet destroyed, along with a visiting trade envoy from the Vree that was unlucky enough to be caught in Alacan space, the Dilgar could go to work unhindered. A concentrated orbital bombardment commenced for several hours, effectively bombing all resistance out of the stunned Alacans. Asteroids and meteors, fired from high above Alaca III, slammed into the world , killing millions. The primary cities of Growor and Vlaca were obliterated within the first few moments, and those trapped in these cities died first, the Alacan administrative and governmental networks destroyed from afar.

After waiting twenty days for the surviving population to be significantly weakened, the Dilgar launched. In the grand scheme of things, the Alacans were unimportant to the Dilgar's plans, but their world and home system contained many untapped mineral reserves critical to the future war effort. In particular, whilst the Alacan spacedocks were laughable by Dilgar standards, the mining facilities elsewhere in the system, including Alacan VII, would be of immense use to the Dilgar. Their military was not strong enough to resist the combined might of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds

The survivors would find their lives reduced to slavery, mining the resources from their own world, or as candidates for experimentation by the Dilgar Warmaster in charge of Research and Development, Jha'Dur. All that they had as

a future was a life of pain, as their very bodies and minds were violated by Jha'Dur.

With this opening salvo fired, the Dilgar were careful not to push themselves too much, too soon. There had been an element of risk associated with the attack on Alacam but it was less risky than most of the other options. Without the opportunity to try out new ship designs, and gain experience for their crews, the Dilgar's effort to find a new homeworld could have stalled at this early stage. For now, luck was on their side, a fact which the Warmasters were well aware of.

A Lull In The Storm

With Alaca conquered and her population submitted to experiments beyond the thought of any sane being, the Dilgar stepped back from the frey. With enough ores and minerals retrieved from Alaca to build hundreds of new warships, and their crews bloodied in combat, the Dilgar knew they had to step back from the threat.

Alacan III, even if it could have been claimed as a new homeworld for the Dilgar, would not have been theirs for very long. The War Council firmly believed that if the Dilgar claimed Alaca III, then moved their entire population there, the League would be united in their opposition to them. Their plan rested on convincing others that the mission had simply been an exercise in handling a Raider problem. Reports from spy and scouting craft had confirmed years before that the other races in the League of Non-Aligned Worlds were much more advanced than the Alacans had been – in fact, some of them were close to the technological level of the Centauri Republic, whom the Dilgar had an occasional relationship with.

On that score, diplomatic efforts had assured the major powers that the Dilgar Imperium was not a threat. The Centauri Republic was drawing in on themselves on a daily basis, and the Narn Regime had only recently emerged from a border war with the race known only as 'Humans'. To ensure that this race did not interfere in their efforts to secure a new homeworld, action needed to be taken. Initial research led the Dilgar Imperium to believe that humanity, a relative newcomer to the galactic stage was too weak to offer much opposition, and also lacked the stomach for a fight.

Using typical Dilgar deceptions, a lone Hyperion cruiser was attacked whilst extending Human goodwill in League space. This ship, the *Persephone*, was carrying several diplomats who had been authorized by EarthGov to offer favourable trade agreements to members of the League, should a series of requirements be met. The Dilgar knew that the Hyperion was not a Raider vessel, but attacked it anyway as a pretense for launching a first strike.

Caught unprepared, the *Persephone* had barely managed to launch its complement of fighters before it was destroyed, secondary explosions raking along its hull as a single lifepod managed to discharge itself, containing mainly engineering personnel. With a lone lifepod to protect, and an entire fleet bearing down on them, the ranking pilot in one of the fighters signaled his wish to surrender. To his surprise, his request was answered by chatter in an alien language between the attacking vessels, which even though it was not in any Human tongue sounded like an argument.

Contacting the ranking Human pilot in Interlac, the commander of the Dilgar task force apologized profusely, stating that they were hunting an enemy vessel of a similar power signature to that of the now destroyed *Persephone*. The Dilgar escorted the fighters and the life pod back to Earth Alliance space, and requested that a diplomat be allowed to come to Earth to ensure that this misunderstanding never happened again. The diplomat would propose a Non-Aggression Pact with the Earth Alliance.

Unfortunately for the Dilgar, the Earth Alliance at the time had no interest in appeasing another galactic power, especially one that had not even issued a stand-down order to an apparently hostile target. The Dilgar were forced to accept that the gambit had failed, but still believed that the Earth Alliance were without the will to engage them in battle – rather than take the opportunity to avenge their fallen, they did nothing. To the Dilgar, this was proof that they did not have the stomach for warfare.

Diary of David Nathaniel Sinclair, May 21st 2228 : 22:13pm.

Halfway through my tour of duty, and was delighted to find a short movie had been sent to me from home. Jeffrey was building a model Starfury Tiger (I swear, he's going to follow me into this sorry profession one day), and Malcolm was trying to avoid his brother's jibes about a new girl in his class. Malc's going to be a heartbreaker one day, I can see it already.

My heart sank when I saw Gemma. Running launch drills, practicing against Narn and Centauri combat models can focus your mind on what you are doing, but it makes the pain in your heart upon seeing a loved one all the more keen. I'm counting the months until I get back home.

No one in EarthForce likes to hear about the loss of one of our ships. I didn't know any of the crew on board the Persephone, but I trained with a couple of her pilots. Good guys, a little cocky and sure of themselves, but still good guys. Glad to hear that at least they made it out, although this new alien race, the Dilgar, concerns me somewhat. Sound a bit too Narn-like for my liking, and we know how much trouble they've been recently.

Anyway, gotta get some shut-eye. Tomorrow's a busy day. Wing Commander McGreen's been reassigned, to command a fighter wing on one of the new Nova Dreadnoughts, the Vanguard, so I've got the post temporarily. I'm not the most popular guy on the team, so this temporary promotion has gone down about as well as the nuking of San Diego. I think some of the guys think I'm so wooden I had a charisma-by pass at birth. Nothing like a bit of pressure to stop you sleeping…

The Narn Regime took advantage of this lull, taking a couple of worlds for themselves, specifically T'llin and Tuchanq. In future times, the manner in which some of the League members, in particular the Drazi, held the mighty Narn Regime would be mooted as a reason why there was no retaliation against the Imperium. It was not known, apart from by some Raider groups, that the Narn and Dilgar had agreed to not actively oppose one another, stemming from a concord made during the Raider Wars. In the following year, that understanding would grow to a new level.

The Centauri relationship to the Dilgar Imperium was more interesting. On several occasions groups of Dilgar soldiers had been offered to the Centauri Republic to function as guards and peacekeepers on alien worlds. Some of the Noble Houses accepted this offer, watching these new guards and peackeepers closely. These guards were more than simple soldiers; they were some of the best spies that the Dilgar possessed. For several months, these soldiers performed duties on behalf of the Centauri Republic, then were withdrawn with little reason given. It was never revealed what had happened, but the Centauri remained unusually quiet during the coming war, not even the rattling of sabres. The word of military analysts years later was that something crucially embarrassing to the Republic had been uncovered by the Dilgar spies.

The other members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds had been alerted to the threat of the Dilgar, although their response was anything but unified. Despite the best efforts of the Imperium, a single Alacan vessel had managed to escape the destruction of their homeworld and make it safely to a neighbour to request for aid. This ship, the *Pyrotinia*, attempted to garner support for a counter strike against their attackers but little came of it. Despite the efforts of the Abbai to bring the various alien governments into some form of political and economic cohesion, the so-called League of Non-Aligned Worlds was too wrapped up in individual concerns to offer any form of consolidated support to the Alacans.

In response to the attack on Alaca, the Abbai fortified their borders, content after a time to merely holler angry words in the general direction of Omelos, the Dilgar homeworld. The Abbai had previously had diplomatic relations with the Alacans, but could not push the issue with the Dilgar, as several dozen Abbai spy satellites had been discovered by the Imperium above their homeworld, the aquatic race wishing to keep an eye on this rising power. The other reason why the Abbai did not step in was simple neutrality – the Alacans were not members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, and to step up to their defence would have forced the Abbai to act in a non-passive manner, which was wholly out of character for their racial profile.

The other major power which could have done something to aide the Alacans, the Drazi Freehold, took the words and pleadings of the crew of the Pyrotinia more seriously. With an excuse given to expand their military presence, the Drazi began constructing new starbases, warships and orbital installations. Several exploratory moves into Dilgar space failed, with the Drazi's new foe appearing much stronger than they had initially suspected. There were several small border raids and skirmishes, primarily near to the Drazi colony of Drathun. The space around this location was claimed by both sides, and thus most of these small battles were fought there, although at no point was a foothold gained on the planet's surface. In truth, the Drazi Shadak were more concerned about the threat posed by the Narn Regime than the Dilgar Imperium, as the Regime was a much larger concern, with significantly more firepower. The impression which the Dilgar wanted to give was merely sabre rattling, and not as if they had any interest in conquering any domain.

The other powers in the League, by comparison, simply did not believe that the Dilgar were much of a threat. The fact that the Dilgar had stopped after Alaca was proof that it was nothing more than a dispute between two rival civilizations, accepting the lie of Raider attacks originating from Alaca to be accepted as the truth.

As 2229 drew to a close, behind their carefully constructed veil of secrecy the Dilgar Imperium's fleet had been able to grow at an exponential rate. The coming two years would bring the League of Non-Aligned Worlds to their knees.

The Veil of Night (2230-2231)

It was in the second month of 2230 that the Dilgar decided that it was the opportune time to launch the next phase of their plan of conquest. It was nothing short of a tactical masterstroke, in that the actual targets chosen, and led to believe that they were part of some grand Dilgar plan, were ones that the Dilgar had no real intention of keeping.

Espionage efforts over the last few years, coupled with detailed reports from Dilgar *Protra* class scout ships, confirmed that the two larger powers in the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, actually did not have a world which would meet the requirements of a new home for the Dilgar.

The Abbai were too strong defensively to crack – their entire ethos as a race was based around a strong defence, and to the Warmasters the eventual prize wasn't worth the trouble. Their homeworld of Abba was waterlogged, and significant terraforming would be required to make it even close to being suitable. The amount of time it would take to successfully alter the surface of Abba would stretch into decades, and the scientists back on Omelos did not want to gamble that their world had that long left. The primary Abbai colony was also not overly suitable, even though the Warmasters expected the Abbai to fall back to their homeworld if attacked, and hide behind their guns there.

The Drazi were a different matter altogether. Much more capable a foe, the Drazi Freehold occupied a vast area within the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, and so would take much to conquer, and more importantly hold. There were a couple of suitable candidates for colonisation, but like the Abbai homeworld would require significant work to make them suitable. Whether it was mineral deposits, trace elements in the atmosphere hazardous to Dilgar health or an unstable planetary tilt, the worlds in the Drazi Freehold were not ideal.

Whilst to most Dilgar the Drazi were considered to be brainless thugs who had only managed to achieve starflight by virtue of some interstellar miracle, the Warmasters knew different. The Drazi possessed a desire to conquer and expand, having taken control of several worlds in the last few decades that had either stood in their way or been abandoned in conflicts not directly concerning them.

The Abbai possessed the capability for altruism, and the Drazi had the manpower to make such things possible. With the Dilgar becoming aware that a secret agreement existed between the Abbai and the Drazi, the needed course of action became clear as crystal.

The only option was for a concentrated and focused assault on both races simultaneously. The expenditure of manpower against the Abbai had to be enough to force them onto the backfoot, as the Dilgar xeno-analysts had confirmed that the Abbai defaulted to defensive behaviour if confronted by a sudden change in circumstances beyond their control. Tests undertaken with some kidnapped Abbai had confirmed this to be a valid hypothesis.

In the opposite manner, the Drazi had to be hit, and hit hard. There would be no respite, no mercy, no weakness shown against the Freehold. The might of the Dilgar Imperium would be the hammer, and the very skulls of the Drazi the chosen rocks to be cracke. As part of their agreement with the Narn

The Abbai and Dilgar Campaigns

The assault on the Abbai was well orchestrated and executed, despite the technological advantages that the Abbai possessed. For most of 2229, a series of fact-finding missions had revealed a great deal of information regarding the Abbai, and their military capability. In the last few weeks of that year, three Dilgar Protra scouting vessels were sent in to ascertain the state of the Abbai Matriarchate, to provide the most up to date information possible ahead of the invasion. A series of military strikes and operations were planned to deal with the Abbai, dubbed the Abbai Campaign.

This information revealed to the War Council some surprising news. Tirolus, the outermost colony and closest in terms of hyperspace travel to Omelos, had been virtually abandoned by the Abbai. Perhaps as a result of fearing Dilgar aggression, or so the War Council liked to think, Tirolus would be a literal walkover. Therefore, their forces could be deployed elsewhere in Abbai space, and this target had already been decided for them; the colony of Utriel.

To determine the defences of this system, a tiny scouting force was sent in, compromising of three Protra class vessels. Each of them deployed to a different location in the Utriel system, to ensure that if one of them was discovered, then at least two vessels made it back. Also, the results gained by each of the Protras could be cross-analysed, to ensure that there were no mistakes. These vessels successfully navigated the minefields that the Abbai had placed, and were able to commence their scanning. The results were clear, and not ambiguous in any way. The Abbai had a staggeringly high level of defences around their homeworld, but most worrying of all was a nearly completed starbase. If this was finished, then Utriel could never be taken, and any opposing force would have a dominant launching point to make strikes directly into Dilgar space.

Discovery of the scout craft was bound to happen, and sure enough the Abbai realised that their were interlopers in their midst. The three vessels broke, attempting to make a run for it, but one of them clipped a mine, and was badly damaged. As the other two vessels left the stranded vessel behind, Abbai vessels approached the damaged Protra scoutship. Knowing what would happen to him and his crew, the Combat Captain in charge of the Protra ordered his ship to self-destruct, leaving nothing for the Abbai to investigate save ashes.

The presence of the near-completed starbase, which had been constructed to defend Utriel, was a major concern. This was a greater opponent than the War Council had forecast facing, and the very presence of this armoured and well defended hulk above their quarry could derail their plans to deal with Abbai. Therefore, the starbase could not be allowed to be completed, and so the offensive against Utriel and the Abbai forces there actually began a weak earlier than the War Council had originally planned for.

The forces to defeat Utriel III, the main populated world in the Utriel system arrived in piecemeal via the Innata and Rohric systems seeking out targets of opportunity and eliminating them first whilst the rest of the attack force made their way to the Abbai's primary colony, the world itself. This caused the Abbai forces to consolidate within the safety of the armoured starbase's guns, and that made the battle for Utriel all the more bloody. In the end, the Dilgar willingess to sacrifice their own vessels overcame Abbai tenacity, and the starbase fell. A total of eleven Pentacans, fifty-five Dilgar capital ships in total, were lost in this struggle that was later compared to a meat-grinder, but the victory was still theirs.

The world of Utriel was effectively useless to the Dilgar, as the cities of Velunaa and Natali had already been evacuated. Some scientists approached the War Council with their wish to study Utriel as a potential new site for planetary relocation, but initial reports revealed trace elements in the oceans of Utriel which, whilst not harmful to any other

sentient, caused intense headaches in all of the Dilgar scouts who went down to the surface.

After their victory, the Dilgar were able to claim Tirolus with very little difficulty, an Abbai picket force not able to stand in their way. Tirolus, or rather the system itself, would be of a boon to the Dilgar as it still had some untapped mineral resources which would in turn further fuel the war effort. That only left the Abbai homeworld, called Abba in most alien tongues but Ssumssha in their own language, and the strategy for that had already been decided.

Long range strikes and pinpoint raids were chosen to keep the Abbai contained on their homeworld. Some of the Warmasters wished to attempt a mass driver delivery on Abba, but the planetary defences were so strong no vessel could get close enough to be able to launch such an assault. However, as balance, Abba had so few orbital shipyards, the Abbai were handicapped in their ability to enlarge their fleet to break the virtual blockade.

The Drazi assault was actually been made possibly by the Narn Regime, who had made their own secret agreement with the Dilgar Imperium in April, 2230. In return for access through edges of Drazi space contested by the Narn, the Dilgar promised the Narn Regime resources and intelligence. Both sides knew that treaties and agreements were little more than ink on a page, and it was this cautious approach that meant that, for a while, both parties were under no illusions about the value of the agreement.

With the inaction of the Narn Regime assured, the Dilgar moved against Drathun and Fendamir. Drathun was taken easily, with little in the way of military power save orbital defences that were swept aside with ease. The Drazi citizens living on Drathun IV, mainly simple farmers and agricultural specialists, waited for the nuclear and viral bombs to fall, but did not. Clearly, there was a bigger target in the Drazi Freehold that the ordinance was destined for. With the Drazi star port on the surface of Drathun IV destroyed by an orbital missile strike, the few thousand Drazi were planet bound, with no military presence.

The Drazi colony of Fendamir was a different matter entirely, which resulted in the Dilgar withdrawing from the field of battle. Whilst Warleader Jha'Dur was initially castigated for retreating, the evidence proved that the Drazi had anticipated an attack and mined the general area, along with making sure that the majority of their firepower was ready to greet the Dilgar invaders. The cost of taking Fendamir at that time would have actually derailed the whole war effort. As it was, several large vessels had been needlessly lost.

The next location selected by the Warleaders was the colony on Latig IV, which was to bear the full wrath of the Dilgar anger at having their noses bloodied at Fendamir. Not for the first time, the Dilgar Imperium launched a full-scale assault on this world, including enough Thorun Dartfighters to outnumber their enemy three to one. In a tribute to the tenacity of the Drazi, the battle lasted for several hours, down to the last Drazi starfighter.

The battle had cost the Dilgar Imperium dearly, and a planetary landing would have been excessive, stretching their forces beyond breaking point. The Imperium used mass drivers to hurl asteroids at amazing speeds down into the planetary crust of Latig IV, wrecking the inhabited areas of the planet for countless generations. A standard was being rammed into the charred soil of Latig IV, and it proclaimed that the Dilgar Imperium would not allow their progress to be hindered, and that any target was fair game.

Hundreds of thousands of Drazi civilians died in minutes on and around the colony on Latig, but their deaths had no impact on the Dilgar at all. Instead of leaving the survivors to their fate, the planet was turned over to Warmaster Jha'Dur, who unleashed a variant of Stafford's Plague she had been working on, to see the effect it would have on living beings. Viral bombardment was an additional tool in the Dilgar's arsenal, and the results of the infection of Latig was immensely valuable to Jha'Dur, as well as the potent message it sent to other races within the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. In particular, it cemented the name Jha'Dur on the general populace, or perhaps more commonly the moniker now associated with her, 'Deathwalker'.

With their work done, and a massacre played out to their satisfaction, the Dilgar left as Drazi relief ships arrived in system. From this date, the Drazi would throw caution to the wind and attack the Imperium at every opportunity without *any* regard for the effects of their actions, something that the Dilgar would utilise to great effect. Even a simple taunt over an open communications channel was enough to cause a Drazi fighter wing to break formation, or cause a Drazi fleet captain to make a beeline for the nearest Imperium vessel. Hundreds of Drazi vessels were lost in the stampede to make the Dilgar pay for what they had done, which worked to the Imperium's favour. Historically, this would become known as the First Drazi Campaign, which despite a minor setback or two was a well-executed military operation.

The Grand Diversion

The true goal of the Dilgar Imperium, unknown by any non-Dilgar was to find a new homeworld. With the Abbai kept occupied by hit and fade attacks on their territory, and a sledgehammer approach applied to the Drazi, the real work could begin in earnest.

That was not to say that the impending attacks on the Drazi Freehold and the Abbai Matriarchate would be wasted. The thinking of the Warleaders, Jha'Dur in particular, the Abbai Matriarchate offered a valued training opportunity for those crews and vessels that were just starting out on their military campaigns. These

green crews would be used on these missions, whilst more experienced crews were used elsewhere. This had the advantages of putting combat experience where it was needed most, and giving valuable lessons to the new recruits taking the field. Of course, an occasional loss of a Dilgar starship was reported, but this was explained away as a crew that had been culled before they could fail the Imperium on a grander scale.

The Drazi needed to be subjugated for one simple reason – fear. The War Council, aware as it was of the secret agreement between the Drazi Freehold and the Abbai Matriarchate, knew that if they were able to fully merge their forces then the entire campaign would be unwinnable. The Abbai Matriarchate had powerful defensive vessels, and if these were utilised in Drazi territory it would allow their strike fleets, arguably more powerful than any other in the League, to do what they were design to do, and attack the Dilgar mercilessly. This co-operation held the potential to be end of the Imperium's efforts, spelling the end of their search for a new homeworld and thus their future as a race.

Bypassing the ongoing conflicts with the Drazi and Abbai, the Imperium began the real work, of defeating the fragmented members of the League, evaluating their worlds for potential, including the very sentients of that world themselves.

The first target for evaluation was Balos, a relatively unimposing galactic power with a stellar fleet of a size in comparison to that of the Alacans, but with a greater level of technical proficiency, indeed some ships in their navy were based around Centauri hulls. To counter this, the Dilgar sent four task forces into Balosian space to subjugate their quarry, taking no chances. The ensuing battles resulted in over eighty percent of the Balosian navy being obliterated, the rest scattering to fight in a guerrilla manner over the next two years.

With the Balosian home world undefended, the Dilgar launched an extended bombing campaign from orbit, followed by seizing control of all surviving ground-based installations. The Balosian inhabitants were driven underground, where they swore to make the lives of the occupiers a living hell. Striking Dilgar targets as and when necessary, the Balosians made their presence known. In return, occasional search and destroy teams were ordered, but much less than would have been expected by any other occupying galactic power.

Diary of David Nathaniel Sinclair, December 21st 2230 : 22:13pm.

We've started practicing against known Dilgar flight models. Apparently, the Dilgar fighters are fast and nimble, Dartfighters I believe they are called. Reports from our agents, which are admittedly sketchy at best, point to the Dilgar being a technically capable foe, perhaps even on the same level as the Centauri Republic. This doesn't exactly fill me with confidence, but we have to do what we must. Should the Dilgar ever turn their sights on Earth, we must be ready. Although, you do have to wonder how many will die before Earth issues a full and proper condemnation of the Dilgar invasions of some of our allies in the League. Still, shouldn't think like that. Although, at least thinking isn't a crime, at least not in this day and age.

The kids are growing up so fast. In the last two years, I've only been home for a total of one month. I'm worried that Jeff and Malcolm are growing up without a father, but at least they've got Father Rafaelli to lean on. Part of me is really worried that they won't know who I am, and that in twenty years time, when I'm sat on my porch, Gemma by my side and a glass of Jack Daniels in hand, I'll look back and realize I never gave myself the opportunity to get to know my children.

I've had enough of this. The endless days and nights in zero-g, the fighter tactics, the training against whichever alien race is on the ascendance. I need Gemma and the kids, and want to believe that they need me. When I get back into Earth space proper, I'm going to apply for a transfer. Whether I end up piloting a cargo scow, or flying a desk in the middle of the Australian Outback, I don't care.

With Balos subjugated, the next phase of the plan could begin, Tirrith being the next in line. This would mark a phase of the Dilgar War that would be compared to the manner in which Nazi Germany on Earth in the 1940's had been able to overwhelm so many nations in such a short space of time. The name of this plan was blitzkrieg, which literally meant 'lightning war', and would be used repeatedly by Earth Alliance historians over the next few decades to parallel that conflict from Earth's past with the war conducted by the Dilgar Imperium.

The Lightning War

The comparison between the Dilgar approach to their war and that of the Nazis is not without considerable merit. On May 10th, 1940 the Germans unleashed the blitzkrieg against the Netherlands and Belgium. Based on principles of speed and surprise, it needed a military force based around light tank units backed up by infantry and support from the air.

Speed and co-ordination were essential to the execution of the blitzkrieg. An aerial assault and artillery bombardment ceased only moments before the light German tanks rolled across that same ground. Troop movements were equally quick, and the common usage of tracked vehicles ensured that even if roads had been bombed, the movement of soldiers was unhindered.

A side effect of the blitzkrieg, and one that made it so successful was the impact on a civilian population. Caught totally unawares, the civilian population suffering under the assault of a blitzkrieg often fled, which made the problems for a defending army all the worse. By striking the fleeing civilians, the attackers could compound the problems suffered.

The blitzkrieg was not without problems however; if supply lines were compromised, then a blitzkrieg could be effectively decapitated. However, this had not transpired in the German assault of Northern Europe, and by June 14th, the Germans entered Paris and shortly after forced the French to sign an armistice with Germany.

With the Abbai contained and the Drazi pounded on a daily basis, the lightning war that the War Council was banking on could begin in earnest. Balos had been taken, which had opened up a channel through the blitzkrieg could commence.

This phase of the war effort began with the taking of Tirrith, a system which had many races squabbling over its resources. The Dilgar Imperium took it upon themselves to decide for themselves who was in charge, shortly after the Narn Regime, who were one of the races contesting the resources of the system, mysteriously departed. Whilst neither the other two competing powers, the Brakiri and the Vree had any idea of why their opponent had pulled out, the Dilgar arrived in January 8th, 2231, and with several dozen Pentacans,

The Brakiri, who had had little involvement in the Dilgar invasion until this point, found that they could ignore the war no longer. Both the Vree and Brakiri left the system at best possible speed, alerted to the danger. However, in the case of the Brakiri, any belief that by fleeing the system they were safe from the Dilgar was grossly mistaken; the Brakiri were next on the Dilgar's hit list. By taking Tirrith, along with the capture of Balos the Dilgar now had two direct jump-routes straight into Brakiri territory.

Continuing the Barrage

The other major power in the League aside from the Abbai and the Dilgar, the Brakiri had been warned of the threat of the Dilgar back in 2228 by the Alacan vessel, the *Pyrotinia*. The Brakiri Syndicracy had continued building up their military forces in the typical Brakiri manner, under the control of the major corporations. Thus, smaller forces with perhaps not the level of integration that could be potentially achieved between them were the line of defense from the Dilgar. Having a close relationship with the Abbai on a business level, the Brakiri had sent a small task force into Abbai space, to offer assistance to their neighbours, and potentially at some point use the gesture as a bargaining tool. To the Brakiri, everything was about business.

Taking charge personally of this intrusion, Warleader Jha'Dur decided to exterminate the Brakiri from all existence, primarily for daring to interfere. It was well known that this sort of gesture needed to be discouraged at the highest level, as so much effort had been invested in keeping the members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds separate. The Brakiri colonies of Comac and Ekalta fell with little difficulty, although a surprisingly noble ramming action on the part of a Brakiri captain led to a Dilgar Garosoch being destroyed. In truth, the fall of the two Brakiri colonies could be attributed to corporate disagreements than the military skill exhibited by the Dilgar, as poorly executed fleet manoeuvres all but handed Ekalta to the Imperium on a silver platter. Humbled, the Brakiri fell back to their home system, and prepared for the final invasion.

The refugees and survivors from the captured Brakiri colonies, including those displaced individuals from Tirrith, arrived on Brakos with nowhere else to go. As if in answer to the Brakiri worries about defending their home, an element of the Balosian navy arrived accompanied by some vessels from the Vree Conglomerate. Before terms could be agreed for the rearming and resupply of these vessels, together with a Brakiri desire to keep these League vessels in their space, the Dilgar attacked.

The battle above Brakos was desparate, in every sense of the word. The League ships present knew that if Brakir fell, the race would be another of their number be wiped from the universe. The jumpgate had been blocked by a small Dilgar fleet, and so there was nowhere for the League ships to flee to, even if that had been their intent. At the time, it was one of the largest battles ever fought in League space, with dozens of cruisers on either side.

The Dilgar were forced back, perhaps the first time that a planetary assault of this scale had been diverted, but the cost was high. Dozens of vessels drifted in the skies over Brakos, from both sides. The Vree and Balosians had fought with every fibre of their beings, and then some. In the case of the Balosians, what they had not been able to do in the skies above their captured homeworld they were determined to do here.. The Brakiri fleets had also performed better than expected, although an improved level of co-ordination between the fleets could have improved matters somewhat.

A second assault on the Brakiri homeworld took place a few days later, as the retreating Dilgar forces were strengthened by several new vessels direct from Omelos. Neither battle line was particularly elegant, but the Brakiri were able to put their first dreadnought, the *Corumai*, to the test, not being able to use it before as the engine array was not completed. This new addition to the Brakiri defensive line was instantly a concern to the Dilgar, and for good reason.

The second battle was less manic than the first, and again resulted in the Dilgar forces being forced to withdraw. Both fleets had sustained significant losses, much of it around the Brakiri dreadnought, the *Corumai*. The gunfight between the *Corumai* and two Dilgar vessels, a Tratharthi named the *Obsidian Mist* and an Ochlavita christened the *Screaming Wail* ended in the two attackers being reduced to burning wreckage. Damaged beyond repair and left without any form of navigational or engine function, the *Corumai* slowly dropped back down to the surface of Brakos, pulled into

that planet's gravity well. The former dreadnought split into several pieces, each hitting the surface of the Brakiri homeworld with the force of a mass driver blast.

As the last Dilgar fleet leapt away into hyperspace, the Brakiri were already working on completing an array of orbital mines and defence satellites that would deter another assault. The cost on their world was truly horrific. With the physical damage done by mass driver impacts and the wreckage of the *Corumai* hitting their world, coupled with high concentrations of radiation spread across the globe and poisonous clouds of gas, the Brakiri homeworld of Brakos was as much a casualty as the *Corumai* had been.

Despite the fact that the second assault had ended in a stalemate, with the Brakiri defensive line holding, the Dilgar Imperium decided to bottle up the Brakiri Syndicracy, as they had done the Abbai, and move on. After all, there were more targets on their list, and they were on a timetable, for sooner or later Omelos would be engulfed in the unavoidable supernova.

A Pure, Unadulterated Opportunity

On the 28th January 2231, the Drazi Freehold achieved a victory against the Dilgar, in the face of the dark tsunami sweeping out from Omelos. Perhaps more than any of the other League races, the Drazi were able to win some military engagements against their attackers, but normally at a great cost to their own ships and resources.

This changed when, by nothing more than a stroke of luck, an operation to capture a Dilgar *Protra* scout craft revealed a highly important passenger – Warleader Jhun'Dron, a high-ranking officer who worked within the Logistical Operations division of the War Council. Imprisoned with the rest of the captured vessel's crew, the Drazi captain realized the importance of this special captive and kept him alive long enough for delivery to the Drazi homeworld of Zhabar. A bonus was that the captured scout ship was in relatively good condition, and would provide a boon for Drazi scientists and military tacticians in their efforts to combat the Imperium.

For over a week, Warleader Jhun'Dron was tortured, intimidated and brutalized in exactly the same manner in which the Dilgar Imperium treated its prisoners. After Latig, and countless other atrocities and losses, not a single Drazi was in a forgiving mood. In the end, Jhun'Dron was not omnipotent, and broke during interrogation, his face and body bearing only a partial resemblance to that of any other Dilgar.

The Dilgar Imperium, at the direction of Warmaster Jha'Dur, was developing a potent strain of biological weapons with the specific purpose of using them against the Drazi. One of Jha'Dur's leading scientists, a sadistic individual even for a Dilgar called Tho'ran, was completing the development of this strain on board a so-called 'hospital ship' that was currently berthed in the Drathun system. Accompanying this vessel was another, a 'factory ship' that carried a wide variety of races, almost all from the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, in special laboratories. These poor individuals were infected with this new strain of weapon, to study the effects. A particular variant had been found to be particularly virulent, especially against Drazi physiology, based around a plague that they had suffered a few years before called Voon. Thousands of Drazi captives were sealed into pods and infected with this plague, to allow the harvesting to begin. This dark harvest would provide enough of a sizeable quantity of the virus to remove the irritant of the Drazi Freehold from the universe forever.

Even though the various Drazi factions were still arguing with one another, the clear opinion was that this could not be allowed to continue. Two weeks to the day later, on the 11th February, 2231, the Drazi Freehold launched a pre-emptive strike against these two vessels. The execution was sloppy on the part of the Drazi forces, as they fell out of formation quickly after leaving hyperspace. However, such was the surprise on the part of the Imperium's ships in the area, not having realized that there had been such a strong security leak, the Dilgar were caught unprepared. The ensuring battle was frantic, but resulted in a costly but important victory for the Drazi, with both target vessels being destroyed, and the loss of Tho'Ran, one of Jha'Dur's most valued scientists.

The Blitzkrieg Continues

The majority of the smaller alien governments were unprepared for the onslaught that would face them. Most had made some attempts at bolstering their defences and military capability, but often only a fraction of what was required to make the Dilgar reconsider attacking them.

One of these races, the Hyach, responded in a similar manner to the Abbai, sealing themselves away in their own region of space, peeking over their virtual castle walls, heavy weaponry ready to repel any invading force. The Hyach had already pulled back from their outposts, in particular the Yonog, as their homeworld was threatened. Like the Abbai, the Hyach were strong defensively, but the Dilgar were unconcerned with the Hyach; containment was as effective as extermination, and often required less manpower. Like the Abbai, hit and run attacks kept them isolated and afraid, punctured by occasional assaults that led the Hyach to believe that a full scale invasion was on the cards.

The bloodbath continued across League space, as more races found themselves attacked by the Imperium. Even at this stage, with the threat of the Dilgar apparent to any, the League of Non-Aligned Worlds still failed to accept that *any* of them could be a target, and the only way to oppose the Dilgar would be to stand in the way of the blitzkrieg, perhaps even in support of a sometime ally, sometime enemy. There was neither the willpower nor the inclination of the League to step up to the plate, to aide another. Perhaps the only race that could have encouraged

this course of action, the Abbai were still holed up on their homeworld, fending off Dilgar attacks.

With the month of February coming to an end, the Dilgar were still conducting occasional bombardments on the Hyach homeworld of Shri-Shraba, normally by tactical deployment of Dilgar forces that allowed either a single or pair of Athraskala Heavy Bombers to fire a round of mass driver blasts at the planet. There was one growing concern to the War Council, in that containing Hyach, not to mention the Brakiri and Abbai homeworlds was draining their resources. The number of vessels in the Dilgar fleet, of all sizes, was impressive, surpassing a thousand vessels, but this was still a finite number.

On March 7th, 2230, the Imperium moved on two nearby systems, Krish and shortly after Mitoc. The former world, inhabited by a race of flightless avians, was made an example of. The Krish themselves, perhaps once in their history blessed with the ability to fly, had a great interest in flight and space travel but very little appetite for bloodshed. This meant that the Krish had no weaponry on any of their vessels, despite having a close relationship with other alien races, particularly those from Mitoc and to a lesser extent the Vree, who sensed a keen trading opportunity with the Krish.

The attack on the Krish was therefore merciless, with the maximum opportunity taken to tease and torment their foes before killing them, slowly. The Krish exploration craft were little more than target drones for the Thorun Dartfighter pilots, and the orbital installations were blasted to dust. After the Dilgar had finished with the Krish, there was not a single member of the race alive in the system, the only survivors being on scouting craft away from their homeworld.

There was little that the Vree could do to prevent this destruction, and the Mitoc had their own problems. The Mitoc only had small patrol vessels which posed little threat to even a single Dilgar Pentacan, and these ships were forced to flee as the Dilgar arrived en masse on March 21st, delaying perhaps a little too long in their subjugation of the Krish.

The Cascor and Ipsha were assaulted on April 9th and 21st, respectively. Resistance was much stronger than the Dilgar had been expecting. Chief reasons for this, at least as far as the Cascor were concerned, was that race's dependency of starfighters, outnumbering those carried by the initial Dilgar attacking force by a ration of ten to one. Early Dilgar losses were analysed, and a strategy was found. The most effective way of handling the Cascor dependency on starfighter wings was to actually ignore these vessels and go after the orbital bases and carrier vessels which were responsible for these Dilgar defeats. Once this was done, the Dilgar were able to approach the Cascor homeworld, but could not do any major damage to it, as they had done with worlds like Latig and Krish.

The Ipsha, rather than numbers, had a minor advantage of technological superiority. Their powerful weaponry was focused on the ability to disable smaller vessels, using blasts of energy that rendered fighters and patrol corvettes dead in space. Unable to defeat the Ipsha without tremendous losses, the Dilgar Imperium were content to bottle them up, as they had done in the past, and move on, but only when they had taken one of the Ipshan colonies, Elitra.

However, the previously conquered world of Mitoc had turned up something that had been suspected by the War Council, and the evidence backed up the facts. Glad of their decision not to deploy viral bombs and missiles immediately as they had done on Krish, the results of an extensive analysis of Mitoc were surprising; this world showed promise.

The Grail of an Imperium

With enough corpses on the funeral pyre by their actions to fill their homeworld thrice over, the Dilgar Imperium still had not located a new homeworld. This core reason was the reason for for the whole invasion, from the seizing of Alaca and its assets, through careful handling of the Abbai and the Drazi. They could allow nothing to stand in their way, perfectly willing to turn the known cosmos upside down in the search for a new planet to call their own.

When they conquered Mitoc in late in the March of 2231, the Dilgar Imperium found exactly what they had been looking for. With little in the way of defences to worry about, mass bombardment had not been necessary, just a simple planetary cleansing operation by the standards of what they had done before. Mitoc was a lush, forested world, teeming with potential. The water supplies on the world were largely unspoilt, gravitational forces were stable, if a smidgen lighter than Omelos. A single moon provided a balanced tidal system, and the atmosphere was a perfect fit for Dilgar physiology.

Almost immediately, the forces of the Imperium set up a rigorous perimeter around the Mitoc system and set up a base of operations on the world. This base was hardly what one would consider small – it was estimated that several thousand Dilgar workers were transported here from Omelos within hours of the War Council deciding that this would be their new home. Within days of Mitoc being subjugated, these construction workers had arrived to begin their ordained tasks.

If the war had been harder on the Dilgar Imperium up to this point, then perhaps they would have merely consolidated their forces in Mitoc and the surrounding systems, and begun a large scale exodus from Omelos. There were plans to do so, but the Dilgar military had tasted conquest on a grand scale, and they liked the flavour. There was more than a new homeworld to consider now, there was a realm to conquer. The fleet leaders and military experts debated their next course of action, but the bloodlust was clear. Mitoc would be the shining jewel of

a new Dilgar Imperium, with the Drazi, Abbai and Brakiri as playthings beneath their feet. The Centauri Republic had left the League of Non-Aligned Worlds behind, and the efforts of the League in battle had shown they were too weak to be allowed to exist under their own control. If they were even allowed to draw breath, it would be under the mercy of the Imperium. That same Imperium had never been known for their quality of mercy, even death was something they refused to mete out, preferring to watch their prey squirm until they died, prolonging the agony for as long as possible.

The Retributive Strike

Whilst the Dilgar Imperium had continued their assault against the Brakiri, Krish, Mitoc and their other victims in the first half of 2231, the Drazi had not been idle in the face of their powerful enemy. Perhaps as a result of a miscalculation, the will of the Drazi Freehold had consolidated into a pure hatred for the Imperium. Whilst this hatred could be manipulated, drawn out to entice the Drazi into military situations where they were vulnerable, there was no denying the strength of this opinion. It was occasionally joked (by other races) that if Narn hatred could be consolidated into one place and directed at Centauri Prime, every single Centauri on that world would drop dead on the spot. Those who came out with those comments would not have done so had they been on Zhabar during the Dilgar War.

This anger had been used against the Drazi on multiple occasions. Over time, those in charge of Drazi military strategy came to the understanding (or the closest that is possible for the Drazi) that simply throwing their very forms at the Dilgar was simply not the best use of their resources. Therefore, a countering strategy of some sort was required. This plan, codenamed Operation Retributive Strike, was based around the Dilgar pulling back in some sectors, in a bid to retake Fendamir and thus reaffirm their borders. Three newly commissioned fleets were ready to take the fight to the Dilgar, in addition to other vessels pulled from the Drazi's border with the Narn Regime. Ever suspicious of the Narn, the Drazi had placed armed freighters, emitting vessel identifiers which made them appear (at least from a distance) as Narn cruisers.

The deception worked, for the most part, and the Drazi were keen to capture the advantage and defend it at all costs. The Dilgar Imperium was unprepared for this sudden and concentrated show of strength. They were forced to fall back to a base only recently completed, which the Drazi soon discovered. After a lengthy bombardment, the base was destroyed, at great cost to the Drazi forces that were destroyed in a minefield laid to defend the base.

Temporarily withdrawing to consolidate their forces, the Drazi gave the Dilgar, and the War Council, time to consider their options. With the strategy of blitzkrieg, if the supply lines could be cut then the entire operation could be compromised. The Dilgar had overextended themselves so much that if the Drazi could get a force past Fendamir, then they would have been able to strike all the way back to the Dilgar homeworld, Omelos. There were so little vessels in the realms the Dilgar formerly considered their own, when compared to those on the front lines, that they would have presented no opposition to a moderately sized military force with the determination to hit Omelos. Despite being battered, there were three Dilgar fleets at Fendamir capable of entering Dilgar space and punishing the War Council for their severe mistake. Or, if the Drazi were more cautious, then they could retake Drathun and push the Dilgar advances into their territory back right back to where it was at the start of the year.

However, yet again Drazi indecision cost them the opportunity to obliterate the Dilgar presence around Fendamir once and for all. This indecision, as the three fleets argued, cost the Drazi Freehold dearly as an effective stalemate developed around the systems on the fringes of their space that the Drazi were fighting the Dilgar Imperium for. As the October of 2231 came to a close, the Drazi counterattack had wound itself down.

Punishing the Lessers

Whilst closer to the galactic core (relatively speaking) the Drazi Freehold were fully occupied battering down upon the Dilgar Imperium, elsewhere advances were being made in the war by the invaders. Bestine, the homeworld of the Descari fell, but not without a great deal of fighting.

The forces of the Imperium had moved into position high above Bestine, and begun their orbital bombardments. By this stage, the military opinion was that Bestine had been pacified; evacuations transports from the world had escaped, but that was of no concern. If anything, refugees served more purposes alive than dead – they were a drain of resources, as well as a propaganda tool that served to spread tales of their suffering at the hands of the agressor.

A relief flight direct from Vreetan, the homeworld of the Vree, dropped out of space literally in the middle of the Dilgar pentacans that were in the early stages of the process of bombing the Descari into the stone age. Dozens of Xorr War Saucers, ready for the onset of battle but not at a status of alert, found themselves literally within the killing zone of five Subjugation Pentacans. These vessels were holding orbit above Bestine, and were immobile, as required by their mass driver delivery systems.

If any casual observers had been present, they would have confirmed that for a brief moment the universe seemed to stop; a brief state of total bemusement. Then, after that second of bewilderment the weapons of both sides opened up. Desperately, the Vree attempted to escape from the gravity well of Bestine, as their jump-engines were still recharging.

The Dilgar had the advantage, and ultimately the conflict would belong to them. Nevertheless, the sudden arrival

of the Vree task force caused several tactical errors on the Dilgar's part. Heavy bolter fire traded with rapid counter-punching of antimatter cannon fire lit up the skies over Bestine. Despite the efforts of the Vree, the sheer weight of Dilgar numbers meant that only a fragment of the Vree task force managed to leave Bestine space. In little shape to intervene further in the fate of the Descari, they limped back home to Vreetan, to plan the next phase of their war.

The only Descari colony, in T'lad'tha, posed little threat. From here, the Dilgar were poised to strike directly at Vreetan. This would be an important victory, for the Vree Conglomerate had been an on-off thorn in their side since the opening shots fired above Alacan III. However, when forced on the backfoot the Vree were not an easy foe for the Imperium to defeat. Whilst the Vree consolidated their remaining forces in their home system, the Dilgar Imperium were at the end of their supply lines.

It is perhaps merciful that the Vree never saw Athraskala heavy bombers in the skies above their homeworld, but the Vree were bottled up. However, with the route to other domains, such as the Torta Regency and the Kor-Lyan Kingdoms effectively out of bounds by the inability to neutralise the Vree, the Dilgar Imperium would be forced to look for avenues elsewhere. The closest avenue in this region of space was that occupied by the religion-focused Markab Theocracy.

The Drazi Campaign Renewed

If there was one thing that angered the War Council more than the loss of so many vessels by one foe, it was the fact that the Drazi Freehold, a race of mindless savages in their opinion, had beaten them at their own game. The Drazi had dealt with spy efforts on Zhabar, their intelligence services actually besting those who had sold their souls to the glory of the Dilgar War Council.

The War Council was locked in turmoil, with two of the Warmasters, Tor'Jan and Yor'Lothan focusing on a renewed assault against the Dilgar, all the way to their homeworld of Zhabar. Jha'Dur, who wanted to contain the Drazi and continue the fight against the other smaller members of the League, held the opposing opinion. In the end, Jha'Dur lost that debate, and a continued assault was confirmed as the choice of action to be ordered by the War Council. This was despite Jha'Dur's best attempts to win around the other members of the War Council to her way of thinking. Unlike any other point in her career, where she had been able to garner those in awe of her abilities to her banner, this had not proved possible with the War Council.

It was not an easy task for the Dilgar to get within striking distance of Zhabar, as no direct jump routes existed from the frontlines. The only way that the Dilgar could hit Zhabar was to skirt around the edges of Drazi space, reaching Shambah, the only system with a direct jump-point to Zhabar.

An alliance was being forged between the Drazi Freehold and the Hurr Republic, to retake Latig. At first, the Hurr Republic desired Latig for themselves, but gradually accepted that they could never take the system on their own. The true reason was despite having no real love for the Drazi Freehold, the Hurr Republic accepted that their larger neighbour could function as a buffer between them and the Dilgar Imperium.

An attack on Latig on November 2nd was successful, leaving many Dilgar garrisons without armed backup. The union of Drazi and Hurr forces had been somewhat messy and disorganised, but able to achieve the task in hand. Given the Dilgar preference for everything to have a precise, defined role, the majority of the garrisons were focused on either scientific research or storage.

The War Council were furious, more so with their forces withdrawing from the battle. Orders were given to execute the Warleader who was in command of the Pentacans who had backed away from death and glory. Secondly, their plans needed alteration. This fragile alliance needed to be broken, and by allying themselves with the Drazi the Hurr Republic were now a target.

Five days later, on November 7th, the Dilgar Imperium launched their counterattack at Latig, determined to avenge their earlier defeat. The plan was to assault the Drazi and Hurr whilst their grasp of the system was not yet complete, with fortifications and defensive fleet formations still not set. A chance meeting between a lone Dilgar vessel and the armada lost the element of surprise, but the Dilgar could not be dissuaded. Indeed they were not, and the force of numbers caused the Drazi to pull out quicker than either the Dilgar or the Drazi's allies, the Hurr, expected.

Leaving a good quantity of their troops and their associated transports behind, the Dilgar followed up the Hurr withdrawl with no mercy shown and no quarter given. The Hurr homeworld was subjected to a torrent of bombing raids that left their world a shadow of its former self. Content with their handiwork, the Dilgar returned, to find that in their absence their fleets, the Drazi had returned to Latig to find that their transports, and all of their troops, had been destroyed. This would cause an immense rift in the War Council for a time, specifically between the Naval and Ground commands.

Their force bolstered by additional forces freshly arrived from closer to home, the Dilgar discovered that their delay in destroying the Hurr with that one decisive stroke had given the Drazi time to increase their level of defences. A lengthy series of battles did not culminate in a clear and decisive victory for either side, and thus the second Dilgar campaign against the Dilgar ended in a virtual draw, with the Dilgar offensive stopped but the invaders in charge of a number of valuable locations. The only real gain from this for the Imperium was that their swift and brutal decimation of the Hurr would discourage other races from becoming involved, or so the Dilgar believed.

This overconfidence was become their weakness, and overconfidence is one trait that the universe punishes with impunity. In fifteen years time, the Earth Alliance would learn this lesson at the hands of the Minbari Federation. This time however it would be the Dilgar's turn to learn this universal constant, always taught in the most brutal fashion possible. This instruction would come courtesy of the lone surviving ship that escaped the initial purge of the Alacans three years before, the *Pyrotinia*.

The Voyage of Desparation

The lone surviving fleet vessel from the Alacan navy, the *Pyrotinia*, arrived in Earth space on November 30th, 2231. On board this vessel was a leading Abbai dignitary, Ambassador Kalika. She was here to request the aide of Earth, a trading partner with some of the League worlds that were under threat, militarily if possible but logistically if nothing else.

The vessel, and her crew, had passed through many systems on the way to Earth, rendezvousing with Abbai diplomats who had been attempting to ascertain what the Narn Regime's intentions were. The Narn had agreed a policy of neutrality towards the Dilgar Imperium; in quite candid talks, the Narn revealed that if they engaged in a war with the Dilgar, then they firmly believed that the Centauri would use the opportunity to declare war on them. Seeing the wisdom in not fighting a war on two fronts, the Narn Regime did not wish to go to war over a conflict that they believed was not in their best interests.

There had been some minor successes on route to Earth. The Gaim had been warned, and were making preparations themselves. The Pak'ma'ra agreed to provide logistical support to the homeworlds of those League races that were blockaded by the Dilgar. Despite the distaste which many sentients had regarding the Pak'ma'ra and their practices, the truth was that without their blockade-running, millions would have died without supplies of food, medicine and weapons which the Pak'ma'ra provided. Their ships never formed up in large battle groups, focusing on convoys of vessels designed to puncture holes in the containment operations which the Dilgar were well skilled at. Naturally, the Dilgar considered the Pak'ma'ra to be an irritant and a pest, and destroyed their vessels whenever they were uncovered.

After this, the Pyrotinia and her diplomatic envoy warned the Descari, who evacuated their homeworld ahead of the Dilgar invasion. The refugees flooded through Markab and Earth space, millions fleeing what they believed the Dilgar would do their world and any Descari found there. The worlds where these refugees ended up were wholly unprepared, as were those alien forces who were required to escort the refugees to safety. The Belt Alliance, with contacts throughout the League and detailed knowledge of League space were able to lend a hand, as were the Pak'ma'ra, who after unloading the contents of one convoy loaded their vessels up with refugees. Sadly, this Pak'ma'ra gesture made a perfect target for the Dilgar, who took the opportunity to get rid of two targets at one time.

Next, the Pyrotinia attempted to get the Yolu on side, as the latter were technically a member of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, but their words fell on deaf ears. Despite the Yolu being one of the few races to survive the Shadow War a thousand years before, they simply were not interested. Their policy of isolationism worked to the Dilgar's benefit, as fewer resources were required to bottle up a foe who didn't want to fight. That said, despite the vast number of attacks which the Dilgar went on to heap upon the technically advanced Yolu once their space was secured they did not participate in the conflict any longer.

There was a remote chance that the War Council was aware of the Pyrotinia, and risk that it may actually succeed in its task. Above all the other members of the War Council, it was the Warmaster in charge of Grand Strategy who feared the political allegiances, and thus prospective military action that this ship could forge. During the time that the Pyrotinia took on its grand tour of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, no less than three attempts were made to destroy this vessel. Every time, the Pyrotinia managed to avoid destruction, almost as if the vessel itself was charmed. The final stop was Earth space, and given the mixed reception that the Pyrotinia had received, everything rested on the pleas of the diplomatic envoys carried aboard this vessel.

Initially, the Earth Alliance Senate had been nonplussed with making a decision about the Dilgar situation. Fighter and cruiser production had been stepped up in recent months, in case the Dilgar Imperium ever reached Earth's borders. However, there was currently no indication this would happen, and there was no motivation to venture out and impose Human military might on a conflict dozens of light years from home.

Ambassador Kalika made acquaintances with several notable Senators, including a young Senator Aldrich from the North American Federation and the well-regarded Senator Mei-Ling, from the Republic of China. However, even with their notable allegiances, and the heartfelt wish to do *something*, the general feeling that all the other Senators held, based on the feelings from the districts and countries to which they were responsible, was that there was no reason to risk Human lives in a non-Human conflict. Ambassador Kalika even turned over the remains of several Dilgar 'Thorun' starfighters, in the hope that the Earth Alliance could use them to come to the aide of the League. EarthForce was glad to take these off the hands of Ambassador Kalika and the valiant crew of the *Pyrotina*, having some ideas already on how to utilize this captured Dilgar tech.

The only action that the Senate undertook was a repeated warning to the Dilgar not to attack the Markab Theocracy, who had been one of the first races contacted by humanity,

and thus were held in esteem by the Senate and many humans. The truth behind the matter was that the Markab, along with the Centauri Republic, was one of the main trading partners of the Earth Alliance. Money talked, and the Senators wished to ensure that those corporates who made wholly unrelated donations would continue to make unrelated donations.

It was during a day-long conference on how best to offer logistical support to the Abbai on the eve of the Winter Solstice in 2231 that news came into the conference hall in Geneva that Markab space had been compromised. Tiree had fallen, and the Markab had declared a holy war against the invaders. This set the Earth Alliance Senators present into a state of panic, because the Markab homeworld was only one jump away from the fringes of the Earth Alliance.

Taking the opportunity, and some newfound knowledge of Earth history, Ambassador Kalika stood up with a defiant speech about the Third Reich, and the Second World War. She compared the tactics used by the Dilgar Imperium to those used by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi war machine. There were darker, more horrific comparisons that she did not make, and in truth did not need to.

Extract of speech by Ambassador Kalika, Abbai Matriarchy.

Record Source: Earth Senate Archives
Record Identifer: EA764-HA733-JK8839-444QB:9
Search Keywords: Kalika, Dilgar, 2231
Date of selected sample: 20th December, 2231.
Time of selected sample: 14:32:22 – 14:34:56

You have reached the point that my race did a short while ago, my fellow sentients. The Dilgar are carving a swathe through the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, leaving nothing but death and anguish in their wake. They torture innocents, use them as playthings, cast out bleeding and dying in the burning streets of their homeworlds.

You had a regime like them, in your history once. As Senator Aldrich informs me, they were called the Third Reich, or 'Nazi's'. They broke agreements, invaded other nations, performed acts which are being mirrored across the League of Non-Aligned Worlds even now. Their butchery left scars on their victims and the children of their victims that can never be healed.

I implore you; history has taught you to stand up to the aggressor, to say, 'Enough!' You are the only ones who can come to our aid; the Narn and Centauri do not care, their hearts are dead. They do not know the value of compassion, of love for a friend, but you do! Your race has struggled throughout your entire history, but never abandoned hope, and the belief that things are worth fighting for!

A Year of Steel and Blood (2232)

Enter the Earth Alliance

On the 2nd[th] January 2232, the tide turned in a series of battles, and the fate of the Dilgar Imperium would forever change, based on the chain of events that began on that notable day. A fleet of EarthForce vessels had been hastily assembled to offer support to the besieged Markab Theocracy. This fleet would grow and shrink over time, but the core of it remained similar throughout most of the coming campaign.

The Dilgar, not merely content with attacking logistical, militaristic or governmental targets, had elected to attack sites of religious significance to the Markab Theocracy, in and around their home system. These sites were packed with devotees and pilgrims, offering prayers to the Markab gods that they would be spared.

It was into this cooking pot of religious hatred and devotion to dark glories that the Earth Expeditionary Force, under the command of Admiral Itagi Hamato arrived to liberate the Markabs from their oppressors. Under generally accepted rules of interstellar conduct (which of course the Dilgar Imperium trampled on at every conceivable opportunity) a declaration of war was required before a strike against another power using a fleet of the site of the Earth Expeditionary Force. No such warning was given.

Lead by a quartet of *Nova* class Dreadnoughts, and with over two dozen supporting Hyperions, Olympus's and Avengers, the force took the Dilgar by complete surprise. In the same brutal manner that the Dilgar had attacked the ships and worlds of the Drazi, the Earth Expeditionary Force vented their full fury, taking no quarter. Using half of the fleet in operations where a couple of Hyperions would have sufficed, Admiral Hamoto's planning was strategically sound, and his forces did him proud. With only minimal losses, the Dilgar were forced to evacuate the skies above the Markab homeworld.

Under normal circumstances, the Imperium would have been able to defend themselves better, and with more vigour, than what they had done in Markab space. However, the Dilgar had extended their fleets and supply lines to a degree greater than they realized. With hindsight, some Warmasters wondered if they should have stopped at Mitoc, and consolidated. It was too late now for such thoughts, for a new foe had entered the frey, and showed no signs of the weakness of spirit that the Dilgar believed that it possessed just a few short years before.

Diary of David Nathaniel Sinclair, January 11th, 2232 : 02:13am.

The last Dilgar Ochlavita jumped into hyperspace two hours ago, and I could swear that you could hear the cries of victory from the Markabs down on the planet below. The rest of my wing is in the mess hall, celebrating their good fortune. I've always thought mess halls were a bit of a silly idea on a ship without gravity, but there you go.

I spent a whole hour sat in the fighter bay, replaying the battles over and over in my mind, thinking about how I could have done something different. I lost two pilots today; Franke and Bruford. Both were good guys, just unlucky. I don't know what I'm going to say to their families. I feel for Admiral Hamato though. We lost the Concordia and Achilles above Markab, and then the Golgotha and Lancelot trying to pull the Markabs back from the front line.

And as for the Markabs, even in the skies above their homeworld I saw wave upon wave of ships open fire, and then plough into the nearest Dilgar vessel when ammunition was spent or weapons damaged beyond usefulness. I pray that humanity never finds itself in a situation that desperate, but the jaded soul that I am becoming knows that there is little that does not surprise me anymore.

What caused more problems for the Earth Expeditionary Force, and Admiral Hamato in particular, was the Markabs themselves. A sense of religious anger swelled within them, and they declared a holy war against the Dilgar, seizing their chance for retribution. Hamato was forced to spread his forces out wider than he would have liked across Markab space, to prevent the Markabs from throwing their lives away in valiant but suicidal gestures. It resulted in the loss of a Hyperion and an Artemis from his task force, Admiral Hamato reluctant to explain the reason for the loss back to EarthGov, but duty bound to do so. They were deaths that could have been avoided, but he consoled himself with the knowledge that were it Earth that had been attacked by the Dilgar, the humanity would have been no different.

Leaving an Orestes System Monitor class vessel behind, to assist in the defence the Markab home system, the remnants of the Markab space fleet, in conjunction with the *Pyrotinia* and some vessels from the Vree Conglomerate joined their forces for the greater good. These vessels, with the *Pyrotinia* as the unofficial flagship, formed an armada that became known over time as the Liberation Navy. Even the Abbai, besieged that they were, managed to donate a vessel to the Navy, presumably at the express wish of Ambassador Kalika. Over time, they would be able to donate more vessels.

A sorry sight for military planners, the Liberation Navy would carry the fight back to the Dilgar, alongside their stellar cousins from Earth.

The Long Road

The fight against the Dilgar was nowhere near over, as there would be no clear and simple path back to freedom for the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. The effort was a long road, to be taken one step at a time, one system at a time. The Liberation Navy took up a large part, freeing worlds from the Imperium's yoke that only had a minimal or minor Dilgar presence. Where there was a larger presence, or Dilgar base, then the Expeditionary Force brought their planning skills and superior firepower to bear.

Some of the worlds taken by the Dilgar Imperium had been turned into dark and twisted incarnations of their former selves. It was not just bombed cities that the Liberaton Navy and Expeditionary Force found when they freed a planet from Dilgar rule. Booby traps were common, some containing poisonous or corrosive effects on any who found them. Sabotaged power lines and fuel dumps were also common; such was the desire to lash back at their attackers in any way they could. Occasionally the Dilgar even poisoned the water resources of their lost worlds, or released carcinogens into the atmosphere.

These were nothing compared to what was found by a group of EarthForce Gropos on one world. A whole testing centre had been found underground on the Descari homeworld, with genetic experiments undertaken on many different races from the League. Evidently, this facility had been left in haste, and the still-occupied cells put to the torch to mask what had transpired before the world was liberated. One name was retrieved from the base computer system before a booby-trap fired and destroyed much of the control centre; Jha'Dur. Her name became infamous across the League, associated with almost every single act of scientific butchery. Whether or not she was actually responsible, Jha'Dur had done so much evil that on one level, the amount of outrages ceased to become relevant. All that mattered was retribution.

Freeing the Vree, Reclaiming the Gaim

Effectively emasculated for a race that has little current desire for the usual biological means of reproduction, the Vree had suffered for months under the threat of a massive Dilgar strike. Their ships had been involved in the conflict against the Dilgar from the opening moves, and had worked hard in the defence of alien races across the League, from the Descari to the Brakiri.

On March 2nd, the Vreetan jumpgate opened, and rather than a Dilgar strike force the expectant Vree military a fleet of EarthForce vessels, accompanied by several League vessels appeared through the vortex. Some of them were badly damaged, the evidence by their scars that a recent battle against a Dilgar starbase, poised to launch an attack against the Vree, had been won.

There was actually no military conflicts in the skies above Vreetan, but for the Conglomerate that didn't matter. The race that they had once hounded during their expansion period, and taken random samples of, had come to free them from the might of the Dilgar Imperium. It was a symbol that the Dilgar Imperium now had a new enemy. The immense gratitude that the Vree felt, in their own alien way, would be repaid thirty years later in Sheridan's mighty alliance.

Whilst the Earth Expeditionary Force continued its assaults on Dilgar bases in the area, the League forces in the Liberation Navy proceeded on to Gaim space, to investigate the effects that the Dilgar Imperium had had on the Gaim Intelligence. Little was known about them, and it was a surprise to the Liberation Navy vessels that the insectoid Gaim had done well in combating the Dilgar menace. Despite their homeworld being battered by mass driver blasts, the Gaim had adapted to warfare against the Dilgar. The arrival of League forces was the final straw for the Dilgar forces in the area, who opted to retreat from Gaim space.

Diplomatic efforts between the ambassadorial Gaim representative and the most diplomatic members of the Liberation Navy, specifically Abbai citizens including Kalika, were difficult. The first contact situation was difficult, and perhaps would have benefited from the presence of Earth Alliance officers who were required to study the concepts of first contact situation. In the end, the Gaim declared their wish to become a part of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds in time – isolation had almost made the Gaim race extinct.

Spies Like Us

In any war, a great deal of the action that ultimately swings the conflict in the favour of the victor is conducted in the dark. Whether it takes place behind closed doors, by a dagger in the back, or the exchange of the galactic equivalent of thirty pieces of silver, subterfuge of any kind is a valued tool in any conflict. Even if that conflict is political or diplomatic in nature, the art of spying is invaluable.

Throughout 2231, the War Council had come to the opinion that simply meeting the threat of the Earth Alliance on the field of battle may not be enough to guarantee them a victory. Therefore, a spy network, feeding information to the War Council, would be of immense benefit. Diplomatic efforts previously had been attempted, but nothing had been forthcoming.

Of course, there was simply no way that the Dilgar were able to sneak one of their own race into Earth Alliance space and conduct the work required by the Imperium. Therefore, a group of individuals were needed who could infiltrate themselves into important positions within EarthDome and EarthGov. With the current situation between Earth and the Imperium, any chance of individuals defecting to the Dilgar cause directly would be unlikely, if not wholly unfeasible. Therefore, a third party was required for these corrupted individuals to report to, and in turn this third party would report to the War Council.

Put into motion in the latter months of 2231, several members of the Centauri noble house, House Kiro were kidnapped by Dilgar operatives. . This plan would put the Centauri Republic directly between the Imperium and the Earth Alliance if it all went wrong. This aspect particularly pleased the War Council, as they knew full well that even if House Kiro went to another noble house, then no aide would be offered. To demonstrate the seriousness of their intent, body parts of the first kidnapped Centauri were returned to the head of House Kiro.

The deal was placed on the table for Lord Kiro to consider. For every three months that House Kiro co-operated, one of the six surviving Centauri would be returned. This would, in the opinion of the War Council, keep House Kiro under their control for a period of eighteen months. After that fact, the war would either be won or lost, and thus there was no requirement for this to continue after this time. When House Kiro protested, and demanded the return of the captives, Dilgar agents informed them that the information in their purple files had been stolen a few years previous. They would return the captives unharmed, but they would also send a copy of the purple files to every single noble house of any importance within the Centauri Republic.

House Kiro, effectively blackmailed, had little choice but to comply. However, the Dilgar Imperium had failed to realise that, despite the depths of their evil, the Centauri Republic were the galaxy's most skilled manipulators and deceivers, perhaps excluding the Shadows and their dark servants. House Kiro fully expected the purple files to be released after they had ceased to be of use to the War Council; after all it was what a good Centauri would do.

Therefore, a careful campaign began to drip-feed information back to the Dilgar Imperium, courtesy of encrypted communications and message drops on border worlds. In a secret meeting aboard a passenger liner in Earth space, Lord Kiro and six members of his staff met with representatives from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As candid as a Centauri could be, Lord Kiro made the Earth Alliance aware of his plight.

The agreed solution was a masterstroke, but would require careful execution. As the Dilgar had requested, Lord Kiro and his supporters within his noble house would contact disaffected members of humanity, plying them with funds for their trouble. All of the individuals contacted would be covert agents within EarthForce, who would drip feed information provided by the Joint Chiefs themselves. These reports would point to mainly

logistical operations, which despite having skeleton crews would have little on board of substantial worth.

Whilst this was carried out, House Kiro would begin an internal exercise to limit the potential damage as much as possible. Evidence blaming other houses, and unfortunate accidents for those who could prove the Dilgar's copy of House Kiro's purple files was well executed and delivered.

Some of the individuals contacted by House Kiro were unaware that they were being fed false information. This was precisely as EarthForce wanted it, for the growing influence of the Dilgar was becoming a concern. Their opinions were validated a few months later, when Markab space was attacked.

The spy network was unused by the Dilgar after March 2232, communications falling mysteriously silent. Up until this point, the spy network reported fleet movements and false data that clearly led the War Council to believe that the Earth Alliance had made no headway in breaking Dilgar codes and security measures.

By the leaking of falsified supply movements to the Dilgar via House Kiro, EarthForce were able to pinpoint the location of three Dilgar starbases that would otherwise have been difficult to locate. All starbases were dealt with in swift and expedient fashion once the fight back against the Dilgar Imperium was well and truly underway. However, it became apparent that some genuine information was getting through, and it cost the Earth Expeditionary Force several support vessels and, according to reports, one Artemis class frigate. Making contact with House Kiro, EarthForce discovered the source that was passing on valid and correct intelligence; it was not one individual, it was several.

The Joint Chiefs ordered a swift but more importantly discreet investigation by EarthForce intelligence. It transpired that the Dilgar had expected a Centauri betrayal, and had privately accosted two representatives from another Centauri noble house, Jaddo this time, in turn forcing them to recruit EarthForce employees. The most convenient short-term option was to eliminate the two individuals from House Jaddo, but House Kiro was not keen on performing this task by themselves.

On May 10th, 2232, a Centauri transport in Sector 49 was ambushed and destroyed by three heavily camouflaged Starfury Nova's. This transport contained the two members of House Jaddo, who were on their way to hand over their latest update to their Dilgar paymasters. EarthForce notified the Centauri Republic of the discovery of wreckage, apparently by increased Raider activity. In truth, EarthForce examined the wreckage first, to ensure that no link to EarthForce could be found.

Perhaps mercifully, the attack was justified on one level, for the information which the two from House Jaddo had received was a precise breakdown of the Earth Expeditionary Force, and some of Admiral Hamato's battle plans which the Joint Chiefs of Staff had approved. Even worse than this was some information on the Earth defense network; this information could have in theory shut down or at least reduced the effectiveness of Earth's planetary defences. A single, lone Dilgar strike could have put the Earth Alliance out of the war in one swift stroke, leaving Earth a shattered wasteland like countless worlds within the League.

If the assault on the two citizens of House Jaddo ever became public knowledge within the Centauri Republic, the change in the Centauri attitude towards the Earth Alliance would be devastating. All of the evidence was destroyed by EarthForce Intelligence; even the Starfury pilots involved were given new identities and resettled, their former families never being told that their loved ones had in fact not perished in a so-called sneak attack by Dilgar forces. Whilst harsh, this secret needed to be kept.

EarthForce Intelligence handled the investigation and punishment of those traitors internally. With House Kiro now the sole source of information for the Dilgar Imperium on Earthbound matters, their usefulness to the Dilgar was assured, EarthForce still in total control of what information was ultimately leaked to their enemy.

EarthForce elected to keep this spy network, and the roles played by its own staff and Earth Alliance citizens a secret even after the war. Indeed, even when the last of the Babylon Stations went on-line in 2257, there were only several dozen individuals within EarthForce who knew that a disaster had almost cost them their role in the war, and much worse.

The Next Step

The domains of the Brakiri and Hyach were next to be freed by the twin fleets. Brakiri was less of a struggle, as the Dilgar had been cautious with attacking Brakos. The quality of the opposition undertaken by the defending forces had been notable, but more so because of the amount of stellar obstacles placed above their world. A plan for a final virus bombing of Brakos was shelved as Dilgar Imperium forces were called elsewhere, back to the proposed new Dilgar homeworld of Mitoc.

An encounter between the Expeditionary Force and the Imperium Navy on the fringes of the Brakos system was a desperate struggle. There was a significant cost, with the Expeditionary Force losing another *Hyperion* and *Olympus* class vessels. A third ship, the Artemis class frigate *Delphi*, was so badly damaged that it was impossible to repair outside of a drydock, and was scuttled to prevent it proving any use to the Dilgar. Despite this, the fleeing forces gave EarthForce an idea of where they were from, and a co-ordinated strike on Dilgar supply lines proved to be highly costly. There was an additional bonus for Admiral Hamato and his loyal officers and crews, to use on this co-ordinated strike; the first of the new batch of Starfuries, the *Nova*

had arrived. Based on the remains of Thorun wreckage and other intelligence sources, these fighters were better in almost every capacity than their counterparts.

As a counter-point to the Expeditionary Force's efforts, the Dilgar had started to do the same on the Earth Alliance. With the Expeditionary Force required frequent supply upgrades, mainly for the railgun and missile based weapon systems of the fleet but also replacement Starfury wings.

Freeing the Cascor Diad from the subjugation by the Dilgar was a much more costly venture. With the Liberation Navy attempting to prevent Imperium bombers from killing millions on the world below, the Expeditionary Force lost one of their precious *Nova* class dreadnoughts, the *Thor*. Badly damaged by repeated bursts of enemy fire, the only surviving Dilgar gunship unleashed a mass driver volley it was hoping to use on the Cascor homeworld. With engines out of action, the *Thor* was doomed the moment the projectile left the Dilgar vessel. There were no survivors from the explosion, which was so intense it took a nearby Dilgar *Jashakar* frigate with it.

In addition to the loss, another *Hyperion* was destroyed, in addition to several dozen *Tiger* class Starfuries. Several wings of Thorun Dartfighters, a slightly improved model over the base design, swarmed over the unfortunate vessel and ripped it to pieces, a hundred thousand pin-pricks against the predator that slowly drained the lifeblood out of it, leaving behind a dead, drifting hulk.

Diary of David Nathaniel Sinclair, March 18th, 2232 : 01:14am.

Just a short note tonight, as I don't feel particularly sociable. Today has been a bad day.

It had to happen at some point, we lost one of our flagships, the Thor. I've seen worlds hit my mass driver blasts during this sorry campaign, but never a ship. Flying in vacuum can make you forget the damage that a single mass driver blast can do. It either splits up into fragments on the way down, raining boulders on the unsuspecting masses below, or smashes into the ground like a PPG blast hitting a melon. There is an air blast, which destroys everything for a good kilometer around the blast site. Earthquakes, brought about by the impact, are guaranteed. Fire storms often follow, burning anything that's left. When that's gone, little remains apart from rubble. The clouds of dust will undoubtedly have entered the lungs or breathing organs of those who weren't immediately killed, causing them health problems for the rest of their days.

In times to come, when liberals question our involvement in this war, and the loss of Human life, they would do well to bear this in mind. They will complain about the cost of the war.

What would I know? I'm just a fighter jockey.

Next in the long haul was the Abbai, and this was another brutal affair, but less costly for the Liberation Navy and the Expeditionary Force than Cascor had been. With the EarthForce fleet pounding Dilgar installations, bases and supply lines, the Imperium's resources were badly stretched, allowing the rest of the Liberation Navy a chance to co-ordinate their efforts with that of the Abbai space fleet and planetary defences.

The removal of the Imperium presence from Abbai space was a great victory, for they were one of the key opponents to the Dilgar, and with enough political influence at the time to galvanise additional support. Indeed, the arrival of the Earth Expeditionary Fleet and the Liberation Navy in Abbai space was seen as a turning point for the League, but this was not to be. Historians would point out the next major milestone in the conflict as being the balancing point on which the war hinged, and was ultimately lost from. That milestone would concern the proposed new home for the Dilgar, Mitoc.

The Participation of Minbar

It would be incorrect to say that the Minbari were unaware of the events transpiring in the League of Non-Aligned Worlds; more precise would be to say that the Minbari considered the whole conflict beneath them.

Contrary to what general perception would suggest, the Minbari had a network of contacts that provided them with information, the ageing Anla-Shok included. It was inevitable that the upper echelons of Minbari government, if not necessarily the Grey Council, would eventually become aware that a new power had come to the aide of the League. Whilst initial reports seemed to imply that this was a noble act, further investigation showed that this new power, the Earth Alliance, was a poorly structured society with a barbaric history of self-mutilation. Also, some of the information sources reported back that the new race had become involved with the sole intent of currying favor with the League.

Perhaps equally, the Dilgar Imperium accepted that, much like realms of the Ancients and the domain of the Tal'kon'sha close to them, conquering the Minbari Federation or at least engaging them in combat would be a leap to far. The province of the Minbari Federation was a good distance away anyway, and coupled with the fact that Dilgar spies had uncovered that the Centauri Republic's fear of the Minbari was well founded led the Dilgar Warmasters to choose to avoid any contact with the Minbari. There were unconfirmed reports, with not a shred of physical evidence, that a Minbari task force did participate in the war, for one specific mission; to destroy a Dilgar fleet in hyperspace that was headed for Earth space. There were no Dilgar survivors, and no living Minbari was either willing or able to state either way whether this single battle was real or just a rumour.

The truth of the matter is that the Dilgar fleet was indeed headed for Earth, via an intended meeting with the two members of House Jaddo who were holding the keys to the Earth defense network in their hands.

The Loss of Mitoc

The intended new homeworld of the Dilgar, the pleasant world of Mitoc, was the next world destined for freedom, and one that the Imperium did not want to lose – at any cost.

By the June of 2232, the Earth Expeditionary Force was somewhat smaller than it had been, through battlefield attrition but also because of the *Orestes* class vessels they had left behind to guard some of the most important systems that they had reclaimed. To support the loss of the *Thor*, and the number of fighters in Cascor space, an *Avenger* class carrier arrived, the *Illustrious*, with a full complement of Star Fury Tigers and Novas to replace those lost over the course of the campaign. Two new Hyperions had also been lent to support the fleet.

EarthForce Intelligence had identified that there was something important to the Dilgar Imperium about this world; fleet movements and intercepted communications had revealed that they intended, or had originally intended at least, to move a significant amount of resources here. It had become something of a fallback point as the Expeditionary Force had pounded Dilgar ships and bases over the last few months.

The arrival of a reinforced Expeditionary Force, with support provided by the Liberation Navy in the same sky as that occupied by their intended new homeworld was something that no Dilgar wanted to see. A conflict began, but it was apparent from the opening shots that EarthForce wasn't about to back down. Admiral Hamato had gained a reputation of being born lucky, and the Dilgar Imperium had heard reports of a legendary officer leading the Human forces. Also, as an aside, there were hushed whispers amongst the Dilgar that an ancient tale was about to come true, about the end of their world. Initially sceptical, the fact that EarthForce possessed powerful dreadnoughts of a class named *Nova*, and a new type of star fighter also named *Nova* played havoc with the morale of some Dilgar crews and officers. Interrogations had ascertained that no alien, Human or otherwise, knew of the fate of Omelos, and this only made the paranoia worse. It was seen as a portent, something that officers in the Dilgar navy did their best to convince their crews was not about to come to pass.

The loss of the two new Hyperions, carrying green crews inexperienced in combating the Imperium, improved Dilgar morale somewhat. However, a series of well-executed manoeuvres put Admiral Hamato's forces into position to take down two Pentacans both commanded by Mishakur Dreadnoughts. It became obvious that to all the participants as more League ships started to arrive, from the Abbai Matriarchate and the Vree Conglomerate, that Mitoc was lost to the Dilgar.

In an act of spite, the Dilgar launched enough missiles and bombs at their intended homeworld of Mitoc to turn it into a polluted and radioactive wasteland. Such was the intensity of the weapons unleashed that the world was stripped of life in an instant, a wasteland not capable of supporting any form of life above bacteria for a thousand years. The results of this attack were replayed by media groups such as ISN throughout Earth-controlled space, a painful reminder of what would have happened to Earth had the Expeditionary Force not gone to the aide of the League

This was the point of balance, where the conflict hung on a knife-edge. Had the Dilgar Imperium had either the resources to launch a counter-offensive, or had allies to help them, then they could have attacked the haggard Expeditionary Force and weary Liberation Navy. If the Imperium had approached the Drazi about an alliance (which the latter would in all probability have accepted), then the progress of the rest of the Dilgar War would have been an entirely different matter. The Drazi mentality, bred into them that nothing truly lasting can be accomplished alone, would have led them to ally themselves with the Imperium.

The War on the Ground

Whilst the battles in space were going well, the same could not be said as easily of the battles on the ground. The Dilgar often left ground forces behind on the ground when they abandoned systems – although initially the Dilgar ground troops were shaken at being abandoned, when they realised they had nothing to lose they dug in and continued to fight, as they had been ordered.

As ground fighters, the Dilgar were resourceful up to a point, preferring to fall back on known military tactics and procedures than invent new ones. EarthForce ground personnel discovered this within hours of engaging Dilgar forces; when confronted by new situations, the Dilgar fell back on the perceived wisdom of the War Council, and the battlefield tactics they had outlined.

Carried by one of the support fleets following behind the bulk of the Earth Expeditionary Force, EarthForce army companies and regiments were charged with retaking the lands on worlds captured by the Dilgar. Their work was much harder and grittier than that experienced by their stellar cousins, with combat often brutal and up close and personal with Dilgar soldiers. Despite their dependance on established methods and tactics, the Dilgar were no less skilled or devoted.

With the emphasis on fleet battles, it is easy to forget that there was more to defeating an enemy that simply destroying his fleets. A dug-in enemy is harder to defeat, for the defender has

little interest in actively attacking, only preventing a successful attack. GROPOS with EarthForce learned this too well during the Dilgar War, and in some situations, especially in cities and bases where their Dilgar opponents were holed up, military actions often had a high expected number of casualties.

Several of the regiments following behind the main Force gained an impressive name for themselves for their heroic actions, one of these was the 112th Armoured Company, also known as the Rolling Thunders. All of their core platoons were taken up with Thor battle tanks, and they knew how to exercise every last drop of power and might out of their vehicles. With a small battery of Loki artillery pieces and a small troop contingent backing them up, to both act as spotters and ensure that enemy infantry did not infiltrate their positions on the battlefield, the Rolling Thunders vanquished many Dilgar armoured columns and positions. In a rare occurrence within the military, the entire company was awarded with medals for bravery at the end of the Dilgar War campaign.

A Last Chance For Peace

With Mitoc gone, the Imperium were forced back to the worlds of Alaca, Balos, Tithalis and of course their homeworld of Omelos. With Balos the primary barrier between the Earth Expeditionary Force and Omelos, and Tithalis the border world on the front-line with the Drazi Freehold, this was the last line of defence for the Imperium. With their new homeworld lost, they were fighting for their immediate survival. The Dilgar now had the advantage that they had not had at any point in the campaign; with their forces concentrated, the Liberation Navy and its human counterpart would have their work cut out on getting any further.

It is perhaps for this reason that an effort to sue for peace, undertaken by EarthGov against the express wishes of Admiral Hamato, failed. Morale back on Earth was ebbing away; the losses suffered for what some were now claiming was not a Human conflict were having an effect on the public's perception of their current government. Politicans, concerned that vocal support for the war would lose them votes in next elections, refused to comment on the need for the war. Something was needed to either end the war or demonstrate that the war was winnable, and soon. A proposal was worked on, to put an end to hostilities by declaring the current battlelines to be the final borders. No alien governments were involved in the creation of this draft, which would have caused a major upset in relations between the Earth Alliance and the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Despite this, political advisers informed a closed session of the Earth Alliance Senate that like Earth the public on many alien worlds was tiring of war.

There was an additional reason for this proposal to be made, more than the effect on public opinion. Military analysts, in their presentations to Senators within EarthDome, were pointing out the cost of the war. The logistical costs of supplying vessels on the front line with crews, spare parts, never mind weaponry such as missile racks and railguns which used expendable ammunition, were causing the war to become a helter-skelter of costs, with little to prevent the downward slide into financial chaos. Therefore, there was an additional need to stop the war, and that reason was fiscal. The fact that the Dilgar still owned a handful of worlds that were not originally theirs was deemed to be an acceptable loss if the agreement could be signed.

After three weeks, the proposal was ready. Borders would be frozen at their current state, and a ceasefire would begin. The Dilgar would be required to return all detainees and captives, although in truth the proposal committee knew that this would never be carried through with. On their staff, serving as a copywriter on the final draft of the proposal, was a young Miagi Hidoshi, who would later become a Senator serving as liason between Babylon 5 and EarthDome.

For players who might wish to play a non-canon campaign, this would be an excellent point at which to flow history from, in a different direction. What if the Dilgar War had ended at this point? Would the Babylon Station have been built 20 years earlier? What would have happened to Sinclair, Sheridan and Delenn if the reasons for the shining beacon in space that was B5 never existed, or were not the same?

Equally, if the Dilgar had made an alliance with the Drazi, then the entire balance of power would change. With the Narns appeased, and the Centauri back-pedalling from major engagements, the Earth Alliance would find themselves fighting a vastly different enemy. The Minbari Federation may have been forced to become involved in the Dilgar War after all.

An envoy from Earth Alliance space entered the Tirrith system under the white flag of truce. For a moment, the universe was equally able to tip in either direction. An opening salvo that obliterated the diplomatic courier was the push, which dictated that the war would not stop and that the Dilgar lust for victory was not to be appeased. It was decided that the entire proposal for peace would be classified, lest it aggravate the current good standing that the Earth Alliance had with the League.

With their path chosen by their foes, leading to whatever lay at the end, a victory was now required that would placate the public long enough for the rest of the war to be completed. That victory, EarthGov decided, would be claimed at Balos.

The Retaking of Balos

Earth Intelligence had come on in leaps and bounds in uncovering the motives of the Dilgar, including a physical makeup of their races. Indeed, it was rare for Human and Dilgar to meet face to face on the field of battle – the Dilgar liked to surround their targets and bomb them until wholly subjugated. This tactic, which had

the minimum loss of life for the Dilgar ended up having two significant drawbacks.
The first of these was of ease of control. Standard EarthForce doctrine, indeed like many of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, was that in order to properly control a target, you had to put manpower down on it. Regardless of whether it was Special Force units, a battalion of tanks, or a complete fabricated structure with fighter cover, the principle was the same.

The Dilgar has a similar approach, but only put down the barest minimum down to subjugate a world in the early stages. To some military analysts, it seemed that the Dilgar Imperium disliked for getting their hands dirty, preferring to make cleaner strikes from orbit or bombing runs. This meant that ground installations, although still possessing significant armed resistance, were not the meat-grinders that they could have been.

Secondly, the Dilgar practice of bombardment, whether by chemical, biological or even nuclear-based strikes, often forced a native populace to go underground. Some races could not handle this, and crumbled, but some embraced the opportunity and struck back at their aggressors. One such race to do this was the Balosians.

Primarily an underground race, the Balosian Underdwellers had saurian ancestry, and had been forced to develop a primarily subterranean culture after a disaster struck their world. Only in the last decade had the Balosians ventured out, using Centauri patrol boats and other small craft that had been sold to them with most of the major equipment removed. Even the jump engines had been taken away, and there was certainly no provision for artificial gravity on these vessels. They were little more than floating coffins with engines, and these few vessels had posed little threat to the Dilgar when they invaded.

The Dilgar had not managed to fully conquer the Balosians; instead placing a series of garrisons on the world's surface. These garrisons contained command and control centres, ground batteries, munitions factories and other artefacts of war. This world was a tempting target, and removing the Dilgar presence from this world would cripple the whole of the Imperium's war effort. It would also hamper the massing of Dilgar forces, intent on striking the Drazi Freehold with a fatal blow.

Admiral Hamato's legendary luck failed him, as a carefully orchestrated plan fell apart. He intended to use the Free Balosian Navy, what little remained of it, as a lure to allow him to use his own forces to ambush the Dilgar. What was the fly in his particular ointment was whom the Warmaster present at Balos was; it was Deathwalker herself.

Warmaster Jha'Dur fully expected humanity to target Balos, and in turn set up an ambush that was highly costly for the Earth Expeditionary Force. It had only just allowed shuttles and Frigga assault craft to land before the Dilgar sprung their trap, stranding Gropos down on the surface.
It was a well-executed trap, and it paid off for the Imperium. They managed to take down another Nova class Dreadnought with concentrated fire, the *Freya*. As an added bonus, the Imperium managed to obliterate the Olympus class corvettes *Rhiannon* and *Harmonia*, as well as putting the Hyperion Gamma class vessel *Dionysus* out of the fight for several weeks before Admiral Hamato was able to withdraw. The fact that Warmaster Jha'Dur's personal command Mishakur dreadnought had managed to deal the death blow on a Nova class dreadnought served to uplight the spirit of those Dilgar warriors who were tiring of losing.

For two whole months, Admiral Hamato took stock of the war to date, and he reconsidered his tactics. Up until now, he had been fighting different Warmasters, but this had been his first real conflict with the legendary Warmaster Jha'Dur, who had spent the war alternating between her scientific experiments and humbling the Drazi. Admiral Hamato also had other problems, with EarthGov demanding a victory. There were even rumours that a replacement for Admiral Hamato was being lined up back in EarthDome. His loyal soldiers were stranded on Balos, without an EarthForce vessel within ten light years. Their carrier had been the *Dionysus*, and with that vessel little more than a flying hulk the Fighting 103rd were stranded on an enemy world.

The Fighting 103rd

Having cut their teeth in the conflict involving the Narn Regime twenty years before, the Fighting 103rd had a proud and valorous history. Every fibre of their existences would be required to keep themselves alive on a world which truly belonged to the enemy. The only solution was to hide underground, and launch guerrilla raids against the Dilgar installations on Balos, until Admiral Hamato and the rest of the Earth Expeditionary Force came to relieve them.

Under the command of Brigade Commander Matthew Angelos, a South American born Latino with a history of guerilla fighting in his history, this was a battle that they would not lose. The Dilgar were swift in their attempt to eliminate the stranded EarthForce soldiers, but were expecting a disorganised rabble, cut off from their chain of command. The reality was different, and against all expectations the Fighting 103rd went on the offensive, ensuring that the Dilgar ground forces were kept at bay until preparations could be made for the 103rd to hide. As a tribute to their hard work and relentless determination, only a handful of soldiers were lost.

Aiding this process was the indigenous sentient race on Balos, a race of reptilian creatures who had themselves been conducting hit-and-run raids against Dilgar fortifications since their world was invaded. With a potential communications disaster averted, the Balosians realised that their desire to kick the Dilgar Imperium off their world now had additional support in the form of well-armed, co-ordinated and dedicated EarthForce soldiers under the command of Matthew Angelos. Until Hamato

could return, both forces were agreed in the requirement to keep the Dilgar occupied as best as they could.

The combined actions of the Balosians and the Fighting 103rd made the lives of the Dilgar in control of Balos a living nightmare. Several strikes were launched that knocked out power relays and internal communications, which infuriated the local Imperium commanders no end. The individual in charge of one of the Fighting 103rd units, an Italian by the name of Alfredo Garibaldi, in particular performed valiantly, successfully charging his team to disrupt the power to the main scientific research centre on Balos, for four full days.

During their time before the Earth Expeditionary Force returned, both the Balosians and the Fighting 103rd worked with each other to make their situations better. The Balosians taught the Fighting 103rd how best to wage war in subterranean domains, whilst the 103rd instructed the Balosians in combat tactics. With the impending return of their forces, and all-out war, both were aware that the withholding of any relevant or useful information could doom both their groups.

A Second Chance for Balos

Hamato's second attack, executed with much more caution, had the benefit of some new additions to the Earth Expeditionary Force. The *Androcles* and the *Zeus* had arrived, to take up the position in the battle line left vacant by the *Freya* and *Thor* respectively. Both ships had experience of combating Dilgar raiding parties in Earth and Markab space after the liberation of that latter world, so were coming to the battle knowing what to expect. Two more reinforcements had arrived, the *Eros* and the *Narcissus*, to replace the *Delphi* and the *Lancelot* which had been lost at Brakos and in Markab space respectively. This was a boon, for it meant that the Expeditionary Force was almost up to full strength.

The patched-up Hyperion cruiser, *Dionysus* was lost in the fight, and the *Androcles* was heavily damaged, but in spite of this the general situation at Balos became impossible for the Dilgar to achieve anything close to a victory. Therefore, they fell back from Balos, concentration their forces even closer to home. At this point, Warmaster Jha'Dur performed an elaborate escape attempt, with a planned series of orders given out to her crew and ships under her command to ensure her escape. To those that knew her, and knew of her plans, this sent a powerful signal that the fight was considered pointless. Clearly, this would have devastating effect on the general level of morale, and so was kept as secret as possible.

Diary of David Nathaniel Sinclair, September 18th, 2232 : 21:14pm.

For the first time in this war, I actually got a chance to go ground-side. Captain Reilly, my C-O, wanted to go down and ascertain the damage first hand, and for some reason he thought that I needed to go down with him. It was nice to feel gravity again, for the first time in weeks.

A GROPOS by the name of Alfredo Garibaldi showed me round, along with a group of rookies from the recently arrived EAS Jupiter. He came across as a bit gruff, but given what he had accomplished here with the Balosians, I would have been remiss to tackle him on that score, in fact any score. The hamstrings of the Dilgar operation had been well and truly severed by their work, which had made our fight up above Balos so much easier.

I saw the breeding chambers, the cloning vats, the technical implementation laboratories. I saw wailing bodies, half sentient, half-tech, crafted onto their bodies and minds with no concern for pain or sanity. The Balosians were forced to put these monstrosities out of their anguish. The things done here on Balos made me physically sick; I find no shame as a man in admitting that. The name of Deathwalker echoes round this place, and words do not exist for what evil has been attributed to her. She could make a man find religion, for there has to be a Hell for her to answer what evil she has done in her lifetime.

I need to write a letter home, to Gemma and the kids. I have to focus on something else, other than that which is probably burned into my retina forever. The realist in me suspects I won't get much sleep tonight.

One thing had been notable by its occurrence in this second battle, and was something that Admiral Hamato and his captains would be forced to consider when engaging Dilgar forces. There was a clear sign that the Dilgar navies now considered ramming actions a valid tactic in stopping the advance. Communications decoded and decrypted by EarthForce Intelligence proved that the gloves were off, and that the Dilgar considered sacrificing their own vessels, by their most fanatical crews, was a fair tactic. This was named 'Blood Wind', and had historical echoes to previous conflicts in human history.

The Fall of Tithalis

With the conquering of Balos, the chance to strike hard at the Dilgar fell to the Drazi Freehold. Information had reached them that the Dilgar had been planning to launch a major offensive, and that the Imperium had been forced to back-pedal as a result of the campaign to free Balos.
Six Drazi Primary Assault fleets (see *The League of Non-Aligned Worlds Fact Book* for details) entered Tithalis space on April 2nd, 2232. Ordered by the Shadak, the closest entity comparable to a ruling body, these ships were ordered to engage and destroy any Dilgar force. Two Drazi Fast Strike fleets were ordered to provide cover for the primary assault fleets, and perform flanking operations if possible.

Previously in the conflict, the Dilgar had used the fact that the fleets of the Drazi perform better at close ranges to good effect, with prodigious usage of long-range firepower to soften up their foes. However, the Drazi were lucky in two regards. The jump-point that they opened actually put them *behind* the core body of Dilgar forces, and the command ship fell in the first few salvos. The mission was led by the leading military figure in the whole Drazi Freehold, Ziddak, who held the prestigious rank of Tora-tan, effectively putting him in charge of the entire war effort. He was an individual of considerable skill, equal to that of the Warmaster present.

The Drazi did well to defeat the Imperium's forces in the skies above Fendamir, to leave the subjugation of the Dilgar ground forces to the tough ground forces of the Freehold. Their mistake was to continue the fight, following the fleeing Dilgar forces through hyperspace back to their home of Omelos. There, the Drazi forces were beaten soundly, with the three surviving fleets destroyed in short order. Thinking tactically, the Warmasters present had instructed the Imperium fleets under their command to disable or destroy those Drazi vessels that had jump-engines. This left the remaining Drazi vessels unable to flee, which cost the Freehold dearly. Ziddak was thought killed in the battle; the truth was that along with a handful of others he was taken prisoner, and was kept alive for weeks until the prolonged tortures finally claimed his life. This was despite their best efforts to keep him alive to suffer further punishments, indignant acts and horrific mutilations notwithstanding.

The Battle for Omelos

On the October 22nd, 2232, the final battle of the length campaign began, that ultimately began with the escape of the *Pyrotina* from Alacan space, through long battles, horrific discoveries and sacrifices both noble and foolish. All sides were weary from the fighting, but the fact that everything would be decided for all time in the skies above Omelos had a galvanizing effect on all races concerned. Every single EarthForce ship in the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, excluding the Orestes vessels required to keep worlds safe, was pulling into the offensive.

Admiral Hamato was killed when a Garosoch Heavy Carrier rammed his flagship. His work was done; he had provided enough tactical advice and forethought so his captains and their crews could finish the work ahead. If Admiral Hamato had been a worrying man he need not have been troubled; those officers would do him proud.

The battle for Omelos was anything but pretty. There were over a thousand vessels belonging to many different races in the skies over that day, a battle of size unparalleled until the Battle of the Line over fifteen years later. No quarter was given, no mercy was shown by either side. Disabled vessels were pounded mercilessly until in fragments, fleeing vessels were hunted down and rended into scrap. For every act of cowardice, there were a hundred individual acts of heroism. Ramming actions did common, captains and crew alike aware that by sacrificing their today would give freedom a tomorrow. After most of a day of fighting, the result was clear, and there would be no celebrations amongst the Dilgar tonight.

The battle was done; the conflict was done; the war was done. A rag-tag fleet of alien vessels combined with the best the Earth Alliance could provide had defeated the Dilgar Imperium. The victory had been paid for in blood, a dozen times over, but the result was that the Imperium would never poison another world, ambush another civilian transport or perform a single dark experiment.

The legacy that the Dilgar left behind however, would take a long time to heal. The scars caused would perhaps never heal, only both the passing of time and the generations affected would allow the universe to carry on.

However, there was much work to be done, recriminations which had to be handled, and the problem of what to do with an alien race that had maimed, butchered, raped and killed billions of innocents across the League of Non-Aligned Worlds.

Aftermath of a War

It was the fourth such patrol in as many days, and Sergeant Andrew McIntyre was exhausted, but not for the reasons he had expected. A certain amount of fatigue was expected when transferring from a weightless environment back into the confines of gravity, but this was something else.

From the first moments of his boots hitting Dilgar soil, it had been apparent to even a ground-pounder like him that something was indeed wrong with the Dilgar people. The long faces, the downtrodden expressions, the gait with which the Dilgar stooped around, even the reluctance to not make eye contact with the invaders from other worlds, there was nothing which reminded him of the tales he had been told and reports he had read. The spirit of the Dilgar had been broken, their dreams corrupted for all time in the skies above Omelos, by a combination of Human and alien determination.

As his transport had dropped out of orbit a week before, the sight of the Dilgar capital city from altitude has surprised him, appearing much more orderly than he would have expected, the rows upon rows of clean looking pentagonal dwellings looking like honeycomb. One of his colleagues had commented on the fact that the sting of the Dilgar had already been felt.

As Sergeant McIntyre continued his patrol around the streets of Omelos, his two subordinates flanked him; they too were silent, their thoughts their own. The declaration of marshal law had made no difference to the lives of the common Dilgar who walked these streets in daytime. Now, by night, there was no sound from the city, as if the city itself had died. There were no noises, save EarthForce ground carriers moving around and atmospheric vessels passing by overhead, searchlights scanning over dull pentagonal

stone buildings, with shutters closed and doorways locked. Occasionally, as they walked through alleyways and passages checking for vagrants, Sergeant McIntrye would wonder if, at the periphery of his senses, he could hear the sound of sobbing and wailing coming from a building they had passed by. Time and time again he had returned to a building he had passed before, this time only to be greeted with silence.

As Sergeant McIntyre checked behind a parked ground vehicle, covered by Privates Takagi and Johnson, he realised why he was feeling so exhausted. It was not the fact that he was further away from home than he believed he would ever possibly be, or even the fact that he was dosed up on anti-radiation medication to prevent him suffering from the damage that the Dilgar expansion had done to their home world. There was nothing happening here on Omelos to get him fired up, get his adrenaline going. It was more akin to guard duty, for a people who had no will to fight any more. The lack of action itself was tiring, for he was forced to be constantly on his guard in a city whose silence was deafening.

A hundred metres up above him, on a highway that passed over their heads, a short, lean figure in similar khaki military dress appeared and waved down at him through the gloom, her presence only noticeable by the presence of her lit torch. Sergeant McIntrye knew exactly who it was, his compatriot Sergeant Kopylova from Bravo team. She had the duty of ensuring that the highways were unused during the night, by either Dilgar ground vehicles or Dilgar citizens attempting to escape the city limits. As she went on her way, Sergeant McIntryre smiled, primarily because he had a soft spot as far as she was concerned.

His thoughts of Sergeant Kopylova were disrupted when he heard a noise to his right, in a side alley that stretched down towards some modest dwellings. He threw himself to the floor, PPG rifle up and ready. Behind him, his two subordinates were already training the business ends of their weapons on the alley, ready for any target to present itself. Torches mounted atop their rifles were activated, as the darkness of the Dilgar night was pierced by the harsh beams of light. For a second, the scene stopped still, as if locked in time, until Sergeant McIntyre got to his feet, and Private Johnson went in to investigate.

Beneath a pile of rubble and rubbish, which must have been fresh, was an ageing Dilgar, with dark fur. The figure looked up at Johnson, and then at Takagi and McIntyre. The Sergeant nodded, and questioned his own orders. Motioning the boulevard behind him, he made a circular gesture, ending the motion back to the alleyway they were in. After a nod of recognition from the alien, the trio departed, giving the alien ten minutes to move on back to his supposed dwelling. Many Dilgar, especially the older ones, were prone to being caught out when the curfew became active, and hid themselves anywhere they could find before the sun rose. The hassle of arresting these elderly Dilgar, who were from some sort of slave race, was more trouble than it was worth.

When they returned, the vagrant was still there. Sergeant McIntrye was already psyching himself up to take this ageing Dilgar into custody when Takagi, the one with the most experience of the Dilgar due to his time spent on Balos, knelt down beside the alien and checked it over quickly. Takagi looked up at McIntyre and shook his head, no words needing to be spoken. Evidently, the Dilgar had not even had the strength to stand, and had died here, cold and alone, but with a trace of kindness shown by a foe who should have granted none.

Tapping the side of his helmet, Sergeant McIntyre's helmet communicator immediately relayed a message from the local control centre, demanding an update. "Log us another one." McIntyre announced sadly, looking at his map. "Grid reference 5HQ by 3D3." He looked on as Private Johnson pulled a sheet of tarpaulin like cloth, which the Dilgar had been attempting to use as a blanket, over the alien's recently departed features. "Our sweep's finished. We're on our way back."

Rebuilding From Ashes

The Effort to Rebuild

The League of Non-Aligned Worlds had a difficult job on their hands. Chief amongst these were the survivors of the worlds that the Dilgar had truly decimated in their rampage. The Balosians, Mitocians and Descari were among dozens of other races who had been affected by the Dilgar blitzkrieg and the twisted experiments that had been conducted upon innocent citizens.

Whilst some races, like the Descari, were cautious about celebrating their new found freedom and opening their hearts and wallets to the Earth Alliance, many of the League governments did so. Whilst they needed to protect themselves against Raiders and the other League worlds, some of the more naive members of the League considered themselves to have some form of champion in the form of the Earth Alliance. For the humble citizens of the League, they had to pick up the pieces of their lives which had been changed forever.

The victory over the Dilgar made both the Centauri Republic and Narn Regime pause for breath. EarthForce had shown itself to be capable of conducting a major campaign, across multiple star systems, and re-take worlds invaded by a hostile power. Whilst neither Centauri Prime nor Narn believed that the Earth Alliance had enough military might to threaten them, both were forced to accept that there was truly a new power on the galactic stage, and this power was not content to act as an understudy for another, as some had accused them of being in the past.

To The Victor, No Spoils

Whilst the battle had been won, the problem began with what to do with the Dilgar. Many of the Dilgar populace hid in their houses, afraid of what would be done to them by their invaders. The stories of what had been done in their name were well known to the Dilgar populace, and whilst there was no great outbreak of remorse for what they had done there was an element of fear that retribution would be paid in kind.

A peacekeeping operation began, but what became apparent was the level of soul-destroyed apathy exhibited by the beaten Dilgar. The Gropos deployed on Omelos, located at a base outside the main capital of Ogkarin, had expected a brutal close-quarters knife-fight, and could not believe that there was nothing. In Ujia, one of the coastal ports, the populace bleached their clothes white as a sign of mourning. The Earth Alliance were spared what they feared at this stage; a peacekeeping operation costly in both financial measurement and in the expenditure of soldiers' lives. Communication spikes set up on Omelos allowed the Dilgar's transmissions between one another to be spied on, although with a few exceptions this was largely unnecessary.

After a few weeks, the peacekeeping effort was judged as being effectively over. The War Council and the Emperor were being sentenced, and other prisoners had been handed over as requested. The forward base was abandoned, and all equipment removed from Dilgar soil. Ironically, many EarthForce soldiers on peacekeeping duty never even saw a Dilgar, the occupation was that short.

The Trial of Butchers

The Emperor and the War Council were held jointly responsible for the war crimes committed, and in accordance with the wishes of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, their trials were carried out on Earth Alliance territory with members of the League presiding over the legal process and proceedings. Despite the wishes of humanitarians for clemency, in spite of all the Dilgar had done, sentences were passed. The Emperor, although not directly involved in the crimes, was still responsible and sentenced to life imprisonment on the Abbai homeworld. Mercifully, he never saw his homeworld burn, as he died a few months after, pushing the spiral of depression felt by the average Dilgar on faster. The news networks clamoured for the rights to broadcast the trials, but were flatly refused, the League wishing that the trials were conducted in private.

Those Warmasters who had survived the assault on Omelos were executed by firing squad. Warmaster Jeddu'Baran, the commander in chief of the naval forces, killed himself in his cell to avoid being humiliated by the assembled League soldiers who had competed amongst themselves for the right to be on the firing squad. Warmaster Keliun'Bar was the most defiant of all, spitting at his executioners before they peppered his torso with PPG fire.

With such public displays of punishment, the impression given to the League and the citizens of the Earth Alliance was that all of the Warmasters had died or been executed, although that was not strictly the truth. EarthForce suspected that Jha'Dur, the most evil (in the human definition) of all the Warmasters had escaped, but had only circumstantial evidence, based off decrypted portions of conversations. Unsure of what to do about this, EarthForce decided to classify all intelligence relating to Jha'Dur and her possible escape, which managed to stay secret for almost twenty years.

Of lesser but still important concern was that Warmaster Yu'Dun was rumoured to have escaped, along with Ehrol'ki, a former student of Jha'Dur, working in her Office of Military Applications. These individuals were the only ones that EarthForce could not explain away as a result of the bombing or the military tribunals, and thus sealed this information away carefully. Whilst nothing could be done about Jha'Dur, EarthForce followed up the matter of Ehrol'ki and Yu'Dun with the utmost secrecy.

Two months after the first alien boot had set foot on Omelos, the last occupier left, leaving behind a world to cope with the knowledge that it was about to die, whether in one day or ten years time.

The Secret of a Star

The mystery over why the Dilgar, as a race, did not plead for another race to come to their aid would be raised many times. Cultural specialists and sociologists regretted that they did not have the opportunity to observe such a breakdown of will on such a grand scale. It was almost as if the race, moving as one, accepted their fate without a single word being spoken.

The actual reason for the Omelos sun going nova was equally less clear. The star itself was not far enough along its life cycle to go into a supernova state at such an early stage, the Omelos sun being of a similar size to Earth's. Indeed, the rumours that there was a problem with the star were discounted for the reason that there should have been no way that the Dilgar star could become a supernova – it was simply the wrong size. Earth scientists were the most vocal in this, laying aside the fact that other races had significantly more experience in stellar matters than they. Their opinion was that there were no signs of unusual stellar activity – Earth scientists did not have the data which proved that there *had* been.

For several decades after the destruction of Omelos, scientists argued over the precise cause for the sun to go supernova. The only conclusion was that there was something critically wrong inside the star, and an explosion deep within the star was the only logical result. Conspiracy

theorists proposed that the star had been altered to cause a supernova by forces unknown, but these were treated as wild accusations with no grounding in known realities.

There were questions raised as to why the strange emissions from the Omelos sun slowed down to an occasional stellar eruption not uncommon to any normal star. A handful of alien governments knew that the Dilgar star had been much more active in the years before the 2220's, and the quiet period following this indicated the problems lay deep in the Dilgar star, rather than on the surface. The Abbai Matriarchate was one of these governments who knew about the approaching doom, having spied on the Dilgar from many years. Like everyone else, the Abbai did not expect the onset of supernova to happen so quickly.

No League government (which knew the real reason behind the Dilgar's quest for a new home) admitted publicly that it knew that the Dilgar's sun was doomed – there was no reason to admit it, for those concerned had been scoured from the universe, payback for what crimes they had committed.

A Withdrawing of Forces

The Earth Expeditionary Force went into public relations overdrive at the end of the Dilgar War, at the express wishes of EarthForce and the majority of the Senate. The public pleaded for the valiant officers and soldiers to be allowed to return home, but EarthForce was not done with them yet. Paraded as the victors, this show of military might cemented in the minds of the League the great benefit that having humanity on their side had been. As a result of this, trade dealings with the Earth Alliance by grateful alien benefactors increased tenfold.

The Liberation Navy dispersed, returning to their systems of origin to do what they could to safeguard their sovereign homeworlds and colonies so threatened by the Dilgar. In some cases, such as the Brakiri, their homeworlds were in such a state that they would in all probability never truly recover from the war. An element of the Liberation Navy was required to ensure that Omelos did not

Some of the Dionysus class outposts which had supported the progression of the Earth Expeditionary Force and the Liberation Navy were sold to alien governments and corporates, as were some of the elderly Orestes class system monitors that EarthForce didn't require anymore. As far as the Joint Chiefs were concerned, these monitors were outdated in any case, and so selling them on to deserving customers would cause no technological advantage to be lost. In truth, the sale would help pay for new vessels to be constructed to replace those lost in the Dilgar War.

Scattered to the Winds

It was three years later, in June 2235, that what remained of the Liberation Navy in orbit above Omelos noticed strange readings coming from the local star, not seen in the last four years. Sending the results back to the scientists within the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, the Abbai were the first to report that this was the signs of a fading star, and by the rate of progression there was literally days. They did not admit that they recognised the signs from previous emissions over the last hundred or so years of Dilgar history.

With no one willing to be the first to discuss the possibility of perhaps relocating the Dilgar, the chance for dialogue was lost when a solar eruption lashed the innermost planet of the home system, literally melting it out of existence. The Liberation Navy retreated to the system limits for safety, and within hours the sun that had shone over the Dilgar's time as a dominant species went nova. As the wave of heat and energy vaporised everything the Dilgar had struggled to achieve, the Liberation Navy turned and jumped to hyperspace.

Omelos was stripped, the atmosphere being wiped from the world at a stroke. Those on the surface of Omelos died within seconds, many cities on the planet's light side scorched. Hidden in underground bunkers, many constructed years before, the Dilgar choked and died, the punishment meted out for going to war on a galaxy. The remains of the surface water settled on the highest points as ice after several days, the planet now a brown, barren husk of its former self.

Two years after the supernova, the last Dilgar on Omelos died, deep in a government bunker beneath the city of Ujia, with no light or power, coughing as atmosphere recyclers failed. The light of the Dilgar fire had truly gone out of the galaxy.

Aftermath of Genocide

There were few tears shed when Omelos was scoured clean of all life. The more pacifistic races lamented the loss of any race, but there was no public outcry that more could have been done to preserve the lives of the Dilgar. Indeed, such was the sudden nature of Omelos' sun going supernova that it was all that the military vessels in orbit of Omelos could do to flee to the fringes of the system and escape.

Lives continued as they had done before for many in Earth controlled space, but for the League of Non-Aligned Worlds there was no way to step away from the carnage left behind. The legacy of the Dilgar was theirs for all time, the fact that Omelos had gone being a kind of cold comfort.

Still, there remained rumours that a few Dilgar were not on their homeworld when their star went supernova, and that the race had avoided extinction, although to all purposes were as dead as their homeworld of Omelos. These stories became rumours over time, their fade into myth enforced by the fact that no Dilgar was seen at large until one particular Dilgar made herself known to have survived the fall of her race, after 20 years in hiding.

Although the intelligence community within the Earth Alliance suspected as much, when Warmaster Jha'Dur appeared on Babylon 5 in 2258 there was still an element of surprise within EarthGov that she had announced her emergence in such a public manner. The reality of whatever happened to her in the intervening years was never revealed, but as her hosts were the Wind Swords, the most militant of the Minbari Warrior Castes, the truth would in all probability never see the light of day.

Effects on a Galaxy

The galaxy suffered greatly by the actions of the Dilgar, a shadow that would remain twenty-five years after the battle for Omelos, when the last of the Babylon stations went on line. Each of the main races would feel the effects of the Dilgar War in different ways.

The Earth Alliance – Effects and Ramifications

Out of all the combatants involved in the Dilgar War, it would not be a stretch of the imagination to state that the Earth Alliance came out of the titanic struggle better than any other race.

Politically, EarthDome and the Senate gained a great boost in public opinion despite the war, and many Senators who stood for re-election in the years following the Dilgar War were returned to their positions with increased majorities. The decision to go to war had been proved as being just, and generated a positive feeling about politicians, and politicians in general, that had waned somewhat in the years before the war. The public would tire of the post-war rhetoric after Omelos was burned up in the supernova, with political figures being forced to find alternate avenues to argue their individual policies and beliefs from.

Earth-based commerce found itself profiting from the war in many ways. Many alien corporations found that they were greeted with open arms and credit books when they inquired about making allegiances with human corporations. Many contracts to assist in the rebuilding work were signed by a multitude of corporates and conglomerates of human origins. The scientific gains from the Dilgar war were substantial, and not merely from the point of view of larger and better weapons. Medical and scientific fields saw a boost. By the time of the agreement to commence work on the Babylon Project, more than a handful of notable scientific discoveries made by Human scientists had their basis in Dilgar theory or experimentation.

The comparison to the Second World War is one that the proved to have merit, on levels less than noble. EarthForce noticed in the comparison that for the United States government there had been historic allegations that they had used individuals who previously worked for the Third Reich to advance their scientific research.

Spurred on by this idea, a secret research facility was constructed on the fringes of Earth Alliance space, via access to a restricted military jump-route. Whilst publicly this was an EarthForce testing facility, the truth was that Human and Dilgar scientists would continue to work for the alleged betterment of humanity; the reward to the Dilgar would be a life where they could continue their scientific work without worry of prosecution or public execution.

The opportunities gave EarthForce an argument to expand, despite political leanings to trim back on costs as the war was effectively over. Several new variants of existing EarthForce vessels were made possible by capitalising on the good work done by Admiral Hamato and the Earth Expeditionary Force. Unsurprisingly, EarthForce received a boost in recruitment, and for a time was able to pick and choose the most suitable candidates.

Any revenge that the Dilgar may have wished to inflict on the Earth Alliance for involving themselves in the war would in fact be carried out by humanity themselves. The Dilgar War was held up as an example of what EarthForce could accomplish militarily; compared to where their interstellar presence had been a year before the difference was astounding. The Earth Alliance was now truly a major power, and could stand alongside the Narn and the Centauri.

Many EarthForce officers believed that they were actually better than the Narn Regime and the Centauri Republic, for they had accomplished that they believed the two other powers could not. They had taken on a foe and liberated the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. These same individuals, filled with a rush of their own seemingly dominant power, rose through the ranks, and by the time Captain Janowski was sent into Minbari space, most of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been involved in the Dilgar War in some capacity.

The punishment inflicted on humanity in the Earth-Minbari war would be brutal, with human deaths a hundred times over what the Dilgar were able to inflict on humanity during their earlier conflict. In future times, the triumph over the Dilgar would be seen as a pyrrhic victory, for it caused a level of arrogance which cost the Human race dearly fifteen years later.

The League – Effects and Ramifications

The effort to rebuild was paramount, and one would have hoped that the League would have learned from the lessons of the war that through unity came strength. However, no sooner were the Dilgar contained to their homeworld than the League proceeded to rebuild in isolation with only one notable exception. In terms of political unity, there was a real and concrete difference that the Dilgar War had forced them to make.

The members of the League were forced to accept that there was value in working together, even if their sovereignty was their own affair. Politically, there was benefit in having a forum for debate and decisions. Whilst the motivation for this body may not have been as altruistic as some Abbai might have hoped for, it was better than nothing. This state of sometime co-operation continued until the Shadow War, when the various members of the League were persuaded to act against one another, in the hope of avoiding Shadow retribution.

The Abbai were pleased to discover the damage to Utriel, their primary colony had been minor. They came out of the war with an increased level of respect from the other members of the League. The Abbai were attributed with bringing the Earth Alliance into the war, along with the Markab, even though in truth the Earth Alliance had chosen to participate for its own self-interest. The war had not been as harsh on them as other races, with Abba surviving the war as a testament to the resilience of the Abbai's renowned planetary defences.

The Dilgar soundly beat the Drazi, who appreciated a good fight as much as any race, on multiple occasions. In fairness, the Drazi had given as good as they had received, and their region of space was in a truly sorry state when the war ended. The outer colonies, such as Latig, had received the full force of the Dilgar's hatred. Those League nations, who had been well aware of the ordeal that the Drazi had suffered, initially came to the aid of the Drazi Freehold.

Whilst the Freehold appeared to welcome the aid that the League offered, it became apparent within a few short months that the Freehold did not need much in the way of external assistance. Despite their territory not being as large as before, and not having as large a military as they once had done, there was no way that the Shadak were going to allow themselves to be attacked whilst their forces were weakened.

The war had visited Brakir directly, and their world was only one step removed from being declared a disaster zone. The improvements the Brakiri had to make were infrastructural as well as militaristic – the Dilgar War had been a case study in what was working in Dilgar society, and what was not. The political changes were as monumental as the effect on Brakiri society.

The Brakiri wished to cultivate a positive relation with the Earth Alliance, elements of which had bodies of commerce that the Brakiri could respect. Their space fleet was not as plentiful as that of the Earth Alliance, even after the Dilgar War. The Brakiri wished to build a fleet of vessels capable of defending their homeworld (and, of course, their corporate assets), but anything beyond that they were happy to ride on the coattails of the Earth Alliance. After all, if the Earthers wanted to play galactic policeman, then the Brakiri certainly were not about to pick up the bill.

That aspect, of picking up the bill, was one that concerned the Brakiri greatly, and something they wished to address. With their attention focused internally, they were not selling to their customers, and thus not generating revenue. The four main corporates knew that conducting sales was made all the more difficult by the fact that the poor state of the Brakiri infrastructure behind the scenes was well known.

The rest of the League suffered an uneven mix of tragedy and difficulty recovering from the Dilgar menace. The Vree emerged better than most, and were more than happy to attempt to make deals in the vacuum left behind by the temporarily distracted Brakiri. However, as they soon discovered, there was precious little business to be done, as the rest of the League had their own concerns. What money there was out there in the League was flowing in the direction of Earth, part gratitude, partly to curry favour with the so-called saviours of the League.

Above and beyond any other, the effects of the Dilgar's war would be counted upon the billions of citizens of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. The true number of souls murdered would never be known; the bodies of millions of their victims would never be recovered, let alone identified. Mass graves on worlds were the final resting-place of untold thousands of innocent souls, the rapid burying of corpses the only way possible to contain the risk of disease.

Many amongst the League would find themselves unable to let go of the hate; given the evil inflicted upon them, a certain level of compassion was more than due by a galaxy who looked upon a myriad of peoples united in their loss and pain.

The Centauri Republic – Effects and Ramifications

Unlike the Narn, the Centauri's involvement with the Dilgar was well known, or at least a rumour accepted as fact. For years before the invasion of Alaca, the Centauri had used Dilgar mercenaries for tasks that were deemed unsuitable or unsavoury for a true Centauri to attempt. The mercenaries had performed every task asked of them, and more besides.

The League expected no help from the Centauri Republic; in return, the Centauri had little concern for their former conquered holdings. Whether they were independent or bombed into oblivion by the Dilgar, it did not matter. The Centauri spy network had uncovered the fact that the Dilgar sun was going to go supernova, this knowledge gained as early as 2229. They knew the reason why the Dilgar were going to war, and reasoned that it was only to find a new home.

The Centauri Republic did not expect the dreams of the conqueror to infect the Dilgar as greatly as it did. The Centauri also did not expect the Earth Alliance to rise from so little to becoming a major power in the space of a year. At the opening of 2232, a meeting of the Noble Houses met to discuss the entry of the Earth Alliance in the war. They agreed with the opinion that there would be little point in the Earth Alliance doing more than protect the alien races which bordered its own space; creating a buffer zone around their worlds with the realms of others.

The Centaurum was totally wrong. The Earth Expeditionary Force assumed the mantle of liberators, taking back space that they had little reason to reclaim for others. The motivations of the Vree and the Brakiri were obvious to the Centaurum; those two races were merely protecting their markets. Likewise, the Abbai and Hyach were concerned with their diplomatic efforts and the confirmation of their League of worlds. Humanity had so much less to gain, and had given a wholly disproportionate amount to a conflict that had, at the time, only partially threatened their space. The Centaurum came to the understanding that the Earth Alliance had felt quite different about the matter than they had estimated. The affairs of Earth were now watched carefully by the Centarum and their agents, lest the Earth Alliance gain illusions of grandeur in the general direction of Centauri Prime.

Apart from defending their borders, incorrectly assuming the Narn Regime would take advantage of the chaos within the League by acting aggressively, the Centauri Republic did nothing of note during the Dilgar War, contributing to neither side. The level of trade that the League of Non-Aligned Worlds conducted with the Centauri Republic was not adversely affected, partly because the actual level of trade done was minimal in the first place.

The Narn Regime – Effects and Ramifications

The association of the Narn Regime with the Dilgar Imperium was a rumour poorly kept, and this tittle-tattle was well known by members of the League. Certain Dilgar victories were impossible to explain away without the Narns acquiescing to Dilgar demands. Despite these tales being public knowledge they could not be proven, for the Narn intelligence community had been vigorous in covering up links between the Dilgar and the Narn Regime. Stories of Narns who were used in Dilgar experimentation helped indirectly to dissuade a direct assault by the League. Additionally, after the efforts of the Dilgar the League of Non-Aligned Worlds was hardly in a position to do anything other than comment on rumours.

These stories, of Narn citizens who had been caught in the wrong place and at the wrong time, helped to bury the collaboration with the Dilgar firmly enough so that the truth was only available to a subset of individuals, such as the inner circles of the Kha'Ri. Whilst there were rumours of extensive collaboration, only short of direct Narn participation on the side of the Dilgar, there was never enough evidence available to corroborate these reports.

Of greater concern to the Kha'Ri were the Earth Alliance, and the manner in which they had conducted the war. Whilst the Kha'Ri did not like to admit it, especially to the Narn populace, the Earth Alliance had proved itself to take on a military power similar in terms of technical competence. Their recent experiences with humanity several decades before the Dilgar War had shown them that the Earth Alliance had tactical expertise which belied the newcomer's time in space.

The Minbari Federation – Effects and Ramifications

Humanity had proved itself to be a capable if primitive military force in the eyes of those Minbari who were aware of them, but to still a decadent alien race wrapped up in their own excesses. The fact that the Anla-Shok had come to the aid of humanity was a fact which the Rangers managed to keep from the Warrior Caste for several years. The result was a chastisement of the Anla-Shok Na, Lennonn for involving the Minbari with lesser races, and the withdrawal of non-essential funding. This drain would cripple the actions of an already pressured Anla-Shok even further.

The limited interaction between the Minbari Federation and the League of Non-Aligned Worlds continued as it had done since before the Dilgar War. There was little that the Minbari Federation required from outsiders, save an occasional trade convoy. Many in the League had never even seen a picture or image of a Minbari vessel; presumably, their media outlets did not wish to ire the wrath of the mighty Minbari Federation. Their reluctance might have been different if it had become public knowledge that the Minbari Federation was harbouring their greatest enemy, believed dead.

The presence of the war criminal Jha'Dur was kept secret from the Grey Council by the Wind Swords. When the war began against humanity (pleasing Jha'Dur no end) the Wind Swords were able to come to the Grey Council with terrible weapons which they had created, based off the designs provided to them by Jha'Dur. At that point, the Grey Council were made aware that the Wind Swords had kept a truth from them, and this made the Grey

Council reluctant to use the weapons developed by this Dilgar female who possessed a brutal and bloody history. Besides, the war against Earth was a Minbari crusade, and to pollute it with the weapons of others would be an insult to the memory of their leader Dukhat.

After the Earth-Minbari war ended, the fact that they had associated with a war criminal was a secret the Grey Council chose to keep. Instead of admitting that they had been harbouring her, the shame that some members of the Grey Council felt at keeping the secret that the Wind Swords had been harbouring such a butcher meant that the lie had to be kept. It was the worst sort of lie in many respects, one that did not need to have been made in the first place.

To protect this secret, Jha'Dur was sent to an out of the way colony in the Minbari Protectorate, and allowed to continue her work unhindered and unaided by the Minbari, save some elements of the Warrior Caste who privately wished they had been allowed to use their weapons of terror against the Humans. As long as the Grey Council were not reminded of her existence, they seemed not to care.

In time, elements within the Minbari Federation learned of the line of work which Jha'Dur had been privately working on since her arrival in Minbari space. This discovery, actually made by a member of the Anla-Shok who was due to retire from active service that same year, horrified the Grey Council and every Minbari, from the messengers to heralds who heard it. Warmaster Jha'Dur had discovered the key to eternal life, but her invention required the murder of another sentient.

Whilst to the Warrior Caste, death giving birth to life was not a major issue, the Religious Caste and the Worker Caste were united in a vote to have Jha'Dur removed from Minbari space. The Warrior Caste argued, claiming that at some point Jha'Dur's key ingredient could be synthesised, but the Religious Caste would have none of it. The murder of one life, perhaps even one life for another, would be akin to trading one soul for another.

In late 2257, Jha'Dur was given one stellar month to gather her belongings and leave. Anything left behind would be destroyed, even the inventions of war she had made which were stored away, under the auspices of the Wind Swords. The Warrior Caste objected violently to this, but dared not risk breaking the decided wish of the Council. This was despite predictions from some historical sources, with many dissenting opinions, that Valen had prophesised that the Grey Council would be broken.

With Jha'Dur gone from Minbari space, the works of a tyrant and a butcher were destroyed, leaving nothing behind but ashes. Certain elements within the Anla-Shok, not to mention members of the Worker Caste tasked with simple logistical work, were unconvinced that these weapons had been actually destroyed. If these weapons had been hoarded, then the Warrior Caste would have clearly possessed the ability to hide their deception from the Grey Council, a fact which could at some point render the Warrior Caste asunder.

If these weapons found their way into the hands of the renegade Storm Blades, then that would truly become a great concern to the Grey Council. The Storm Blades, Minbari military forces that defied the orders of the Grey Council and refused to surrender at the Battle of the Line, would possess in their hands the greatest tragedy to befall humanity if they uncover this secret cache.

The Future of the Dilgar

The fact that their homeworld was vaporised by a supernova need not spell the end for the usage of the Dilgar Imperium in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying game. Whether it is in one-off adventures, exploring a different time and different setting, or using this book to play against the Dilgar or even *as* the Dilgar, this book can offer many alternatives for adventuring in the Babylon 5 universe.

The three outlines provided in this chapter detail the location of some of the remnants of the Dilgar race, finishing at the start of the Earth year 2258. It is important to note that for over twenty years no Dilgar of any race was seen (or recognised) as such in the galaxy at large, and the nature of these survivors and their locations reflect this.

Lost and Damned – The Mynadin Pentacan

Humbled by the Minbari

Early on in the Dilgar War, shortly after the Earth Expeditionary Force had entered Markab space and gone to work on defending their allies, the Imperium sent a fleet into Earth space packed with viral bombs and missiles to cripple the war effort, possibly forever. This convoy of gunboats and heavy bombers was attacked in hyperspace by an unknown aggressor and left decimated. The attackers had targeted those vessels with jump-engines, content that they had disabled all those vessels before departing. It was nothing short of a miracle, and some extensive jury-rigging, that got the jump-engines working again. The only thing that was known was that their attackers had not been any of the League races.

Whilst it was indeed the Minbari who launched the assault, the actual instruction for the operation did not come from one of the Grey Council. It was the head of the Anla-Shok at the time, a middle-aged Minbari called Lenonn, calling in a favour that would do little to benefit the poor situation that the Anla-Shok were in at that time in their history.

Dropping a beacon, the remains of the Mynadin Pentacan passed through four dead systems before finding a location where they could regroup. The survivors were well aware that the war was continuing whilst they hoped to be rescued, but as time passed the beacon they had dropped evidently had not been picked up by friendly or indeed offensive forces. It could have drifted off the main hyperspace routes, but the truth would never be known.

The system which would become their new home, hopefully only for a short while, was a star system that had long since died. The sun in this system had long gone cold, the planets around the sun frozen without the much-required warmth. The frozen closest planet to the almost dead sun, the world of Attica, named after the Pentacan commander's maternal grandmother, was destined to become their temporary home. Whilst the atmosphere was only partially conducive to the Dilgar biology, simple breather units would suffice. The temperature was cold, an average of minus 40 degrees or so, but this was preferable to any of the other planets in the system.

With a location to put down and await rescue, there were more immediate concerns. The supplies on board the Pentacan were only enough to support the designated mission. Equally, there was no point the Dilgar crews remaining on their vessels in orbit, for to do so would be to waste the resources on their vessel where the world below provided them for free. At some point, it was argued, the vessels in orbit could be needed again.

Landing on the planet below, the Dilgar were set upon almost immediately. One of the natural predators, a vicious burrowing creature with four primary facial incisors, set upon the exploration team within moments of landing. These animals had little fear, knocking several Dilgar soldiers to the ground and ravaging them until their corpses stopped quivering. PPG fire was only partially effective against these metre long beasts, as their physical armour was tougher than many Dilgar had expected. The only time the beasts, dubbed Kirekken, were vulnerable was when they actually leapt at their quarry, which was a highly dangerous a Dilgar to be in.

The location where they put down was pleasant enough, despite the immediate problems. The air was not breathable, and there was little in the way of food provision. Kirekken meat was found to be palatable to the Dilgar digestive system, but a careful series of curing and the draining of the Kirekken's blood was necessary, as chemicals within the Kirekken body caused hallucinogenic effects. Even the skin and armour of the Kirekken was useful, having an excellent resistance to the cold. Water was more readily available, extracted from the ice that all but covered this elderly world.

It would surprise the Myanadin Pentacan to know that the Kirekken were actually not native to the world that they have made their temporary home. Two hundred thousand years before, a race attempted to conquer this region of space, before being wiped out by a hive virus that simultaneously struck down every single member of that doomed race..

The Kirekken were actually at once point in their history the pet creatures of this race, a hardy pet that could cope with many different planetary environments like their owners. Despite their masters being long dead, the Kirekken have evolved into a much larger, deadlier creature.

The Kirekken are amazingly long lived, averaging three hundred years or so. They have developed over many thousands of years to have an amazingly slow metabolism, able to survive for several years without food if they limit their movements. In times of a shortage of other prey, the Kirekken have been known to prey on one another.

Kirekken
Character Level: 3 (10 hp)
Initiative: +4 (+0 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 20ft
Defence Value 12 (+1 Dexterity, +1 Size)
Attacks: +5 melee
Damage: 2d4 (bite, multiple independant incisors)
Special Qualities: Damage Reduction 4 (extensive body armour), Cold Resistance (+2 to Fort save to resist effect of the cold)
Saves: Fort +4, Reflex +2, Will +0
Abilities: Str 14, Dex +12, Con 12, Int 6, Wis 5, Cha 2
Skills: Climb +1, Jump +3, Listen +3, Spot +3
Feats: Improved Initiative, (Improved Bull Run?)

The collection of wrecks which made up their home on this world, jokingly dubbed New Ujia after the coastal port on their homeworld, was home to the stranded Dilgar. Despite their isolation, they still operated to military procedure and protocol, but this new home was truly little more than an ineffectual replica of a military camp.

An Acceptance of Abandonment

It was on the tenth anniversary of their landing that the Pentacan captain, Kur'tan, was forced to admit that there was probably no relief flight coming. This was made worse when the navigators completed their analysis of the skies above this world, and discovered where they were. They were on the fringes of the galactic arm of their galaxy, thousands of light years away (by their reckoning) away from their homeworld of Omelos.

Something had to be done to keep themselves alive, until that day which they believed would come, when the Dilgar Imperium found them. A young ensign, with educational experience of environmental control systems before he was recruited into the Dilgar navy as an engineer, managed to convert one of the expired atmosphere control systems to extract oxygen from the atmosphere around them. Without this, oxygen supplies and their existing equipment would have barely lasted another year.

At the time of the arrival of newcomers in their system in 2259, the average Dilgar from the Myanadin Pentacan looks little like the race that held the League of Non-Aligned Worlds in the palm of their hands. Most of them, especially when outside their home, wear the skins and armour of the Kirekkens, as well as traditional Dilgar weapons.

No detail is given as to who the newcomers were, as the intention is to allow these almost tribal Dilgar to be fitted into the adventure or campaign outline as required by the Games Master. They could be a patrol from the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, which had received reports from scout ships of alien vessels matching old Dilgar profiles in the area. It could also be an EarthForce Explorer vessel, perhaps even the Cortez herself, establishing a new network of jump-gates after leaving Babylon 5 in 2259. It could be a Narn patrol, searching for new routes into Centauri territory. It could also be the Shadows, and what they would with such a group is anyone's guess.

In addition, there are Dilgar space vehicles, located close by, which were abandoned by the Mynadin Pentacan. Such vehicles, if made ready, could turn a raiding force into a power to rival some of the smaller League worlds.

With Kirekken numbers falling, the wisdom of War Captain Kur'tan led to several Kirekkens being captured and kept in relative captivity. There were several incidents of the keepers being killed by their charges, it came to light that the domesticated Kirekkens were less likely to attack their keepers if they wore clothing made from Kirekken skin, especially so if they armoured segments in the Kirekken armour were also worn. Wondering if this was driven by pheromones, or simply because the bearers were seen as being Kirekken-like, the dependence on the Kirekkens for survival was sealed. After a while, Kirekkens were released back into the wild, both for War Captain Kur'Tan's favoured advisers to hunt as well as allowing the natural food chain to replenish itself.

The next problem to face the battered survivors was their energy reserves, which were dwindling, especially with the breakdown of two generators in the same number of days. The Dilgar were forced to explore the tunnels that stretched deep into this world, uncovering several new species of underground life and lichens. Eventually, the more scientifically minded Dilgar were able to tap into the reserves of thermal energy beneath the planetary crust that helped with the crisis.

As a result of their isolation, the refugees were not aware that the Dilgar War had ended with their race losing the war and being wiped out of existence. Their equipment began to fail, not designed for such extended use, and the Dilgar stranded on this world found every day becoming a struggle. Without the support mechanism behind them, the military machine that had managed to survive being temporarily lost in hyperspace was falling apart, and a bloody revolution seemed likely. They had survived this far, but even their luck was running out.

In early 2259, a jump-point opened in the system. Whether this was for the salvation of the Dilgar, or their quick damnation and immediate extermination, remained to be seen.

Using the Mynadin Dilgar in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game

The following restrictions apply to all Dilgar from the Mynadin Pentacan in the Babylon 5 roleplaying game.

- All Dilgar who served as crewmembers in the Mynadin Pentacan during the Dilgar War may take levels in any relevant class, but any levels taken after their isolation on Attica must be either from the Soldier, Worker or Lurker classes.
- All junior Dilgar (who were born after the remains of the Mynadin Pentacan touched down on Attica) must take all of their levels in the Worker or Lurker class. They may not multi-class into any classes other than these, unless for some reason they are able to leave Attica.
- If the Skill Focus feat is taken after a Dilgar arrived on Attica, then Knowledge and Technical skills may not be selected with this feat. A Dilgar from this Pentacan is simply not in a position to make great strikes in intellectual or technical research that the Skill Focus feat in these areas would warrant.

Fifth Column to First Colony – Slaves of Opposition

A secret from the majority of the galaxy throughout the whole of the Dilgar War, the presence of a fifth column was denied to even the citizens of Omelos. The actual presence of a group of Dilgar opposed to their government never actually came to the attention of the Earth Alliance. It was the Drazi who learned of this secret, during a beating of a captured Dilgar officer. This secret was discarded as nothing more than another Dilgar lie.

Had the Earth Alliance or another power with an appreciation of handling matters covertly come into possession of this information, then it is possible that a meeting could have taken place between the fifth column and the forces arrayed against the Dilgar. The war could have gone along a different path, but there was no way of knowing after the fact if it could have been achieved. The fifth column would remain an enigma in later times, often discounted by reputable historians as having no substantial evidence to either prove or disprove the existence of such a group.

The Aims of the Fifth Column

A great number of Rittacan and Kathran slaves were unhappy with their lot. Whilst occasional protests occurred, the fact that they were stamped down mercilessly meant that demonstrations only occurred when the situations and living conditions were truly grim, and the only alternative was a slow, painful death.

There was very little organisation within the so-called fifth column, aside from a common desire to improve the lives of slaves. This would have caused political repercussions had any Thrazan ever agreed to it, as it would imply that all Dilgar had a basic set of rights, which went against the principle of control and authority which formed the core of the Dilgar political system. It would interfere in the instructions that a Thrazan could give a slave, and thus the instructions that a Magistrate could give a Thrazan. Whilst a Thrazan was to some level in control of their own destiny unless instructed from above to the contrary, the slaves had nothing. To the Assembly, the fact that the slaves had no rights was seen as a principle of their government, that of control over inferiors.

As of the opening months of 2228, there was very little that the Fifth Column had done to upset the workings of the Dilgar state. However, the fact that they existed at all was a concern to elements within the Dilgar government, including the War Council commands of Communication and Covert Action. They feared the slaves could become organised whilst the attention of Thrazan society was on readying themselves for a new homeworld. There was no evidence though, merely the paranoia of leading Dilgar that something was stirring many levels below.

This fear was exactly what transpired as 2228 progressed. A resistance movement sprang up and was poorly organised, but at the end of 2229 several failures in fuel pipelines and contaminated food shipments could not be explained away as accidents. The actual goal of this group of rebels was unknown, and despite repeated executions of slaves selected at random there was nothing that could be done short of executing every single Rittacan and Kathran.

This was unacceptable for several reasons, even though some Magistrates would have preferred it. Dilgar society relied on slaves doing unpaid work, often unfed and unclothed. A significant change to the Dilgar system of control would need to occur, because without the slaves the lowest level of Dilgar society was the Thrazans themselves.

The Value of Telepaths

In any intelligence effort, the presence of a telepath is incredibly useful. When there are no inherent rights for an individual to be scanned to hide behind, there is no defence against unwarranted telepathic attempts. Without such rights, a telepath can literally bludgeon their way in without any requirements on processes, or indeed damaging the mental capacity of the target.

As an optional rule, Games Masters may decide that Dilgar telepaths inflict a point of subdual damage for every use of a telepathic ability on a target. This reflects the bluntness of a Dilgar telepath's approach to using their abilities, in some ways more akin to a sledgehammer than a scalpel.

The War Council found telepaths extremely useful, a necessary evil which needed to be controlled and regimented in the same manner as any potentially volatile resource. The Covert Operations command of the War Council was aware of a potential fifth column, and used telepaths to scan common Dilgar at random to ensure that nothing was amiss.

Evidence of the fifth column was first discovered in 2229, shortly after Alaca III was claimed by for the Imperium, but it was not until 2231 that the true goal of the group was discovered. Until then, the fifth column had managed to incite a level of support amongst groups of defiant slaves, and surprisingly also a few discontented Thrazans whose opinions were not locked by history.

When the opportunity came on a new homeworld, those members of the fifth column would stage a coup. The aim was to capture enough military vessels to make the recapture of this world too much of a difficulty; if necessary, they would request aide from the very forces that would wish the Dilgar of Omelos harm. Their dreams were ultimately doomed to failure, by the resistance shown by the Liberation Navy and the Earth Expeditionary Force and the unwillingness of the War Council to change focus after the discovery of Mitoc.

The War Council, and the Covert Operations command, could not allow this to take place. Crackdowns on slaves became so commonplace that by the start of 2232, over a million slaves had been rounded up and executed, or passed onto the Imperial Research Arm for use as fodder in their scientific endeavours.

A Time of Servitude

Those whose families were suspected of involvement, or those individuals whose involvement could not be confirmed, found themselves with no real future on Omelos. A perfect way to handle the family of what were considered degenerates was to send them into a further level of penal servitude, normally to the colonies close to Omelos. There, they would spend out the rest of their days toiling until the conditions or a lack of food and water claimed them.

One of the colonies that the families of these freedom fighters were sent was the colony of Wahant I, an agricultural experiment which had the dubious distinction of failing every year. A fresh batch of colonists were sent annually, to attempt to eke out an existence with very little in the way of supplies. These unfortunate colonists had to attempt to grow and procure their own foodstuffs, otherwise they would literally starve to death.

The last batch of colonists was sent to Wahant I late in June, 2232, and were forgotten as the attention of the Earth Expeditionary Force and the Liberation Navy turned to Dilgar space proper. The colonists attempted to tame the soil, grow crops, conserve their water supply, and simply survive in the inhospitable environment of Wahant I.

As war waged above the skies of their homeworld, the colonists grappled with a failing harvest, like all others before them. The first representative of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds set foot on Omelos as a conquerer rather than a prisoner, as the colonists stared at the remains of crops that had not grown. The first colonist died of starvation, weighing a third of what he had done when he arrived on Wahant I, as the war crimes trials began.

Half of the colonists had died from malnutrition when a ship appeared in orbit in February, 2233. The colonists, mostly Rittacans, were overjoyed, believing that it was a vessel carrying supplies, or potentially even a ship to carry them home. It was in no way the former, and the latter would soon cease to exist.

Children of Morgoth

Their salvation was name *Morgoth*, the name of a Centuari god which occupied a relatively unimportant place in their pantheon of beliefs. A Centurion class cruiser, the Morgoth was in orbit above Wahant I, patiently waiting for the shuttle dispatched to the surface to return. A pirate vessel, it had pulled into the Wahant system, expertly avoiding detection, to see if there was anything that could be salvaged from the Dilgar colony after the fall of that race. When the shuttle returned, there were eighty or so surprises aboard, all with blood on their minds.

The fight was brutal and bloody, with those few Kathrans fighting alongside the majority of Rittacans in a bid to capture the ship. Despite being weakened by their ordeal they won, narrowly taking the bridge before the captain could detonate the engines. The last Kathran, Jho-Hinn, died giving his life for his fellow colonists, single-handedly storming the bridge; a fatal PPG wound not stopping the Kathran from continuing to fight until the bridge had been claimed.

With a means to an end, the Rittacan colonists had nowhere to go. The had to find somewhere for safety, and under duress the *Morgoth's* pilot, knowing the Dilgar capacity for torture, took them into Narn space. The Rittacans knew that the information within the ship's computer system would prove of great interest to the Narn Regime, as it contained details of Centauri supply routes. These would, the Rittacans hoped, prove a great benefit to Narn precision strikes against Centauri convoys and so called 'softer' targets. As a secondary reason, the Narn had allied themselves covertly with the Dilgar in the past, and hoped that the same could be accomplished again.

The Kha'ri, although initially nervous, accepted the Rittacans. In gratitude for the information received from the *Morgoth's* databases, the Kha'ri agreed to give shelter to the refugees. As part of a brokered agreement that the Rittacans had little room to manoeuvre in, the *Morgoth* would be used to launch raids on the very government that had once built it. The reason for the Kha'ri offering this agreement was never revealed; save the chance to strike back at the Centauri Republic without cost to the Narn. Privately, some Rittacans wondered if the truth behind the reason was simply because the Narn Regime, like the Rittacan Dilgar, had once been slaves, fighting for their own freedom.

From Rittacan to Tanazar

A near-equatorial island was offered to the Rittacans as a new home on the lightly populated Narn colony of Shu. With a good mix of forests, fresh water supplies and rains, the only concern was occasional earthquakes caused by the volcanically active world. The Rittacans could not complain, based of where they had been before.

The restructure of their society, such that it was, would begin. Rudimentary building work created a simple looking yet pleasant enough environment for the Rittacans to live in. To an outsider it appeared more like a tribal settlement for a pre-industrial civilisation, but to the Rittacans that did not matter. Power generators and other technical items acquired in their piracy actions gave the Rittacans a

high level of technology belying first impressions, but no energy weapons were permitted on the island as part of the agreement.

Like many Narn colonies and worlds, the planet of Shu suffered under the threat of Centauri invasion during the War of Retribution. Unlike most Narn colonies and worlds, Shu was never taken. The Centauri Republic had taken the Narn homeworld of Nar'Shal, and thus the war was considered won.

For more details on the Narn-controlled planet of Shu, see the Narn Regime Fact Book.

The colony consisted of around two dozen or so small buildings, based around a central hall. This large building was the first constructed, and assigned to a governmental use after the individual homes for the Rittacans were constructed. This hall was renamed after the Kathran who had made the escape and capture of the captured pirate vessel possible; the Hall of Jho-Hinn.

It was a poor excuse for an existence, but the colony of Jhar'Tellin, taken from the ancient Rittacan phase for last hope, was all that they had. They would never have a homeworld again, but the Rittacans would at least have a chance for a home, even if within the confines of Narn territory and at the mercy of the Kha'Ri. They would even have to discard the name of Dilgar, for the connotations with their dictatorial and unpitying brethren would surely come back to haunt them at some point in the future. In some ways though, the older Rittacans reasoned, they were free, more so than they had been under their own kind.

Existence was a little softer for those Tanazar who did not crew the captured *Morgoth*. They were able to revisit some of their past, able to embrace language and music as they once had. They were able to write down their tales and legends from the past, passed on to subsequent generations by story-telling. Even the story of Nid'dur and the being of light, although bearing little relation to the original events, was written down for the first time in several centuries without fear of torture or execution.

The name of Tanazar was selected for their people, in memory of a lost city from their homeworld destroyed by war many years before. An alteration in pronunciation was different enough to lend an element of subterfuge to the renaming. The Narn Regime were happy with this, and all records pertaining to the origins of the former Rittacans, now simply referred to as the Tanazar, were deleted. In some respects, the Narn Regime was becoming as competent at lying and deception as their former masters. If it came down to it, the Narn would in all probability lie about the origins of the Tanazar, claiming that the colonists had made no reference to their point of origin. In turn, the Tanazar had not been entirely honest with the Narn regarding the fact that their race could produce telepaths – the Narn desire for to create telepathic potential in their own race was well known.

The Morgoth

As of 2258, the *Morgoth* was still participating on raids, primarily on Centauri and Drazi targets. By this point, they had gathered another half-dozen vessels to their fleet. At least one Narn observer was present on any ship, to ensure that no attempt was to double-cross the Narn Regime. This observer also was charged with deflecting any questions about the origins of this slender feline race, which bore more than a passing similarity to the Dilgar race so feared across the League.

The requirement to conduct raids using the *Morgoth* felt wrong to many Tanazar, but they had very little choice in this matter. The Tanazar are well aware that the presence of the *Morgoth* guarantees them a home, and thus try to cause as little harm to their targets. The Narn adviser on board was well aware that the Tanazar would not tolerate cruelty of any kind, and reluctantly accepted this. When a Centauri was taken prisoner, the Narn adviser often bided his time, waiting to deal personal retribution upon the Centauri for all of his race's suffering when no Tanazar was around.

The *Morgoth* has a secondary purpose – raiding activities gives the Tanazar possessions that they would not have otherwise. Whilst resourceful, the Tanazar are not a self-sufficient society, and many advancements have to come from acquisition rather than being manufactured by themselves.

Slightly less agile than a standard Centurion class cruiser, the *Morgoth* features an increased level of hull plating, and internal reinforcements. These modifications had already been made to the vessel when the Rittacans came into possession of it, and they saw no reason to modify it. A second modification made was the removal of the already damaged artificial gravity system, as battle damage around these sectors gave the impression that this system had been irreparably compromised, possibly destroyed at some point in the past.

The main weapon systems of the *Morgoth* are not as powerful as those on a standard Centurion cruiser. The former Rittacans, having recently renamed themselves to be the Tanazar, discovered that removing some of the firepower had little effect on the effectiveness of the *Morgoth* to complete its raids. The benefit was that the removed weaponry could function as spare parts and upgrades for the remaining weapons, should they be damaged in battle. The Narn adviser stationed on board the *Morgoth* approved on this, complimenting the Tanazar on their practicality.

The Morgoth
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 350; DV 9 (-10 size, +9 agility); DR 18; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +3; Sensor +4; Stealth 16; SQ Artificial Gravity (not working), Jump Point; Cargo 45,000 lbs; 3 Officers (2 Tanazar, 1 Narn), 6 Pilots, 6 Sensor Operators, 30 Crewmen.

Weapons:
Two Battle Lasers; Boresight; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 40+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 6
One Matter Cannon; Front; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 30+3d10; Critical 18-20; Range 5
Two Twin-linked Particle Arrays; 2 Front; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+3d10; Critical 20; Range 3

Using the Tanazar (Rittacan Dilgar) in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game

The Tanazar in some ways are living in a state of denial; the time may come where their future comes back to haunt them, and the generation at that time may have little idea of the barbarity of their race. This state has denial was relatively easy to accomplish, given the fact that the Dilgar who performed the atrocities were descended from the Thrazan tribe, and not theirs.

DNA samples gathered by the League and EarthForce during the war were predominantly from Thrazan Dilgar, as the Rittacan and Kathrans never saw service on military craft or ground forces. Therefore, whilst over ninety-nine percent of the DNA structure is the same, an element is different, mainly due to the increased level of telepathic potential compared with that of the Thrazans or Rittacans. This tiny fraction of difference may be enough to prevent a former victim of the Dilgar from exterminating them, but time will tell.

Uncovering a Tanazar away from Narn space would be rare. It is entirely possible that one of them has gone rogue, been captured, or otherwise lost. A Tanazar Player would need to present his Games Master with a convincing history to justify the choice of playing a character of this race. With the history of the Dilgar explained in this book, and the experiences of the former colonists from Wahant I, this should be straightforward to accomplish. Whether or not the galaxy at large will discover the origins of the Tanazar is open for a Games Master to extrapolate upon, should they wish.

The following restrictions apply to the Tanazar (of the Rittacan bloodline) within the Babylon 5 roleplaying game.

- Tanazar use the racial traits as presented for the Rittacans. The Life of a Slave trait is still taken, as it represents a historic link to the past of the Rittacan tribe, and would stay for several generations.
- The preferred class for the Tanazar is Worker, rather than Lurker. A Rittacan Dilgar who is settled on the world of Shu does not count levels gained in the Worker class when determining whether he suffers an XP penalty for multiclassing
- Tanazar characters must purchase a skill rank to learn the Narn language at first level as if Speak Languages is a class skill, even if the character would normally treat learning additional languages as a cross-class skill.

THE THINK-TANK – BARGAINS AND LIES

Humanity often wishes that, at some point in the future, they would evolve to a point where the same mistakes made by previous generations were are made. In this regard, humanity may have been cursed for all time, for as of the 2230's there was no sign of this status changing.

After the Second World War on Earth, there was a largely unspoken race to retrieve as much knowledge had been discovered by Nazi Germany as possible. The world had crossed the threshold into an atomic age, and the Third Reich had made many innovations in scientific fields, including rocketry, that would be desirable for any given nation to attain.

It was rumored that in a secret American resolution, known as Operation Paperclip, selected German scientists were granted citizenship status within the United States of America. The restriction was limited to those scientists who had no more than a token involvement with the Nazi party. At that point in human history, there was an immense distrust between the varying political opinions of East and West, fostering a wall of apathy that would take almost four decades to break down.

Whether these rumours were true or not, after the Dilgar War the Earth Alliance found itself on a high. They had proven themselves to be on top of the pile, but some elements within EarthGov possessed a nagging concern that a more technically advanced foe could better them. At the start of the Dilgar War, the Imperium had possessed many technological advantages, such as bolter weapons that the Earth Alliance had not investigated. Equally, despite their barbarity the Dilgar seemed to possess an almost genetic knack for chemical compositions and their effect on living beings. To maximize on this, covert elements within EarthForce took steps to establish a secret 'think tank', containing some of the best Human scientists. These human scientists would work alongside their Dilgar counterparts, researching scientific advances to better the fate of Humanity.

The actual implementation of this plan was much more difficult, based off a misunderstanding that many in EarthForce had about the Dilgar and how scientific ability was dispersed amongst their race. Some of their top scientists were also guilty of war crimes, and both the League and the Earth Alliance Senate were keen to see judgements made and carried out. The scientists they were able to obtain may not have been the candidates they wanted, but a higher profile acquisition would have drawn media and political attention to their work.

Facility Details

Located a good twelve hours away from a jump-point on the fringes of a system only recently charted, the Think Tank facility is situated on a dusty brown planet, with a minimal atmosphere and little in the way of natural life.

Breath masks are essential on the world, which does not even have a name, only the designation of KA623. Methane is the prime atmospheric element on this world, generated by chemical reactions deep under the planet's surface. Liquid methane rains are not unheard of, but are uncommon. The thin atmosphere manages to keep the world moderately warm, with an average planetary temperature of minus 10 degrees centigrade. The star which warms KA623 is hot but small in size. From several lightyears away it appears to be an inconsequential and unimportant stellar body, which is how EarthForce prefers it.

Whilst there are few opportunities to play as a Dilgar character, one of the younger scientists could possibly be a valid character as a starting character. By some stretch of the imagination, an enterprising Dilgar could have stowed away from the Think Tank, determined to go out amongst the stars to find out the truth about their race.

The Think Tank facility is constructed of the same materials and components as any other EarthForce research installation, ensuring that spare parts can be appropriated without the nature of them raising any undue attention. A small dome is used to grow a small yield of fresh produce, although this tends to be seasonal.

Approximately eighty Humans and twenty Dilgar scientists work at the Think Tank facility. Some additional Humans and Dilgar work as support staff, ensuring that the scientists can focus on their tasks without being distracted by mundane affairs. These individuals often have little scientific ability.

Working for the Think Tank

A scientist does not apply to join the Think Tank – they are selected using a specific social profile. Loners and those with family or relationship problems are preferred, as they are unlikely to bring social baggage in with them. A lack of traditional moral values is preferred in those selected to work at the facility, as are abilities in the fields of chemistry and biology. Even as early as the 2230's, EarthForce was aware that somehow the more advanced alien powers used organic technology, an area that humanity knew nothing about.

For their work, human scientists are well paid. The Dilgar scientists are technically prisoners, but well treated ones. They have been instructed that the chances are that they will never leave, but anything else is up for negotiation as long as results are forthcoming. The Humans are less well rewarded, but in theory they have option of leaving. The reality is a little different.

Human scientists are allowed to leave the Think Tank at any time, but if they do so they are unable to return. EarthForce is aware of the security risk this poses, and a high-ranking telepath is made available through the Psi-Corps to deal with this risk. Whilst there is no need for the individual to have their mind wiped and replaced with another personality, a more subtle type of work is required. All traces of the Dilgar are replaced in the target's mind, replaced by human substitutes. By the time an individual is on a transport away from the Think Tank, they are under the firm belief that the facility houses only humans, which is how those in charge of the Think Tank want it.

The Fate of the Think Tank

The Think Tank was all but destroyed during the Dilgar War by a Minbari patrol, two months before the end of the Earth-Minbari War. The location of the base was not known to the Minbari prior to their arrival, but that did not prevent a pair of Tinashi's obliterating the research facility from orbit. They believed it to be a military facility, which was correct, although

They left the facility apparently destroyed, but unbeknownst to the Minbari the facility stretched beneath the ground, with bunkers and secured areas where experiments were carried out. The solar radiation that occasionally washed over the surface was not deflected by the thin atmosphere of KA623, and so some experiments needed to be carried out in subterranean conditions.

After the war had ended, an EarthForce vessel was dispatched to KA623 to find out the fate of the colony. A handful of Dilgar scientists had survived, but mysteriously there were no Human survivors. The truth became apparent when limited food supplies and human remains revealed the true nature of the Dilgar survival, to the horror of the investigators.

Using the Think Tank in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game

The fate of the Think Tank after the Earth-Minbari war is left open-ended for Games Masters to extrapolate from. Whilst the facility would in all probability have been closed down and the Dilgar moved somewhere else secretive, there is a possibility that the project could be re-activated. Indeed, given the acquisition of alien technologies, in particular organic technologies by EarthForce's Bio-Weapons Division, who better to work on it than the joint efforts of Human and Dilgar scientists, the latter already possessing skills in cybernetic related technologies?

The Liberators and the Victims

The force which comprised of the Liberation Navy may go down as historically the most mismatched and disorganised fleet which the League of Non-Aligned Worlds ever assembled. In truth, until the considerable efforts of Captain John Sheridan in the year 2260, no one believed that the League could ever be brought together again as a cohesive force.

In truth, this should not come as a surprise, for whilst the League of Non-Aligned Worlds fell underneath Sheridan's guidance during the Shadow War, they needed a nexus to form themselves around to be effective. Whilst in the Shadow War that nexus was one man, in the Dilgar War it was the Earth Alliance itself, and its military representative in League space, the Earth Expeditionary Force.

The Liberation Navy was not called as such until Markab space was liberated, and the forces of that religiously inspired race played a key part in consolidating the efforts of the non-Humans. With the Markabs and Humans making up a large number of the initial fleet, along with a scattering of alien vessels including the *Pyrotinia* herself, the snowball had begun to roll, and was gaining size and momentum with every passing battle.

In the early days of the conflict, any given element of the Liberation Navy could contain a dozen or more vessels from any number of different races. However, as the fight against the Dilgar continued, it became apparent that managing the different capabilities and configurations, not to mention the different languages, protocols and tactics was a bridge too far to be adequately managed at the time. This led to battlefield confusion, and conflicting orders often resulted in vessels of two different races going after the same target whilst leaving one unchallenged.

After a period of confusion and hesitation which caused operations to be risked needlessly, it was decided that the Liberation Navy would be split into sub-divisions according to each race. This would have the positive effect of limiting the language and cultural barriers to one species, and one racial mindset. They would fight united, but separate.

Liberation Command

The task of commanding the Liberation Navy was not an easy one, for fighting a war against a foe well skilled in military tactics and unconcerned with causing civilian casualties required careful planning and thought. Given this requirement, and noting the differing mental patterns and temperaments of the wide variety of races opposing the Dilgar, this clear and unemotional process was often anything but.

The gathering of generals and military experts who formulated strategy, often seemingly on-the-fly, was a group represented by representatives from the major alien races, including the Earth Alliance to represent those races with only token forces available. In the case of the Alacan Republic, the representatives from the Abbai Matriarchate spoke for them.

These individuals were charged with leading the war effort. Whilst in theory no one had rank over another, the base truth was that the Earth Alliance, through its representative Admiral Hamato, possessed more power and influence than any other part involved. It was accepted, albeit grudgingly by some of the League members, that without the presence of the Earth Alliance they had little chance to oppose the Dilgar.

Twice per week, the Liberation Command met, usually in the Captain's quarters of the fleet flagship or on a nearby Dionysus base. Tactics and war plans were discussed, normally outlined by Admiral Hamato and then approved by the other members of Liberation Command. There were often dissenting voices about these plans, typically from the Drazi, but the reputation of Admiral Hamato was hard to counter, with a high level of success from missions planned by him. Kalika Qwal'mizra functioned as the liaison between Admiral Hamato and the rest of the Liberation Navy, ensuring that the flow of communication between the two were clear and unambiguous.

Humanity's presence within Liberation Command was unquestioned, and many of the smaller races privately sought the guidance of Admiral Hamato when discussing military tactics. For this, they often went through Kalika Qwal'mizra, which ultimately would forge her diplomatic skills further than she would have believed.

Forces of the Drazi

The Drazi were not as well represented within the Liberation Navy as many of the other races, indeed some of the other participants had more ships committed to the liberation of the League despite having a combined military of a tenth of that possessed by the Drazi Freehold. The tragedy is that had the Drazi been content to secure their position and donate their excess fleets to those in the Liberation Navy, the Dilgar War could have been finished several months earlier, saving untold millions of lives. In this instance, the cost of Drazi stubbornness and lack of greater wisdom was more than just Drazi lives.

The Drazi forces involved in the liberation of the League comprised of the following vessels. The number in parentheses indicates the maximum number of vessels that were involved at any one time. Note that battlefield attrition and reassignments meant that at no point was the total number of fleet vessels detailed below present in any one battle, save the Battle for Omelos.

Sunhawk class Battle Cruiser (11)
Darkhawk class Missile Cruiser (3)
Strikehawk class Battle Carrier (5)
Star Snake Light Attack Fighter Wings (Multiple)
Sky Serpent Heavy Assault Fighter Wings (Multiple)

The representative on the group known only as Liberation Command was a Drazi named Shei'Drokk. In reality, he was not a Drazi general, lower in rank than one would expect to lead a fleet of his race. The Drazi military back home declined sending an arguably more experienced officer, which is just as well as the odds are that the replacement for Shei'Drokk would in all probability have been far more unreasonable. This states, he was still possessed by the impulsive tendencies of his race – Shei'Drokk could appreciate the benefits of a strong defence, if only to allow a counter-attack at a future time when he believed it would ultimately be required. A former ground vehicle commander, Shei'Drokk knew that the rules of engagement sometimes had to be broken to achieve desired results.

It is important to note that Shei'Drokk was only charged with directing the Drazi forces that were participating within the Liberation Navy; the forces engaged in the active defence and sometimes naive counter-attacks against the Dilgar were the responsibility of military leaders and tacticians closer to home.

Shei'Drokk
13th Level Drazi Officer
Hit Points: 33
Initiative: +3 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 15 (+5 Reflex)
Attacks: +17/+12/+7 melee, +14/+9/+4 ranged
Special Qualities:
Branch Elite, Branch Specialisation (ground), Rallying Call, Way of Command
Saves: Fort +8, Ref +5, Will +11
Abilities: Dex 12, Str 18, Con 14, Int 13, Wis 12, Cha 15
Skills: Computer Use +7, Concentration +9, Diplomacy +12, Drive +4, Intimidate +16, Listen +3, Medical +3, Pilot +4, Sense Motive +7, Speak Drazi, Speak English, Spot +10, Technical (Electronics) +6, Technical (Engineering) +8, Technical (Space Travel) +7
Feats: Dense Scales, Great Fortitude, Iron Will, Spacecraft Proficiency, Weapon Focus (PPG Rifle)

Forces of the Abbai

Like the Drazi, the Abbai were bottled up by the Dilgar for the great majority of the war. However, the Abbai were lucky enough to have less territory to protect, in addition is a high level of defensive technology which prevented the Dilgar from breaking the stalemate. This defensive position reflected on the general nature of the Abbai, which was a welcome counter to the natural Drazi aggressiveness within Liberation Command.

For any Non-Aligned character, having any of the individuals mentioned in this section as the target of the Contact feat or class feature would present an excellent link to the events of the Dilgar War; such individuals would be well respected by their race both during and after the war has concluded. As an example,

The Abbai forces involved in the liberation of the League comprised of the following vessels. The number in parentheses indicates the maximum number of vessels that were involved at any one time. Note that battlefield attrition and reassignments meant that at no point was the total number of fleet vessels detailed below present in any one battle, with the exception of the Battle for Omelos.

The *Pyrotinia* (on behalf of the Alacan Navy)
Lakara class Cruisers (4)
Tiraca class Attack Frigates (8)

In charge of the Abbai element of the Liberation Navy was Kai'Lusso, the mentor to a junior Kalika, who had taken a step aside from command to function as an aide for Admiral Hamato. Kai'Lusso often inquired after his former student, grudgingly accepting that she was starting to move away from a military career. Kai'Lusso was a competent leader, despite only having a moderate level of ability.

Captain Kai'Lusso
8th Level Abbai Officer
Hit Points: 24
Initiative: +6 (+2 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 14 (+4 Reflex)
Attacks: +8/+3 melee, +10/+5 ranged
Special Qualities:
Branch Specialisation (fleet), Rallying Call, Way of Command, Underwater Breathing
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +4, Will +10
Abilities: Dex 15, Str 11, Con 9, Int 12, Wis 15, Cha 16
Skills: Computer Use +6, Concentration +3, Diplomacy +11, Intimidate +8, Pilot +7, Sense Motive +10, Speak Abbai, Speak English, Spot +7, Technical (Electronics) +7, Technical (Engineering) +3, Technical (Space Travel) +7
Feats: Data Access, Improved Initiative, Iron Will, Spacecraft Proficiency, Veteran Spacehand

Forces of the Vree

To summarise the Vree forces which participated in the Liberation Navy as being the sum of their military efforts in the Dilgar War would be to do the Vree Conglomerate a great disservice. From the opening of the war, the Vree have been living and dying for the sake of others. It would be an error to assume that the reasons for the Vree's military efforts were purely altruistic.

The Vree forces involved in the liberation of the League comprised of the following vessels. The number in

parentheses indicates the maximum number of vessels that were involved at any one time. Note that battlefield attrition and reassignments meant that at no point was the total number of fleet vessels detailed below present in any one battle.

Xorr class War Saucer (3)
Vaarka class Escort Scouts (3)
Xixx class Torpedo Saucer (1)
Vaarl class Scout Saucer (2)
Tzymm Heavy Fighter Wings (Multiple)

Whilst other races had a distinct representative who attended the meetings of Liberation Command, often the Vree sent a different representative. The reason for this was not revealed, but any individual attending a meeting on behalf of the Vree had full knowledge of what had happened at previous meetings.

Forces of the Brakiri

The Brakiri forces involved in the liberation of the League comprised of the following vessels. The number in parentheses indicates the maximum number of vessels that were involved at any one time. Note that battlefield attrition and reassignments meant that at no point was the total number of fleet vessels detailed below present in any one battle. As well as this, the Brakiri forces were without their larger vessels such as the Corumai dreadnought, and many of their ships stayed behind to guard their home systems.

Avioki class Heavy Cruisers (3)
Devaskar class Carrier (4)
Ikorta class Light Assault Cruiser (6)
Falkiosi Light Interceptor Wings (Multiple)

With the well-known corporate mindset of the Brakiri, it is unsurprising that the individual sent to the meetings of Liberation Command was a businessman first and foremost. Everyone expected that Lehkim Ftoba, the Brakiri representative, would be attempting to gain as much knowledge as possible to benefit his corporate sponsors, and this is entirely true – he would not be a Brakiri otherwise. However, Lehkim also had a keen interest in stopping the Dilgar, only seconded by his wish to ensure that the Vree did not take the prospective customer base of the League away from the Brakiri.

Lehkim Ftoba
7th Level Brakiri Diplomat
Hit Points: 12
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee, +3 ranged
Special Qualities: Dark Vision, Government Resources, Heat Resilience, Improved Diplomacy
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +2, Will +6
Abilities: Str 9, Dex 10, Con 10, Int 17, Wis 12, Cha 16
Skills: Appraise +9, Balance +1, Bluff +11, Computer Use +10, Concentration +5, Diplomacy +14, Gather Information +9, Intimidate +13, Knowledge (Military) +12, Listen +5, Pilot +1, Sense Motive +13, Speak Brakiri, Speak English, Spot +9, Technical (Electronics) +4, Technical (Space Travel) +4
Feats: Contact (x4), Eye for Quality, Resist Scan, Spacecraft Proficiency

Forces of the Markab

To the Markabs, the fight against the Dilgar was a holy crusade, initiated by the attacks on their worlds, their people and their sacred shrines. One cannot underestimate the effect that religion has on Markab society, and their military is no different, being structured as if it was a holy order. Whilst the Markabs worship many different deities, the Dilgar attacks were an affront to all Markabs and their pantheon of gods, and must be stopped. This religious fervour meant that only a handful of Shafabs were present at the Battle for Omelos, the rest having been lost to battlefield attrition and hasty decisions.

The Markab forces involved in the liberation of the League comprised of the following vessels. The number in parentheses indicates the maximum number of vessels that were involved at any one time. Note that battlefield attrition and reassignments meant that at no point was the total number of fleet vessels detailed below present in any one battle.

Shafab Heavy Cruiser (8)
Martoba Patrol Cutter (4)
Drofta Medium Fighter Wings (multiple)

Loirinn Burra, a High Acolyte, leads the forces of the Markab in the war against the Dilgar. Smaller vessels only had a minimal presence in the military contingent dispatched to fight alongside the Earth Expeditionary Force – the Shafab Heavy Cruisers are to the Markabs an anointed warhammer that will smash the skulls of any Dilgar whom steps in their way. Smallers vessels were required closer to home, to ensure that Markab space was not violated again, and assist in work on rebuilding after the multitude of Dilgar attacks.

Loirinn governs the Markab forces with wisdom, being well spoken and advancing in years, although she like any other Markab is prone to suffering from a religious fervour that can cause her and the Markab fleet to follow their crusade rather than the task at hand.

Loirinn Burra
8th Level Markab Officer
Hit Points: 22
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft

DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +9/+4 melee, +8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (fleet), Rallying Call, Way of Command
Saves: Fort +3, Ref +2, Will +9
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 10, Con 10, Int 17, Wis 12, Cha 16
Skills: Computer Use +13, Concentration +2, Diplomacy +10, Intimidate +9, Knowledge (Markab Religion) +7, Listen +7. Medical +6, Pilot +2, Sense Motive +10, Spot +9, Technical (Electronics) +5, Technical (Engineering) +6, Technical (Space Travel) +4
Feats: Alertness, Data Access, Iron Will, Skill Focus (Knowledge: Markab Religion), Spacecraft Proficiency

Forces of the Earth Alliance

Whilst nominally included as a member of the Liberation Navy, the Earth Expeditionary Force led by Admiral Hamato functioned largely as a separate unit. They had a slightly different mission profile than that of the League; the Earth Alliance was charged with taking out Dilgar installations, star bases and fleets, as opposed to the rest of the Liberation Navy, which was chiefly charged with liberating those worlds and sites occupied by the Dilgar.

Ships of the Liberation Navy

Whether by the availability of newer models, changes in technology or simple progress, some vessels, which served during the Dilgar War, were out of service by the time representatives of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds took up their ambassadorial posts on Babylon 5. These vessels still played their part in the Dilgar War, and thus earned their right to be recorded in the rolls of history.

A breakdown of these vessels is presented below.

Alacan Atrimis class Light Cruiser

The Alacan Navy never had much in the way of a stellar military to oppose the Dilgar. Like all of the vessels in their navy, the Abbai Matriarchate had sold the basic starship frames to the Alacans, for the fledgling race to fit some of their own modifications to. Of these designs sold to the Alacans, the Light Cruiser was the most advanced vessel in their arsenal. The Alacan incarnation bore a variety of weaponry, all of it of a low level of power compared to the greater forces that would be arrayed against it. Missile racks, fore and aft, were matched with particle cutters and blasters which, although primitive and lacking in range, were conceived to be enough to defend the Alacans against raiding parties and pirates.

The most notable, and only surviving, vessel of this type to survive the Dilgar War was the *Pyrotinia*, and upon her return was charged with defending the fragments of the Alacan culture and peoples that had survived the Dilgar's desecration of their homeworld.

Atrimis class Light Cruiser
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 280; DV 12 (-8 size, +10 agility); DR 10; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 4; Han +3; Sensors +5; Stealth +10; Cargo 20,000 lbs; 3 officers, 2 pilots; 2 sensor operators; 27 crewmen.

Weapons:
One Particle Cutter; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Base damage 25+5d6; Critical 20; Range 3
One Twin-Linked Particle Blaster; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Base damage 25+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Four Light Laser Cannons; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Four Missile Racks; 2 Front / 2 Rear; Guidance 2; Damage 30+3d10; Critical 20; Speed 4; Fuel 20; Reloads 10

Craft:
24 Rotia class Light Fighters
2 Shuttles

Alacan Rotia class Light Fighter

The Rotia is the fighter of choice for the Alacan Republic, ironic in many ways as the Alacans have very little in the way of alternate options. The Abbai did not invest much time in this design, having almost a racial dislike of fighters. When the Atrimis Light Cruiser was sold to the Alacans therefore, the vessel was provided with a complement of Rotia light fighters.

Appearing ovoid in shape, with wings coming off the main fuselage, the Rotia is a straightforward enough design, with a good level of resistance to damage, comparable with EarthForce fighters of a higher class. The comparisons end here, as the rest of the capabilities do not match up with the level of resilience exhibited by this light fighter. A scaled down version of the particle blaster fitted to the Atrimis is the sole weaponry fitted to this vessel, and can only inflict small amounts of damage.

Rotia class Light Fighter
Historical Summary:
Base Model (2105-2229)

Rotia class Light Fighter
Huge Spacecraft; hp 12; DV 10 (-2 size, +2 agility); DR 5; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +1; Sensor +3; Stealth 8; Cargo 25 lbs; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
One Ultra-Light Particle Blaster; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Base damage 2d4; Critical 20; Range 1

Brakiri Devaskar class Carrier

Produced by Ly-Nakir Industries, one of the two largest corporates on Brakos in 2228, the Devaskar was the carrier of choice for the Brakrir. The predecessor of the Brikota and the larger Brokados, the Devaskar had an average fighter capacity with the benefit of jump-engines. Possessing a well dispersed out array of gravitic bolt weaponry meant that the Devaskar could at least provide distracting fire to an enemy, although standing up against a co-ordinated assault was difficult. The Devaskar was a distinctive shape, resembling an elongated crescent from a distance.

The Devaskar carried eighteen fighters, normally twelve Falkiosi and six Pikitos. Internal rack space and design prevented any more than six Pikitos being carried, which was a limitation of the Devaskar which was kept quiet by certain designers and engineers until after the vessel had been commissioned. It was believed that the managing executive of Ly-Nakir were unhappy with the replenishment cost of the Devaskar class, having to support two fighter types on every single produced Devaskar.

No Devaskars are believed to have survived the Dilgar War. The replacements for the Devaskar were the Brokados, which had a larger fighter capacity, and the Brikorta Light Carrier which traded the jump-engine for the ability to land on a planet's surface. No new vessels of this type were built after the war, from a cost point of view. To a Brakiri, there is no greater consideration to bear in mind on any project than fiscal expenditure.

Details for race specific weapons, as well as the ships that participated in the Dilgar War which are still in active service, can be found within the relevant race section of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds Fact Book.

Drofta Medium Fighter
Colossal III Spacecraft; hp 500; DV 4 (-10 size, +4 agility); DR 10; Spd -; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +1; Sensors +6; Stealth +10; SQ: Gravitic Shield (-3), Jump Point; Cargo 220,000 lbs; 4 officers, 40 pilots; 10 sensor operators; 45 crewmen.

Weapons:
10 Gravitic Bolts; 4 front, 1 front/left, 1 front/right, 1 rear/left, 1 rear/right, 2 rear; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Base damage 40+4d10; Critical x2; Range 4 (The Gravitic Bolt is the precursor to the Graviton Beam, having its base statistics without the ability to recharge)

Craft:
18 Fighters (12 Falkiosi, 6 Pikitos)
2 Shuttles

Markab Drofta Medium Fighter

An elongated appearance and a diminished ability to perform the complex manoeuvres of many of its compatriots, the long serving Drofta is the primary fighter operated by the Markabs during the Dilgar War. The offensive potential of the Drofta gained a boost during the 2220's, with the fighter packing a scales down version of the scattergun fitted to the vessel it was most commonly carried on, the Shafab Heavy Cruiser. Modified versions of this fighter remained in service, all of the way to the race's demise in 2259 at the hands of plague considered a punishment for immoral behaviour.

Visually, the Drofta is an unusual design, appearing like a bulked out dart. Any who consider the Drofta to possess the same amount of damage potential usually find themselves in for a shock in short order.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2005-2259)

Drofta class Medium Fighter
Huge Spacecraft; hp 15; DV 11 (-2 size, +3 agility); DR 7; Spd -; Acc 6; Dec 3; Han +1; Sensor +5; Stealth 10; Cargo 40 lbs; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
One Light Scattergun; Boresight; Attack +2 (Targeting computer); Damage 5+2d4; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Markab Martoba Patrol Cutter

One of the most common vessels in Markab space, only a few patrol cutters accompanied their larger Shafab brethren into Dilgar space. The most notable aspects about this design is that is fast and manoeuvrable, even for a craft of its type. Reliable and trusted, at the time of the Dilgar War there were no signs that the Martoba was about to be replaced. Surprisingly for a patrol vessel, the Martoba carries a small number of Drofta fighters.

Visually, the Martoba bears some hallmarks of the design of the Drofta fighters, being sleeker and more elongated than other Markab vessels.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2023-2259)

Martoba Patrol Cutter
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 270; DV 14 (-8 size, +12 agility); DR 10; Spd -; Acc 5; Dec 4; Han +3; Sensors +4; Stealth +8; Cargo 12,000 lbs; 3 officers, 10 pilots; 3 sensor operators; 24 crewmen.

Weapons:
One Twin-Linked Plasma Wave; 1 Front; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
One Twin-Linked Particle Cannon; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Base damage 25+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3

Two Medium Plasma Cannons; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +1 (targeting computer); Damage 30+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1
Two Pulsar Scatterguns; Left/Rear, 1 Right/Rear; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
6 Markab Drofta Fighters
2 Shuttles

Markab Shafab Heavy Cruiser

The most advanced vessel in the Markab navy, the Shafab Heavy Cruiser is robust enough to make many other races think twice about engaging them in combat. Conducted by one of the Markab religious orders with a propensity towards anger and violence, aspects of their god named Droth, the ships are actually constructed and operated by members of that order.

The Shafab is a very competent design – as well as having a good offensive rating and a robust hull, the Shafab carries twelve fighters and four shuttles. In fact, the only weaknesses of the design are that it does not possess a jump-engine and that the majority of the firepower is forward facing.

Visually, the Shafab is an incredibly bulky vessel, comprised of a large frog-nosed main body section with large sections port and starboard containing engine arrays, hangar bays and weapon installations.

Historical Summary:
Base Model (2012-2259)

Markab Shafab Heavy Cruiser
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 330; DV 8 (-8 size, +6 agility); DR 15; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 4; Han +4; Sensors +4; Stealth +7; Cargo 22,000 lbs; 4 officers, 20 pilots; 4 sensor operators; 32 crewmen.

Weapons:
Two Heavy Plasma Cannons; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 30+2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 4
One Twin-Linked Particle Cannon; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Base damage 25+2d10; Critical 20; Range 3
One Plasma Wave; 1 Front; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 20+2d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
Four Pulsar Scatterguns; 1 Front/Left/Rear, 1 Front/Right/Rear, 1 Left/Rear, 1 Right/Rear; Attack +1 (Targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2; Rapid Fire

Craft:
12 Markab Drofta Fighters
4 Shuttles

The Victims of the Dilgar

There were many races that suffered under the might of the Dilgar during the early 2230's. Some of them had not even achieved spaceflight, and when the Dilgar came to their world they were unable to offer any form of defence whatsoever, only useful to the Dilgar in terms of manpower or their scientific potential. Those races often had no contact with the League, so no record even exists of their passing.

It is entirely feasible for an exploratory survey team, such as IPX, to discover a society that had once thrived before being encountered by the Dilgar. An idea such as this could form the basis of a whole adventure.

The actual number of races exterminated by the Dilgar may actually never be known. The following races are those that were able to survive, often albeit loosely, the war which smashed the League into disorganised fragments, if only until the intervention of the Earth Alliance.

The Balosian Underdwellers

By all accounts, the Balosian Underdwellers should not have survived the catastrophe which struck their world. This catastrophe was not the invasion of the Dilgar, but rather an ecological calamity which struck Balos 200,000 years before the Dilgar arrived to commence their invasion of this battered world. Forced to live underground, the Balosians developed a wholly subterranean culture, using geothermal energy to both keep their people warm and sustain their development.

Reptilian in nature, the Balosians evolved to tolerate environments with a modest amount of radiation. They have a tough external skin of greyish-crimson in colour, which greys further as the Balosian grows older. All Balosians have a prominent forehead and extended nose, although like greying skin this becomes more prominent with age. They have three fingers and a thumb on each hand, with a sharp clawed nail on the end which can sometimes become infected and produces a great deal of pain to a sufferer.

Like many reptiles, young Balosians are born as eggs, with a two-week hatching duration. Balosians tend to evolve quickly, reaching adolescence in their fourth or fifth year of life. An average Balosian lives around fifty or sixty years, depending on living conditions. Male and female Balosians share the needs of their society; in particular Male Balosians make devoted fathers. Balosians do not need to eat as often as many other races, as they have a particularly efficient digestive system. Likewise, water is not required on a daily basis, but if denied this most basic resource then a Balosian can become deathly ill in short order.

The Balosian's longstanding tribal system remained unchanged for thousands of years, even when the Balosians observed an alien race, the Centauri, landing on their world to begin mining operations in the mid. The technology left behind gave the Balosians a major boost. In particular, the Balosian fleet is comprised of mainly Centauri vessels that were acquired in a stripped-down state. The most common vessel in the fleet is a converted Centurion class, although there are also sizeable numbers of ships based around the Altarian and Balvarin frames. These ships do not possess jump engines, artificial gravity or any of the Centauri's powerful weaponry, the Balosians relying on simple laser based weaponry constructed by themselves. As reliable designs from which to explore and defend their home systems and those of their neighbours, the Balosians could have done a lot worse.

If the Balosians consider one race to be their greatest ally throughout their history, then to the surprise of many it is actually the Centauri. Balosian soldiers are occasionally provided to boost the defence of outlying Centauri colonies against Narn aggression, although the level of respect with which they are accorded often leads a lot to be desired. Balosians typically get the worst duties, but do it out of respect for the Centauri, who to many Balosians provided them with the means to achieve space flight. The resemblance that Humans have to the Centauri may provide one reason why the Balosians so easily allied themselves with those Human soldiers stranded on Balos after the failed invasion.

Since the Dilgar War, the Balosians have expanded the hold on their home system cautiously, as one would expect from a race which prefers the safety of subterranean environments. They have two orbital shipyards, both of which are turning out vessels at an unhurried pace. The Balosians do not have a formal ambassador assigned to Babylon Five, but an unofficial role does exist. As of 2258, they had not yet approached the League of Non-Aligned Worlds for membership, as their opinion of the Centauri puts them in direct opposition with the majority of the League.

Balosian Racial Traits

+2 Constitution, -2 Wisdom: The Balosians are a hardy people, and generally resistant to most ailments and common bacteria. Some of their opinions, especially those on a galactic level, are nieve, and this can affect their relationships with others. This is primarily from a lack of experience in dealing with other alien races.

The thick hardened skin of the Balosians provide a rudimentary level of defence to their main vital organs and innards. This gives a Balosian a score of Damage Reduction 1. This damage reduction stacks as per normal with any worn armour.

Their world having suffered so much so early has had an effect on the biology of the Balosians. Their biology is naturally resistant to the effects of radiation, although the Balosians are not immune to more severe exposure. They gain a +4 racial bonus to Fortitude Saves to resist the effects of radiation.

However, the same biology renders the Balosians vulnerable to extremes in cold. This manifests itself as a -4 racial penalty to Fortitude Saves to resist the cold.

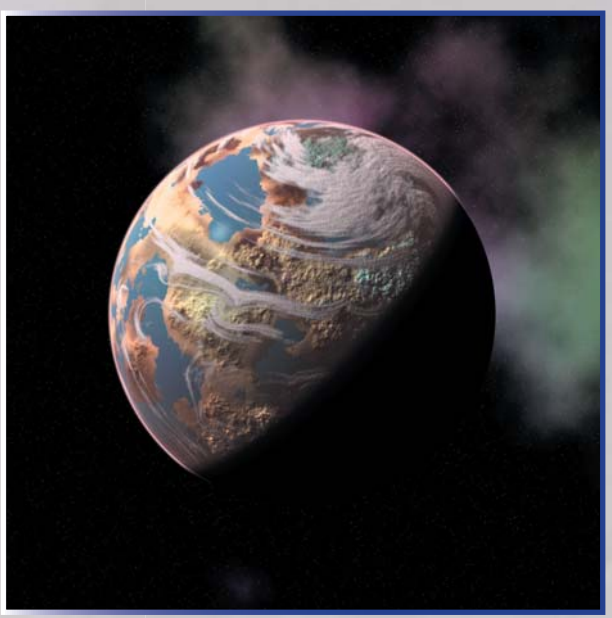
Automatic Languages: Balosian and either Centauri or English.

Preferred class: Soldier

The Alacan Republic

It was supremely ironic that the first race to be conquered by the Dilgar Imperium was actually the one race out of all of their victims that they bore the most similarity with. Indeed, their early history shared similarities with the Imperium, even down to the development of nuclear weaponry. However, unlike the Dilgar, the Alacans realised the true destructive power of their newfound weapons, as well as the ongoing damage that they caused, and stepped back from the brink, becoming more enlightened at the end of their voyage of self-discovery.

The Abbai approached the Alacans, after witnessing what had happened to the Dilgar Imperium. Any worries that the Alacans would turn into a war-hungry race like the Dilgar proved to be false, and the Abbai proposed a multitude of trade treaties and non-aggression accords which were signed. The Abbai came to realise that the Alacans were simply not interested in warfare for warfare's sake, and they were satisfied with this assessment.



Alacans are not particularly tall, averaging about a meter and a half in height. They have small pink noses, and smooth facial features. Short body hair, in browns and reds, covers their bodies from head to toe, and this hair requires almost constant grooming. Internally, the Alacans have a well-developed nervous system, but struggle to focus on tasks for any length of time, especially if there is external stimulus that can distract them. Their vocal cords are well developed enough to handle speaking languages other than Alacan, but their phrasing of words and sentences often have an almost lilting singing sound that can take listeners time to adjust to.

The Alacan space fleet, such that it was, was purchased from the Abbai. It consisted of old vessels, some even freighters converted for military use. Even the Pryotinia, the last surviving military grade vessel, was actually an obsolete light cruiser sold to the Alacans with some of its weaponry already provided. That fact speaks more about the lack of potency the ship's weapons possessed above and beyond any mistaken notion of overbearing Abbai generosity. That said, the *Pyrotinia* and the other Atrimis class light cruisers performed valiantly in the Dilgar Invasion, especially when compared to the rest of their fleet.

Both the Balosians and the Alacans are excellent choices if a group of players wishes to engage themselves with a race not associated with any major government or the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Players may wish to engage in trade, conduct smuggling operations, or any one of a dozen nefarious activities. The Descari are a much riskier proposition, with not much extra in the way of reward for any players that are successful.

It is also entirely possible, after 2259, for one of these worlds to function as a training base, supply dump or listening post for the Anla-Shok, in a similar manner to Zagros VII.

The Alacans were reduced to a fragment of their former selves by the Imperium during the Dilgar War. From a pre-invasion population base of just over two billion, there was fewer than ten thousand left after Omelos had fallen. The *Pyrotinia*, the one vessel that had managed to escape the system and request aide, returned to find a hell for a homeworld.

Whilst grateful to those who offered them aide, and in particular the Abbai for their assistance, the Alacans are well aware that their pleas fell on deaf ears as far as many amongst the League were concerned. Even the Vree, whose trade envoy was actually visiting the Alacan Republic at the time of the Dilgar invasion, believed the Dilgar lies regarding Raider attacks originating from Alaca. The Earth Alliance only came into the war when their own territory and that of their allies was attacked, which puts them above the (in the Alacan's opinion) self-serving League, but not by much.

The Alacans has never sent an official representative to Babylon 5, although their ambassador to the Abbai Matriarchate often visits Babylon 5 to consult with the Abbai representative there.

Alacan Racial Traits

+2 Dex, -2 Constitution.

Naturally agile, the Alacans find it difficult to become disorientated, a racial ability which helped out their race when in their infancy. In game terms, this manifests itself as a +2 racial bonus to all Balance and Tumble checks.

The Alacans have an advanced nervous system, much faster than many other races. They gain the Lightning Reflexes feat free at first level, but as a result find focusing on any one task for a length of time, or when there are distracting factors difficult at best. The Alacans also have a -2 racial penalty to any Concentration checks or Profession checks they are required to make.

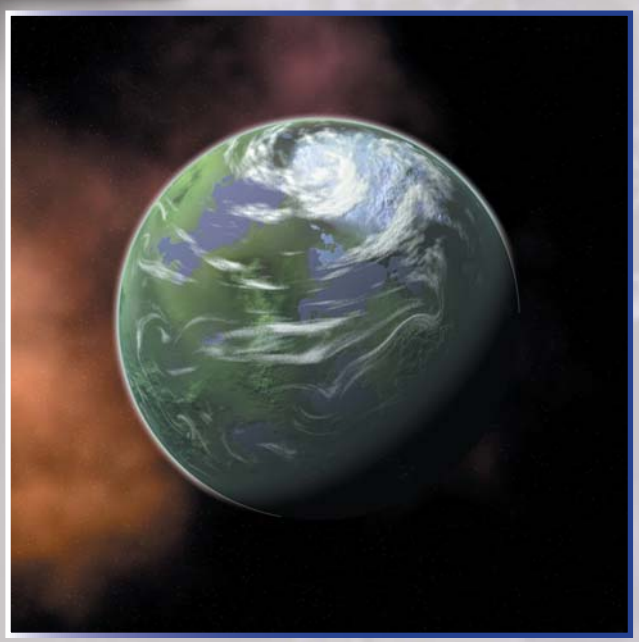
Automatic Languages: Alacan

Preferred class: Lurker (Worker for pre-invasion Alacans)

The Descari Committees

If an alien race could be described in a single word, the most apt descriptor for the Descari would be 'paranoid'. This is not without reason, but the Descari have done little to change their opinions, and given the recent outrages their culture has suffered, this opinion can perhaps be forgiven.

Simian-like in appearance, with powerful musculature, the Descari often intimidate others with only their physical stature required to do so. Their culture could only survive on a world with so many predators by using physical strength to dominate their surroundings and other species.



Indeed, many xeno-biologists would love to visit the Descari homeworld of Bestine just to study the abundance of life that this world has.

After a foiled Narn invasion in 2214, due to brute force and dogged persistence more than any technical advantage, the Descari took the wreckage of Narn vessels and used it to advance their own interests in exploring the stellar void around their home. Despite occasional Raider incursions, the Descari decided that their way in the universe was to be a solitary one until they encountered the Markabs, whose solemn and devout approach to life impressed the Descari greatly. Many Descari started to talk openly about greeting the races around them, but this was lost perhaps forever when the Dilgar invasion began.

In the midst of what to do about the prospect of an invasion by a vastly superior force, the *Pyrotinia*, the only surviving Alacan light cruiser, approached Bestine with warnings about the Dilgar Imperium. Their immediate response was to load up transports and send them away from Bestine for safety, some even arriving in Earth space. Their reaction was well justified, for when the Imperium arrived the battle took only ninety minutes. A direct hit on their main government building effectively destroyed any central administration or control, breaking the chain of command up into regional committees. Several medical centres were hit, forcing these regional groups to take all the care of innocent Descari citizens into their own hands. Communications satellites were taken out in short order, futher compounding the isolation the committees felt.

The Descari were more lucky than most, for their world and population suffered less than many other worlds, and at least elements of their population were spared the horror of the Dilgar and their twisted experiments by being off-world. When the Dilgar were defeated, the Descari kept this regional form of government, along with good relations with the Markab and their saviours, the Earth Alliance. As far as others were concerned, the Descari held the same xenophobic attitude they always had, and started to analyse ship debris recovered in the Dilgar War to advance their own navy, so that they need not fear another race again. This went alongside the strong Narn influence in their designs, based off recovered vessels and wreckage from the failed invasion of 2214.

Their first steps after the Dilgar War almost cost the Descari dearly. An incident with the Gaim almost led to the Descari being wiped out for the second time in a decade, and it took the Gaim putting down their fearsome Warriors on Descari soil for a truce to be called. Whilst the Descari were largely at fault for the incident, it did nothing to discourage their xenophobia. More wary than every of contact with outsiders, the Descari Committees declined to send a representative to Babylon 5 in 2257, only sending one in 2259 when the Narn-Centauri War began.

Descari Racial Traits

+2 Strength, +2 Constitution, -2 Dexterity, -2 Charisma

The Descari are an immensely strong race, with a level of mistrust they have in others interfering with how they interact with the galaxy as a whole. When dealing with aliens, the Descari apply a -2 racial penalty to all Charisma-based checks they are required to make when dealing with other races. In addition, the Descari may only take the Alien Empathy feat if the selected race is either Humanity or the Markab Theocracy. This selection of this feat effectively cancels out the above negative modifier for the chosen species.

Automatic Languages: Descari

Preferred class: Worker

The Earth Expeditionary Force

The Earth Expeditionary Force was the tool to enable the reclaiming of the League from the Dilgar Imperium, in conjunction with the efforts of the League races themselves. For decades after the end of hostilities books and tactical papers would be written studying the actions and efforts of those concerned.

Of course, the Earth Expeditionary Force was not the only element of EarthForce active within League space during the Earth-Minbari war. The total number of vessels was close to twice the number than that commanded by Admiral Hamato. Nevertheless, these other vessels acted in predominantly as support capacity. Dilgar counter-attacks were expected, and EarthForce felt the need that borders between the

Ship Name	Type / Variant	Variant	Lost At	Replaced By	Variant	Lost At
Valkyrie	Nova	Alpha	Lost at Omelos			
Odin	Nova	Alpha				
Freya	Nova	Alpha	Lost at Balos	Androcles	Alpha	Lost at Omelos
Thor	Nova	Alpha	Lost at Cascor	Zeus	Alpha	
Hecate	Hyperion	Alpha	Lost at Omelos			
Hyperion	Hyperion	Alpha				
Xanadu	Hyperion	Alpha	Lost at Cascor	Urania	Alpha	
Loki	Hyperion	Alpha	Lost at Brakos	Enyo	Alpha	Lost at Omelos
Dionysus	Hyperion	Gamma	Lost at Balos			
Golgotha	Hyperion	Alpha	Lost in Markab space	Dione	Alpha	Lost at Omelos
Cuchulain	Hyperion	Gamma				
Taliesin	Oracle	Beta	Lost at Alaca			
Argo	Olympus	Alpha	Lost at Alaca	Ariel	Beta	Lost at Omelos
Daedelys	Olympus	Alpha	Lost at Omelos			
Halloway	Olympus	Alpha	Lost at Omelos			
Troy	Olympus	Alpha				
Olympian	Olympus	Alpha				
Medusa	Olympus	Alpha				
Harmonia	Olympus	Alpha	Lost at Balos	Jupiter	Alpha	
Midas	Olympus	Beta	Lost at Brakos	Eros	Alpha	Lost at Omelos
Rhiannon	Olympus	Beta	Lost at Balos			
Delphi	Artemis	Beta	Lost at Brakos	Caesar	Beta	Lost at Omelos
Athena	Artemis	Beta				
Lancelot	Artemis	Beta	Lost in Markab space			
Gawain	Artemis	Beta	Lost at Omelos			
Cupid	Sagittarius	Alpha				
Achilles	Sagittarius	Alpha	Lost on first day of invasion above Markab homeworld.	Erinyes	Alpha	
Lionheart	Avenger	Beta	Lost at Omelos			
Cassandra	Orestes	Delta				

races plagued by the Dilgar needed to be observed, lest one race use the chaos to give themselves an advantage over the other.

Presented in this section is the complete list of all participant vessels in the Earth Expeditionary Force, which departed from Earth Alliance space in early 2232 to meet the Dilgar menace head on. Game statistics for all variants of ship commanded by Admiral Hamato are also included.

THE CHAIN OF COMMAND

Commander-In-Chief

There was no greater responsibility of any individual within the Earth Expeditionary Force than the individual who held the role of Commander-In-Chief. The lives of every single soldier, officer, crewmember and enlisted serviceman were accountable to the Commander-In-Chief, commonly abbreviated as CIC.

Required to file daily reports to the Joint Chiefs of Staff back at Earthdome, the CIC had to juggle personnel issue, logistic problems, maintenance concerns and every other conceivable problem within a fleet of military vessels. This was in addition to conceptualising the plans of the enemy, as well as knowing the offensive and defensive potential of the various tactics they deployed. The CIC was expected to know the most viable tactical response to any situation, whether it was a fleet of rogue vessels, suicide frigates of a trio of heavily armed Pentacans.

Occupying the role of Commander in Chief for the duration of the Dilgar War was Admiral Ieysau Hamato. Even though the final battle cost him his life, no one else took on the role after his death, as a mark of respect for the achievements made possible by the designs and careful planning of that one man.

The flagship of the Earth Expeditionary Force, and the command of Admiral Hamato himself, was the Nova class dreadnought *Valkyrie*.

Office of Fleet Liaison

The Expeditionary Fleet was but one part, albeit the major part, of a combined force known as the Liberation Navy. In reality, EarthForce did not consider their forces subservient to any, including their allies within the League. They would have been remiss if they neglected the valuable role played by those League vessels who were in many cases fighting to reclaim their homes; in the case of some, to avenge the memory of their homes, now little more than charred ash.

These passions need to be calmed enough to enable clear minds and tactical doctrine to prevail – given the nature at which the Drazi conducted their war against the Dilgar, this argument was considered proven as far as Admiral Hamato was concerned.

Therefore, a single League individual was requested to take up the role of Fleet Liaison Officer. This role would be the link between the forces of the Earth Expeditionary Force and the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. It was a difficult role, and something of a messenger, but nevertheless essential.

Occupying the role of Fleet Liaison to the Earth Expeditionary Force was Abbai Officer Kalika Qwal'mizra. This was her first taste of a proper diplomatic role, save the passionate speech she gave to the Earth Alliance Senate at the end of 2231.

Captain, First Support Fleet

Whilst the Earth Expeditionary Fleet was taking the fight against the Dilgar head on, in conjunction with the rest of the Liberation Navy, there was military tasks which needed to be performed behind the constantly moving front line.

An EarthForce support fleet was charged with ensuring that the Dilgar were not able to sneak past the combats and establish a covert presence from which to spy or launch strikes from. Equally, there were Dilgar supply stations, ammo dumps and rogue vessels which fled the scene of battle (according to the Dilgar themselves, this was merely a tactical withdrawal) which needed chasing down and destroying. The most experienced captain from this support fleet was designated as Captain of the support fleet, and given additional responsibilities.

The requirement on the Captain of the First Support Fleet was to attend regular meetings, in person if possible, with the Commander-In-Chief of the Expeditionary Force and the Fleet Liaison Officer. Tactical options and any concerns were discussed in these meetings, which occurred at least weekly for the duration of (Earth's part in) the Dilgar War. Co-ordinating the activities of the support fleet also fell to the post-holder.

The occupant of the role of Captain of the First Support Fleet, and thus charged with rooting out pockets of Dilgar resistance was Captain David Vilhelm, a military officer from Germany with many years of command experience behind him.

Ship Name	Type	Variant
Arcturus	Hyperion	Alpha
Polaris	Hyperion	Alpha
Athena	Olympus	Alpha
Xanthippus	Artemis	Beta
Obsidian	Artemis	Beta
Capella	Artemis	Beta
Algol	Tethys	Epsilon
Minerva	Tethys	Epsilon
Aurora	Hermes	Beta

Captain, Second Support Fleet

Whilst the Earth Expeditionary Fleet was taking the fight against the Dilgar head on, in conjunction with the rest of the Liberation Navy, there were military tasks that needed to be performed behind the constantly moving front line.

The Earth Expeditionary Force carried perhaps a surprising lack of ground troops, save the Fighting 103rd. The reason for this was in no way due to any fleet snobbery about the essential nature of ground forces. Rather, as Admiral Hamato explained, it was in a bid to protect them from conflicts where there was little opportunity to participate. There was no point risking valuable ground troops in interstellar battles where there was no value in doing so.

As one of his first command decisions, Admiral Hamato decreed that only a single fighting force would accompany the Earth Expeditionary Force proper, and this responsibility fell to the Fighting 103rd. The bulk of the ground forces would follow behind, for these had their own specific requirements.

Units from the Second Support Fleet followed behind the main battle line, and provided vessels and their carried soldiers and equipment when directed by the Commander-In-Chief. It was a requirement for the Captain of the Second Support Fleet to attend regular meetings if possible with the Commander-In-Chief of the Expeditionary Force and the Fleet Liaison Officer, at least weekly. In practice, the Commander-In-Chief and Captain of the Second Support Fleet spoke at a daily basis.

Occupying the role of Captain of the Second Support Fleet, carrying many hundreds of valiant men and women, not to mention their battlefield equipment, was Captain Sophie Reece-Howard, relatively junior for the role but a promising student at training academy. One shining example of the armed forces transported under her care was the Rolling Thunders.

Fleet Vessels

Ship Name	Type	Variant
Gaia	Nova	Alpha
Gemini	Hyperion	Alpha
Claudia	Hyperion	Gamma
Pericles	Hyperion	Gamma
Banshee	Hyperion	Gamma
Alexander	Hyperion	Gamma
Spartacus	Artemis	Beta
Lilith	Artemis	Beta
Ishtar	Artemis	Beta
Constantinople	Tethys	Epsilon
Kali	Tethys	Epsilon
Aldebaran	Hermes	Beta
Gelert	Hermes	Beta

Ground Force Vessels

The following list details the number of EarthForce ground bases (i.e. not naval) vessels that formed part of the Second Battle Fleet. These vessels rarely saw front-line combat, and were often escorted into hostile space by EarthForce naval vessels to deposit their cargoes.

Type	Quantity
Condor Class Transports	12
EA Magnum Heavy Lifters	6
Valkyrie Gunships	12
Cotton Class Tenders	10
Hermes (Civilian/Merchant Navy)	12

Ships of the Line

Perhaps the saddest truth about warfare apart from the loss of life and dignity is the fact that technological advancements are made quickly during warfare, necessity truthfully being the mother of invention. The Dilgar War was no different, with new variants and models brought into play to fight against the greatest menace that the League had ever known, perhaps even rivalling the activities of the great Centauri Republic.

The following vessels were the line craft that fought on behalf of the Earth Alliance in the Earth Expeditionary Force during the Dilgar War. Statistics presented are appropriate to the models and variants that participated, as shown in the fleet lists previously in this chapter.

Nova (Alpha)

Whilst in latter days the usefulness of the Nova Dreadnought was surpassed by the Omega class and the Warlock class, the Nova Dreadnought was well and truly the chief battleship as operated by EarthForce at the time of the Dilgar War. For a time, all previous concerns about the vast armament load-out on the Nova vanished as the ship proved its worth against the Dilgar.

For the command staff, command of a Nova Dreadnought was perhaps the highlight of a career. Perhaps short of a promotion to command an Avenger carrier, a bridge position on a Nova was highly sought after during the Dilgar War, and for several years after. The ship was unpleasant to work on, in some ways being little more than a floating gun platform the size of a small town. The crews of a Nova were notoriously unhappy with their vessels, and the amount of maintenance work required to keep them running.

Of more importance to the command staff than the trials and tribulations of their engineering crewmen were the fighters carried on board the Nova for defence. These fighter crews were required to continually be ready for escort duty, performing enemy fighter interdiction. With the weaponry so geared up to deal significant damage on large foes, a squadron or two of Dartfighters could cause the ship immense problems, targeting specific locations such as the engines and weapon emplacements. Therefore, guarding their base ship was the overwhelming priority for any fighter launched from the Nova.

The weaponry of the Alpha model Nova, which participated in the Dilgar War, was primarily focused around the delivery of medium laser cannon bursts. Whilst the forward and rearward firing weaponry were perhaps not as great as those equipped on other vessels, the broadsides that the Nova was capable of launching was truly staggering, possessing perhaps the greatest volley of potential damage of any EarthForce vessel. Indeed, short of mass driver weaponry, no Dilgar vessel had the potential to score so much short-ranged damage. This was the forte of the Nova in the Dilgar War; to engage enemy vessels at close range and rip them apart. A great number of fleet victories can be attributed to both the resilience of the Nova to survive reaching close range, and then the ability to unleash hell when it did so.

What was not known to EarthForce at the time, and is highlighted elsewhere, was the intense fear that the Dilgar had for the Nova. This fear manifested itself on more than one occasion, with a Pentacan commander making a sloppy tactical judgement that a Nova captain pounced on. It was only discovered in later years that the Dilgar knew their sun was going nova; the fact that the Earth Alliance possessed a ship-killer and advanced fighter bearing this name must have seemed like a message from the universe being delivered to them personally. The success of the Nova in battle did nothing to dissuade this worry, which occurred to more than one Dilgar on the field of interstellar battle.

During the Dilgar War, six Novas were involved in the fighting on behalf of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds in the Earth Expeditionary Force, although two were the replacements for Nova's lost on the field of battle. These

were the Valykrie, Odin, Freya (replaced by the Androcles) and the Thor (replaced by the Zeus).

Nova (Alpha variant)
Statistics: Colossal III Spacecraft; hp 650; DV 2(-12 size, +4 agility); DR 22; Spd -; Acc 3; Dec 2; Han +0; Sensor +1; Stealth 12; SQ Jump Point, Long Ranged; Cargo 125,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 28 Pilots, 20 Sensor Operators, 62 Crewmen

Weapons:
Eighteen medium laser cannons; 2 front/left/right; 2 rear/left/right; 7 left, 7 right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 60+6d10; Critical 19-20; Range 5.

Craft:
48 Starfury Tigers (replaced by Novas later in the war)
2 Shuttles

Hyperion (Alpha and Gamma)

Whilst the Nova Class Dreadnought gained a fair amount of glory by its kill ratio during the Dilgar War, the Hyperions did themselves proud at a comparative fraction of the initial purchase and maintenance cost. The true workhorse of the Earth Expeditionary Force, little prestige was gained in the public eye for the Hyperion crews, although military planners were aware of the contributions played by this dependable design, ensuring the continuation of the line into the future.

The Hyperion Alpha, the first true model of this type, performed its task well. With arguably more up front firepower than the Nova, the Hyperion Alpha was perfect to spearhead assaults, with medium plasma cannons able to force enemy commanders and vessels to break formation. Whilst the laser cannons of the Nova Alpha had a range advantage, the Hyperions was more able to pour significant fire forward on an approaching or fleeing foe. It was a notable disadvantage that if a foe was able to get the jump on a Hyperion Alpha, and engage from a non-forward quadrant, then the amount of firepower the Hyperion would be able to put out was drastically limited.

The other main variant of the Hyperion frame, which participated in the Dilgar War, was the Gamma version. Designed to facilitate ground troop and vehicle deployments, this version had an alternate weapons loadout, designed to literally punch its way into situations and deploy its contents. The Gamma had little in the way of non-forward firing weaponry and no fighter capability, with all internal storage space taken up by the troops or equipment carried therein.

During the Dilgar War, seven Hyperions were involved in the fighting on behalf of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Five of these, the Hecate, Hyperion, Xanadu, Lokii and Golgotha were Alphas, and the remaining two, the Dionysus and Cuchulain were Gamma class. Both Gamma class Hyperions were configured to carry troops and ground equipment; one of these vessels, the Dionysus was badly damaged at Balos, stranding the Fighting 103rd. On the return visit, the Dionysus was destroyed, but as the battle was won the safety of the grounded Fighting 103rd was assured.

By the time of the Earth-Minbari war, all surviving Alpha models were converted into the latest valid classes, typically the common Theta model. When that occurred, the Alpha became a footnote in the historical progress of the Earth Alliance's military might.

A full and detailed history for the Hyperion programme, including statistics for all versions current as of 2258, can be found in the Earth Alliance Fact Book. Unlike the Hyperion Alpha, the Hyperion Gamma is still a valid configuration, but is included in this section both for completeness and your convenience when gaming.

Hyperion (Alpha variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 500; DV 6 (-10 size, +6 agility); DR 18; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +3; Stealth 14; SQ Jump Point, Long-Ranged; Cargo 150,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 10 Pilots, 12 Sensor Operators, 38 crewmen.

Weapons:
Three Twin-linked Medium Plasma Cannon; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer), Damage 30+6d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
One Medium Plasma Cannon; Turret; Attack +2 (targeting computer), Damage 30+6d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
One Medium Plasma Cannon; Rear/Left/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer), Damage 30+6d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
Four Mk 1 Interceptors; 2 Front/Left/Right, 2 Rear/Left/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
6 Starfury Tigers (Starfury Novas during 2232)
2 Shuttles

Hyperion (Gamma variant – troop)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 500; DV 6 (-10 size, _6 agility); DR 18; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +3; Stealth 14; SQ Jump Point, Long-Ranged; Cargo 150,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 10 Pilots, 12 Sensor Operators, 38 crewmen, (plus 400 troops or 30 ground vehicles/aircraft)

Weapons:
Three Heavy Plasma Cannon; Two Boresight; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 35+4d10; Critical 19-20; Range 3
Twin-linked Medium Plasma Cannon; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 30+6d10; Critical 19-20; Range2

Tri-linked Particle Beams; Boresight; Attack +2(targeting computer); Damage 10+3d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Four Mk 1 Interceptors; 2 Front/Left/Right, 2 Rear/Left/Right; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
Designated assault contingent (either 12 Assault Shuttles, 2 Breaching Pods, 30 Ground Vehicles or Aircraft)
2 Shuttles

Olympus (Alpha and Beta)

With some noted supply problems plaguing certain variants of this corvette class ship, the Olympus was another stable member of the EarthForce fleet line. Often described as ugly, the main offensive armament of the initial class, the Alpha, carries railguns and missile racks in addition to plasma weaponry. This variant was the most common, but another design, featuring medium lasers and particle cannons was introduced but never garnered much favour, unfortunate given the simplified logistics. The primary reason for this poor take up was that the weapons carried by the Olympus Beta were valid, it caused comparisons with the Hyperion Alpha, and that was a conflict the Olympus Beta was always going to lose. The simple equation was the Hyperion Alpha did a better job, and was able to make its own jump-point, as no Olympus could.

The innards of an Olympus are often regarded by their crews as being the most uncomfortable of any EarthForce vessel, something that Nova and Artemis crews would argue fiercely with. The Olympus does not have the capability for missions far from home and for an elongated period of time, rendering some of its responsibility to system patrol. The vessel has a distinct lack of long and wide corridors, with twisting tunnels throughout the lower levels of the ship often reminding the crew of rabbit warrens and ants' nests.

The Olympus has no fighter complement, unsurprising given its small size. A rumoured plan to include an external fighter rack was mooted at one point, but nothing officially came of it. Again, such a development would have placed the Olympus into the category occupied by the Hyperion, which was a much newer design in any case.

During the Dilgar War, nine Olympus corvettes were involved in the fighting on behalf of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds within the Earth Expeditionary Force, although many more were involved in operations behind the main battle group, sometimes pulling patrol duties. Seven of these vessels which participated in the Earth Expeditionary Force were the Argo, Daedelus, Halloway, Troy, Olympian, Medusa and Harmonia were all Alpha class, with all the logistical problems that ensued with that particular variant. The remaining two vessels, the Midas and Rhiannon were both Beta class.

Olympus Class Corvette (Alpha variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 375; DV 10 (-10 size, +10 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +2; Sensor +3; Stealth 15; Cargo 25,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 4 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 24 crewmen

Weapons:
Two Railguns; Turret; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+1d10 (ignores DR); Critical 20; Range 5; Ammunition 30; No Reloads
Four twin-linked Medium Plasma Cannon; Front; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 15+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
Two Prototype Missile Racks; Guidance 4; Damage 30+3d10; Critical 20; Speed 4, Fuel 4, Reloads 4
Two Mk 1 Interceptors; 1 Front, 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Shuttles

Olympus Class Corvette (Beta variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 375; DV 10 (-10 size, +10 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +2; Sensor +3; Stealth 15; Cargo 25,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 4 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 24 crewmen

Weapons:

Four twin-linked Laser Cannon; Front; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 30+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 4.
One Twin-linked Particle Beam; Turret; Attack +2(targeting computer); Damage 10+3d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Mk 1 Interceptors; 1 Front, 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Shuttles

Oracle Scout Cruiser (Gamma)

The ELINT responsibility during the Dilgar War fell to the well-respected Oracle Scout Cruiser. Only Gamma models were deployed with the Earth Expeditionary Force; there were only two such vessels that participated, the *Taliesin* and the *Cassandra*. These ships were essential to the ongoing operation of the Earth Expeditionary Force, and it is a tribute to the respect they were given by other fleet commanders that both vessels survived to see the Battle for Omelos.

All models of the Oracle had a slightly increased crew complement before the establishment of the Delta model that would still be in use in 2258. When the Delta was produced, more advanced sensor equipment (tested during

the Minbari war, but useless against the stealth-equipped Sharlins) enabled the number of sensor operators and maintenance crewmen to be reduced slightly, as their roles had effectively become redundant.

The Gamma model featured a missile rack that had been successfully trialled on the earlier variant, and two twin-linked laser cannons. The former was useful for attacking targets from a distance, and the laser cannons ready to deter closer vessels. Unfortunately Scout cruisers tended to fare poorly when engaged by massed forces at close range, and as mentioned were deployed sparingly but to good effect.

Oracle Scout Cruiser (Gamma variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 500; DV 6 (-10 size, +6 agility); DR 18; Spd-; Acc 3; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +8; Stealth 14; SQ Jump Point, Long-Ranged; Cargo 100,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 6 Pilots, 24 Sensor Operators, 40 Crewmen.

Weapons:
Two Prototype Missile Racks; Guidance 4; Damage 30+3d10; Critical 20; Speed 4, Fuel 4, Reloads 4
Two twin-linked Laser Cannon; 1 Front, 1 Rear; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 30+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 3.

Craft:
4 Shuttles

Artemis (Beta)

The Dilgar War was the last great heyday for the Artemis, a design which had its hallmarks of the post-Centauri expansion of EarthForce. Fitted with a multitude of railguns, keeping these vessels fully equipped was a major resource drain for the logistical operations branches of EarthForce. The crews of an Artemis were an unhappy bunch, for like the crews of the Novas and Olympuses they disliked their lot. Worth noting is that those in charge of logistics held pretty much the same opinion as the crew of the Artemis vessels themselves.

Like the Hyperion Gamma, the Artemis Beta is still a valid configuration in 2258, but is included in this section both for completeness and your convenience when gaming.

During the Dilgar War, four Artemis class vessels were involved in the fighting on behalf of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. The Delphi, Athena, Gawain and Lancelot were all Beta variants. These were the Artemis Heavy Frigates that were directly assigned to the Earth Expeditionary Force – at least a dozen vessels were involved in the battles away from the front lines.

Artemis Heavy Frigate (Beta variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 350; DV 10 (-10 size, +10 agility); DR 18; Spd -; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +1; Sensor +3; Stealth 14; Cargo 15,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 3 Pilots, 5 Sensor Operators, 26 Crewmen.

Weapons:
Six Railguns; 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+1d10 (Ignores DR); Critical 20; Range 6; Ammunition 50; No Reloads
Two Twin-Linked Particle Beams; 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2
Two Mk I Interceptors; 1 Front, 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Shuttles

Sagittarius Missile Cruiser (Alpha)

The dedicated missile cruiser within the Earth Expeditionary Force saw sporadic use, typical for its profile. Considered akin to artillery by many EarthForce fleet commanders, the benefits of a Sagittarius on the battlefield was best felt when the missile cruiser was allowed to unleash its own version of hell from a suitable distance.

During the Dilgar War, two Sagittarius Missile Cruisers were involved in the fighting on behalf of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. The *Cupid* and the *Achilles* were both the older Alpha variant, and due to be upgraded to the new Beta variant they returned to Earth Alliance space. The newer variants were coming into service as the Dilgar War broke out, but none were available in the time allowed to get the Earth Expeditionary Force together to begin operations.

Sagittarius Missile Cruiser (Alpha variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 450; DV 5 (-10 size, +5 agility); DR 17; Spd -; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +2; Stealth 13; SQ Long-Ranged; Cargo 130,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 6 Pilots; 10 Sensor Operators; 44 Crewmen

Weapons:
Eight Standard Missile Racks; 2 Front/Left/Right, 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right, 2 Rear/Left/Right; Guidance 5; Damage 30+3d10; Critical 20; Speed 5; Fuel 5; Reloads 80
One Twin-Linked Particle Beam; Turret; Attack +1 (Targeting Computer); Damage 5+2d10; Critical 20; Range 2
Two Mk I Interceptors; 1 Front/Left/Right, 1 Rear/Left/Right; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Shuttles

Avenger (Beta)

With the Nova Dreadnought having so much prestige within EarthForce military planning at the time, there was no chance that the Avenger Carrier would take up the role of flagship. Despite this, the Avengers fulfilled a useful function within fleets, by carrying fighter craft to where they were most needed. It was not until the development of the Poseidon Supercarrier that such a vessel became a fleet flagship, boasting twice the capacity of the Avenger and an upgraded communications array.

Life on board an Avenger, as one can expect, was totally focused around the pilots and their fighter wings. This tended to lend itself to intense rivalries between different fighter wings, something that the individual nominated as CAG, a holdover title to planetary naval aircraft carriers, had to keep under control. Whether it was in drinking competitions in the officer's mess or in the number of kills, a pilot on board an Avenger either participated or withdrew, often by taking a moral high ground. This is not to say that in any situation a pilot from one wing carried on board an Avenger would pause to render aid to another, merely that bragging rights would be exercised to the fullest.

The main problem with the Avenger was not a direct fault with the vessel itself, rather the capabilities of the Nova dreadnoughts. They were able to take on any Dilgar vessel courtesy of their powerful array of weapons, and still carry half the fighters that an Avenger carried. The poor defensive arnament accounted for why so few Avengers were able to defend themselves from a focused Dilgar assault.

There was always one Avenger within the Earth Expeditionary Force, providing a counter for the dozens of Thorun Dartfighers which the Dilgar seemed able to churn out on a daily basis. The Avenger assigned to the Earth Expeditionary Force was the *Lionheart*, although one other notable vessel, the *Katana*, served as a fighter carrier to and from the warzone, in later months carrying the new Nova class fighter to replace those Tigers which had been lost by the Earth Expeditionary Force.

Avenger Carrier (Beta variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 475; DV 5 (-10 size, +5 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +2; Sensor +3; Stealth 15; SQ Jump Point, Long-Ranged; Cargo 175,000 lbs (mostly fighter parts); 4 Officers, 64 Pilots; 8 Sensor Operators; 32 Crewmen

Weapons:
Six twin-linked Medium Plasma Cannon; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 1 Left, 1 Right, 1 Rear/Left, 1 Rear/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 15+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2

Four Mk I Interceptors; 2 Front/Left/Right, 2 Rear/Left/Right; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
48 Starfury Tigers
2 Shuttles

Tethys Frigate (Epsilon)

Smaller class vessels are often overlooked when planning military operations, primarily because of the modest level of firepower they carry. However, they possess the ability to control multiple areas of space at one time, where a larger vessel, such as a Nova would only be able to control one.

The Epsilon variant used in the Dilgar War contained a boosted hull structure, giving the vessel more resistance to damage around critical areas. Whilst the improvements were not ground shaking, they were an overall improvement to an already competent design. The Epsilon effectively replaced an earlier variant, the Gamma, which suffered from being the first model of Tethys equipped with plasma cannons. A redesign of the power matrix on the Gamma, which risked exploding if a foe hit it with a lucky shot, required a significant internal restructure, hence the need for the redesigned Epsilon.

Tethys Frigate (Epsilon)
Statistics:
Colossal Spacecraft; hp 250; DV 10 (-8 size, +8 agility); DR 10; Spd-; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +3; Sensor +2; Stealth 16; Cargo 10,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 4 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 18 Crewmen

Weapons:
Three Twin-linked Medium Plasma Cannon; 1 Front, 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer), Damage 15+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
Three Mk I Interceptors; 1 Front, 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
2 Shuttles

STARFIGHTERS

Tiger Starfury

Launched in 2203 in a blaze of publicity, the Mitchell Hyundine Starfury 'Tiger' was heralded as the bold new venture in fighter design, breaking away from the principles of the past. Fully pivotal thrusters gave the Tiger a level of manoeuvrability unknown in any previous fighter, and a twin-linked light uni-pulse cannon provided a clear and sharp set of teeth for the stylised tiger that appeared in the production manuals and associated literature. The split wing design was new with this model, presenting a more distributed heads-on profile to attackers, and thus harder to hit, rather than the relatively boxy Aries and Flying Fox designs.

The Tiger proved to be a great fighter craft, and not merely for those who were fortunate enough to fly it. The reliability of the Tiger was second to none – a clear and unambiguous internal design made life easier for maintenance technicians to strip a Tiger down to the bare essentials and rebuild it. They garnered a reputation to shrug off damage as well – many Tigers returned to their base ships literally held together with a pilot's boot laces and good intentions, and after a period of work were ready to go out again. If there was one criticism of the design, it was that the maintenance of the complex engine power array was harder.

The success of the Tiger variant was proved by its length of service – as of 2258, no Starfury variant had been in service longer than the Tiger.

Starfury (Tiger variant)
Statistics:
Huge Spacecraft; hp 30; DV 15 (-2 size, +7 agility); DR 6; Spd -; Acc 8; Dec 6; Han +5; Sensor +2; Stealth 16; SQ Afterburners, Ejector Seat, Pivotal Thrusters; Cargo 15lbs; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
Twin-Linked Light Uni-Pulse Cannon; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 2d8; Critical 19-20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Nova Starfury

Utilising technology uncovered by the wreckage of Thorun Dartfighters, several changes were applied to the Tiger design, resulting in a brand new fighter. Slighty faster, better handling and with a more powerful pulse cannon array, the Nova well and truly gave EarthForce the edge of the Thorun, a fact which the Dilgar Imperium became well and truly aware of.

The main advantage which investigating Dilgar fighter technology gave to EarthForce was miniturisation procedures, enabling them to channel a greater amount of power through thrusters. Whilst the Tiger had possessed an additional pair of rear thrusters, the research showed EarthForce how to do away with this entirely, directing *all* engine power through the pivotal thrusters. This had benefits above and beyond performance – maintaining a Nova was easier than maintaining a Tiger.

The Nova replaced the Tiger's rapid-firing light cannons with slower firing but more powerful versions. Ironically, some pilots preferred the rapid-firing weaponry when taking on lesser-armoured targets, such as Raiders, and so the next model of Starfury, the Aurora, would allow a choice between these two weapon systems. When compared side by side, the Nova and Aurora Starfury variants appear quite similar from a distance, although closer up the Nova is slightly bulkier than its newer cousin.

During 2232, EarthForce was able to replace its Tiger Starfuries with Nova variants. It is up to an individual Games Master's interpretation as to when a vessel in his game is upgraded with these new fighters. That said, during the summer of 2232 roughly half of all Tigers had been replaced, and by the final battle for Omelos over three quarters had been replaced by the new Nova variant.

Starfury (Nova variant)
Statistics:
Huge Spacecraft; hp 30; DV 15 (-2 size, +7 agility); DR 6; Spd -; Acc 10; Dec 6; Han +6; Sensor +2; Stealth 16; SQ Afterburners, Ejector Seat, Pivotal Thrusters; Cargo 10lbs; 1 Pilot

Weapons:
Twin-Linked Uni-Pulse Cannon; Boresight; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 4d6; Critical 19-20; Range 1

System Monitors, Bases and Logistics

Orestes System Monitor (Gamma and Delta)

An elderly design, the Orestes was outmoded by the newer and faster vessels which had replaced it in the standard battle line. The Orestes played an important but unglamorous role in the Dilgar War, by ensuring that a captured system remained safe from counter-attack. In its efforts, an Orestes was commonly supported by a pair of Tethys class vessels, often directed by the Captain of the Orestes who functioned as the nexus of channelling the defences at his command.

When the Earth Expeditionary Force deployed as a whole, it was rare for a single Orestes to not be deployed at the rear of the formation. The Orestes proved perfect for this task, in addition to being directed to support secondary targets and stay with them whilst the main bulk of the fleet were engaged elsewhere. This meant that the Orestes often survived longer than it would have done closer to the main battle, as despite being well armoured the simple fact was that the Orestes was outdated by faster, better armed vessels on both sides. In systems where there was already a native military presence, by holding station the Orestes allowed that race's fleets the opportunity to join the expanding Liberation Navy.

During the war, Orestes class vessels would commonly remain in system until a star base could be constructed, commonly a Dionysus Mid-Range Military Base, or sometimes other relief force arrived to relinquish it. After the end of the Dilgar War, all Orestes monitors were recalled, save a small number which were sold to the Gaim.

There were two distinct variants of the Orestes in service during the Dilgar War. The Gamma model was more commonly deployed during the first few months of the war, but a decommissioning date for that variant had already been decided. The replacement, the Delta variant, was becoming more popular, with an alteration in payload being the main difference between the Delta and Gamma models.

Starfighter defense and escort duties were placed in the hands of the Tiger class Starfuries assigned to an Orestes Monitor. Even in the later days of the war, the Orestes never had their fighters upgraded to Novas. The Tiger was considered a perfectly valid fighter to defend a slow moving cruiser like the Orestes.

Orestes Monitor (Gamma variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 525; DV 2 (-10 size, +2 agility); DR 18; Spd -; Acc 1; Dec 1; Han +0; Sensor +3; Stealth 13; Cargo 125,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 16 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 28 crewmen

Weapons:
Five Twin-linked Medium Plasma Cannon; 1 Front, 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer), Damage 30+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
Two Twin-linked Particle Cannons; Front; Attack +2(targeting computer); Damage 30+3d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Two Railguns;1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+1d10 (ignores DR); Critical 20; Range 5; Ammunition 40; 40 reloads
Two Mk 1 Interceptors; 1 Front, 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
12 Starfury Tigers
2 Shuttles

Orestes Monitor (Delta variant)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 525; DV 2 (-10 size, +2 agility); DR 18; Spd -; Acc 1; Dec 1; Han +0; Sensor +3; Stealth 13; Cargo 125,000 lbs; 3 Officers, 16 Pilots, 4 Sensor Operators, 28 crewmen

Weapons:
Three Twin-linked Medium Plasma Cannon; 1 Front, 2 Front/Left, 2 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer), Damage 15+3d10; Critical 19-20; Range 2
Two Twin-linked Particle Cannons; Front; Attack +2(targeting computer); Damage 30+3d10; Critical 20; Range 4
Two Twin-linked Particle Beams; Turret; Attack +2(targeting computer); Damage 10+3d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Railguns;1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 10+1d10 (ignores DR); Critical 20; Range 5; Ammunition 50; 50 reloads
Two Mk 1 Interceptors; 1 Front, 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire

Craft:
12 Starfury Tigers
2 Shuttles

Dionysus Mid-Range Military Base

The supply train required to wage a war the size of which the Earth Alliance requested required logistical provision of a scale that had never before been envisioned. Previous military actions and campaigns had focused on single, isolated engagements, or small-scale wars such as the conflict with the Narn Regime.

The design brief for the Dionysus had to simple – there were a great many useful parts from the Orion design, and the mandate was to use as many of these as possible. The Dionysus had to be constructed from segments which could be broken down to fit into the hold or cargo pod of a freighter. The interfacing between the component parts had to fit seamlessly together, whilst being easily identified to prevent an error during assembly.

Impossibly, the design was proposed to the EarthForce Budgetary Allocation Committee, prior to being passed onto the Joint Chiefs, within three months, unheard of in the history of military base construction. The committee passed the proposal without reservation, and construction of the first two prototypes began in 2230.

The Dionysus bases could be flown in, assembled and made ready for habitation within weeks. They then fulfilled part of the war effort that had caused the Dilgar so many problems – whilst having the weapons to wage war was indeed important, having the *ability* to wage war was more important still.

Life on board a Dionysus was not unpleasant during the Dilgar War, at least as far as living quarters were concerned. The base was one of the first EarthForce installations, aside from the Orion starbase, to feature artificial gravity induced by a rotating section, a welcome relief from weightlessness. Whilst the amount of space available to the command staff and crew was not large, in some cases smaller than on naval vessels, this never proved to be a concern. The reason for the Dionysus class's existence was to store weapons and suchlike for the soldiers and officers on the frontline.

Although not officially part of the design, during the Dilgar War a Dionysus class base often had a fully stocked medical wing. This wing was designed to stabilise those injured humans and aliens who were on their way back from the front lines. The arrival of a Hyperion through a local jumpgate, plasma fires issuing from the shattered hull of such a vessel, would send the medical staff into a controlled panic as they prepared to receive the wounded. Those members of medical staff were normally military

officers, although some were civilian doctors who were requested to offer their service during the time of (albeit undeclared) war.

Detailed game statistics and operating instructions for the Alpha variant of the Dionysus Mid-Range Military Base, which featured heavily in supporting the war effort against the Dilgar can be found in the Earth Alliance Fact Book.

Throughout the war, all Dionysus class bases were equipped with Tiger class Starfuries, as the priority for Nova replacements was on front-line vessels and outposts.

The majority of the Dionysus military bases were disassembled and rebuilt closer to home after the Dilgar War, although some came into the hands of the League members, and a select few into the hands of corporate entities whom the Earth Alliance placed trust in.

Surviving examples of the Dionysus class from the Dilgar war that were reassembled in Earth Alliance space include the New London station at Sinzar and the Guardian at Jericho. A good number of the other surviving bases in Earth Alliance space were destroyed during the Earth-Minbari War.

Hermes Priority Transports (Civilian)

Logistically unsung heroes, almost forty Hermes Priority Transports vessels plied the space lanes between Dionysus bases during the Dilgar War. EarthForce conscripted several of these vessels into service from the private sector, including their crews who were already experienced in the operation of those vessels. The usage of civilian vessels in military endeavours was common, a merchant navy that could be relied on in wartime.

Civilian Hermes vessels carried little in the way of firepower, if anything. They had a standard sensor array installed, rather than the modules fitted into their military brethren. Also, the majority of the weapons conduits were removed along with the conversion of two of the shuttle facilities, which had the benefit of giving increased storage space. Conditions on these vessels were smart but spartan, with the greater percentage of effort devoted to maximising cargo capacity and thus vessel profit. At the request of some civilian Hermes captains, a single interceptor was fitted to their vessels for the duration of the conflict, to ensure that the rear quarter would be protected in a conflict whilst the Hermes fled.

On any given run between Dionysus bases, Hermes transports carried anything from food supplies and medical equipment through to replacement fighter parts. Most of the time, the crews of the Hermes had no specific idea of their cargo, just an overriding aim to do their job.

Hermes Priority Transport (Civilian)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 350; DV 9 (-10 size, +9 agility); DR 16; Spd –; Acc 4; Dec 3; Han +2; Sensor +2; Stealth 16; SQ Jump Point; Cargo 55,000 lbs; 4 Officers, 6 Pilots; 4 Sensor Operators; 18 Crewmen.

Weapons:
One Mk I Interceptor; 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire.

Craft:
2 Shuttles

Detailed game statistics and operating instructions for the Beta variant of the Hermes Priority Transport, as operated directly by EarthForce, can be found in the Earth Alliance Fact Book. All military issue Hermes Priority transports were equipped with Tiger class Starfuries, unless they were transporting Nova class Starfuries to the front line.

Cotton Tender (Alpha)

Whilst the Hermes transports moved significant quantities of smaller items around, for larger items, such as replacement parts for cruisers, ground vehicles or component parts of Dionysus bases a bigger vehicle was required. This role fell to the Cotton Tender, a proven model with over fifty years of service in its original guise.

Like the Hermes, a Cotton Tender during the Dilgar War had instructions that defied all other commands, regardless of who issued them. Simply put, upon the engagement of enemy forces with an escorting vessel or fighter screen, or the sighting of enemy forces when not escorted, the Cotton Tender was instructed to make best speed. The Cotton Tender was lucky in this regard, as was the Hermes, for both vessels had their own jump engines.

Quite ugly in appearance, with modular cargo sections, the Cotton has ten times the storage capacity of a standard military issue Hermes, and thus is much more efficient at moving great quantities of cargo. However, this made the Cotton a greater target for Dilgar raiders and harassment flights, which occasionally ventured behind Earth Alliance lines to see what damage they could so. Unfortunately for the Cotton, it had roughly about the same resistance to damage as a single Hermes, and was also an easier target to hit. To cap off the disadvantages, the Hermes had twice the acceleration of the Cotton.

Even with these disadvantages the Cotton was essential for allowing the war effort to continue. Without it, not a single Dionysus could have been built, and many capital ships would have struggled with under-strength fighter squadrons.

A second variant of the Cotton Tender, the Beta, started to come into service during the Dilgar War, but only a handful of vessels were in service by the start of October, 2232.

Cotton Tender (Alpha)
Statistics:
Colossal II Spacecraft; hp 400; DV 6 (-10 size, +6 agility); DR 16; Spd –; Acc 2; Dec 2; Han +1; Sensor +3; Stealth 16; SQ Jump Point; Cargo 500,000 lbs; 6 Officers, 8 Pilots; 5 Sensor Operators; 24 Crewmen.

Weapons:
Four Twin-linked Light Particle Beams; 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right, 1 Left, 1 Right; Attack +2(targeting computer); Damage 10+1d10; Critical 20; Range 3
Two Prototype Missile Racks; Guidance 4; Damage 30+3d10; Critical 20; Speed 4, Fuel 4, Reloads 4
Two Mk I Interceptors; 1 Front, 1 Rear; Attack +3 (targeting computer); Damage 10+2d10; Critical 20; Range 1; Rapid Fire.

Craft:
12 Starfury Tigers/Novas (carried only, not able to be deployed in combat)
6 Shuttles

Personalities of the Earth Expeditionary Force

Introduction

The following personalities presented either a notable role in the Earth Expeditionary Force, or are the descendents of characters who will accomplish great things during the timeline of the Babylon 5 series.

Admiral Hamato, Commander-In-Chief

Despite a promising set of results at Westpoint, and a family with an involvement in politics and military service going back three generations, Ieysau Hamato never predicted that he would end up leading the greatest war fleet that humanity had ever seen.

The appointment of his command of a Tethys in 2219 was the perfect thirtieth birthday present for Hamamoto, having celebrated the event with his family three days before. Several years of service on the command deck of vessels both larger and smaller had given him a chance to shine, and the opportunity to do so was coming up in spades.

The Narn conflict with the Earth Alliance gave Ieysau Hamato the chance to shine. Performing admirably in the pursuit of Narn raiding vessels, he proved his worth to seniors, and received a promotion to a larger vessel, an Olympus class corvette named the *Jupiter*. It was on this vessel that he was able to stamp his mark; after six months in charge, all sectors on board the vessel were reporting efficiency improvements, something which was always appreciated by those in charge of promotion. It was a rare captain who could cut costs whilst improving the speed and effectiveness of a ship and its crew.

In promotion board interviews, the reason for this ability became clear. Clearly, Ieysau Hamato knew when to speak, and not to speak. What was more important was that his ability to remain silent spoke volumes, and worked stronger than any rebuke. A crewmember whom Ieysau blanked knew that he had disappointed his commanding officer, and redoubled his efforts. A crewmember whom Ieysau took into his confidence knew that he was honoured.

In 2227, Ieysau Hamato passed the mantle of the Jupiter onto his loyal second in command, and received a promotion to Rear Admiral. Taking up his new role on EarthDome, Ieysau took up a role with military planning, and displayed a rare talent for logistics. In battle simulations, he seemed to have an innate knack of knowing exactly what was required to complete a given mission. What seemed like a knack to others was actually the result of twenty years hard work, mentally sketching out engagements in his mind, selecting actions and then consulting military lore to see if his judgement was a correct one.

The death of a friend and former mentor gave Ieysau Hamato a promotion to Admiral in 2231. The ambassadorial representatives from the League of Non-Aligned Worlds had arrived and were attempting to plead their case to the Earth Alliance Senate. From a tactical point of view, Ieysau had a great interest in their experience of this new race, called 'Dilgar', and so made arrangements to be at a gala dinner where the ambassadors were in attendance.

Admiral Hamato did not intend to be at the forefront of any relief effort, but unbeknownst to him he had already been selected as a being involved in some capacity by the Joint Chiefs. The fact that he had shown himself to have an interest in this race, and was already well versed in military tactics from both theoretical and practical point of views meant that his name was pushed further up the list.

Even before Kalika gave her monumental speech to the Earth Alliance Senate, EarthForce had already picked their candidate to lead any potential expeditionary fleet. Admiral Pantaliano, a military man with great experience and more influential connections than Hamato could ever hope to have, was picked as the leader of this fleet, and ordered to begin making plans, on a purely theoretical level as far as anyone outside of EarthForce was concerned.

Hamato's chance came as a result of an investigation into Admiral Pantaliano's affairs, or rather those of his

elustrious contacts. A disgruntled mistress spilled the beans regarding her former lover and the money that had passed to promotion boards to ensure certain people got selected. Whilst not directly related to Admiral Pantaliano, it was close enough to force him to decline the position. As second choice for the role leading any prospective fleet, Admiral Hamato soon found himself structuring himself a fleet to go to war. His superiors never told him that he was the second choice for the position, finding out by accident. As with all such matters, Admiral Hamato handled his unhappiness with this news in a private, contemplative manner.

The decision to go to war came quickly, but Hamato succeeding wielding his fighting force against the Dilgar in Markab space. This success evidently validated his promotion, and he proceeded further into League space. His soldiers and officers alike knew what to expect of him, and morale was high.

Required to give daily reports to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the progress of the war, the recently promoted Admiral Hamato was well aware of the great responsibility entrusted to him. At some point he was bound to make a mistake, and the great run of luck he had experienced throughout the whole campaign ran out at Balos. Unlike lesser men, he learned from his mistakes, and the fleet that went back to Balos was better motivated and co-ordinated.

Hamato died during the final battle of the Dilgar War, and if he had known what was planned for him by the Earthbound media, then he would have accepted his fate with relish. An intensely quiet and private man away from his command, softly spoken when not on duty, Hamato would have hated becoming the military darling, doing interviews and attending the openings of commercial ventures for the rest of his days.

Admiral Ieysau Hamato
13th Level Human Officer
Hit Points: 31
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 14 (+4)
Attacks: +14/+9/+4 melee, +13/+8/+3 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Elite, Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Rallying Call, Way of Command.
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +4, Will +13
Abilities: Dex 11, Str 12, Con 12, Int 15, Wis 17, Cha 14
Skills: Appraise +3, Bluff +6, Computer Use +14, Concentration +6, Diplomacy +9, Drivve +3, Intimidate +16, Knowledge (Military) +11, Pilot +6, Sense Motive +19, Spot +17, Technical (Space Travel) +10, Technical (Electronics) +9
Feats: Data Access, First Contact Protocol, Hobby, Iron Will, Skill Focus (Computer Use, Sense Motive), Spacecraft Proficiency.
Standard Equipment: EF Link, PPG.

Officer Kalika, League Fleet Liaison

One might have expected Officer Kalika, of the Abbai Matriarchate, to have spent the majority of her time on board the few Abbai vessels that were able to join up with the Liberation Navy before her homeworld was freed. Instead, due to her acquaintance with Admiral Hamato, she was requested to function as the fleet liasion between the Earth Expeditionary Force and the League vessels. Hamato believed quite correctly that a League vessel would hesitate to take an order from a human vessel, the same order would be received better were it coming from an Abbai.

Kalika Qwal'mizra, to use her full and formal name, had never truly intended to become a military mastermind like her friend Ieysau. She was happy in her role of Fleet Liaison, for it meant that she could deal with others diplomatically, a situation which she felt best suited her.

The game statistics for Kalika reflect her at the time of the Dilgar invasion. To represent her in the Babylon Five Roleplaying Game in 2258, Games Masters are recommended to add three levels in the Diplomat base class, to represent her change in career following the Dilgar War.

Kalika was bitterly saddened by the loss of her compatriot at the Battle for Omelos, and gave up her military career shortly after, taking up a route into politics. As reports came in of the number of dead across the whole conflict, and the barbarities heaped upon innocents by the Dilgar, she believed that she had served her time. She served well as the representative for her people, including as the Abbai emissary to Babylon Five, where an echo of the past would one day come back to haunt her.

Kalika Qwal'mizra
5th Level Abbai Officer
Hit Points: 17
Initiative: +2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3)
Attacks: +5 melee, +7 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Rallying Call, Underwater Breathing
Saves: Fort +0, Ref +3, Will +7
Abilities: Dex 14, Str 10, Con 8, Int 13, Wis 16, Cha 15
Skills: Computer Use +8, Concentration +2, Diplomacy +13, Intimidate +3, Listen +4, Medical +4, Pilot +4, Sense Motive +11, Speak Brakiri, Speak Drazi, Speak Vree, Spot +5, Technical (Space Travel) +4, Technical (Electronics) +2
Feats: Evasive Action, Skill Focus (Diplomacy), Spacecraft Proficiency.
Standard Equipment: EF Link.

Captain David Vilhelm, First Support Fleet

Having garned an impressive military career by the time he was twenty five, his fourtieth year saw a field promotion to a fleet position for David Vilhelm, a middle aged human of Germanic descent.

Coming from a wealthy family, David Vilhelm need not have worked if he had so desired. His family had money, but the one thing they could not provide was the thing that David Vilhelm wanted and needed – his parent's love. His father worked in New York, his mother alternated between Mars and Tokyo, so he spent his early childhood in the company of au pairs and nannies, making few permanent connections.

The only time that David Vilhelm received any attention from his parents was when he did something to make them proud – when he did something wrong, it was his full-time care givers who chastised him. At some point, he decided that the only way to be noticed was to excel, and consistently made himself the top choice in his class for any additional duties or responsibilities. Ironically, this tactic worked against him, for his successes only confirmed in the minds of his parents that their child was not suffering by their lack of presence.

In David Vilhelm's sixteenth year, his father Alexander was made redundant, and thus found himself working from home on a variety of small contracts. The two found out that, despite seasonal holidays and summer vacations spent together, there was little apart from a potted history that bound them together. Feeling isolated, David signed up for EarthForce, feeling the need to place his drive and enthusiasm somewhere he felt it would be appreciated. He was not disappointed, and excelled at everything he put his hand to. By the time of the Dilgar War, he had not seen his mother or father in person, including the death of his father in 2226; he was out on manoeuvres, and was not able to attend.

During the Dilgar War, Captain Vilhelm gained a reputation as a hard and disciplined military officer, expecting the best from his officers. He viewed any officer who failed to complete a task, even if they had to spent their free time working on the task, as being a waste of his time and effort. His personnel skills lacked somewhat, and transfers were common for those who could not handle his command style. For those as focused and dedicated as he, Captain Vilhelm rewarded his officers as best he could.

Although he survived the Dilgar War, Captain Vilhelm died from a genetic illness three years after the end of the war, two weeks after the Omelos sun had exploded and removed his quarry cleanly from existence.

Captain David Wilhelm
10th Level Human Officer
Hit Points: 27
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3)
Attacks: +10/+5 melee, +10/+5 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Rallying Call, Way of Command.
Saves: Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +10
Abilities: Dex 11, Str 11, Con 15, Int 11, Wis 13, Cha 15
Skills: Computer Use +12, Concentration +8, Diplomacy +5, Intimidate +14, Listen +2, Medical +2, Pilot +6, Sense Motive +7, Spot +6, Survival +2, Technical (Space Travel) +8, Technical (Electronics) +6
Feats: Data Access, First Contact Protocol, Fire Control, Iron Will, Skill Focus (Computer Use, Sense Motive), Spacecraft Proficiency.
Standard Equipment: EF Link, PPG.

Captain Sophie Reece-Howard, Second Support Fleet

The daughter of the owner of a private trading concern founded by her grandfather, Sophie Reece-Howard grew up with the acceptance of alien races. Her father's business exported a great deal of goods to Centauri space, mainly textiles and oriental rugs. Despite the Centauri penchant for finery in their fabrics, some Centauri households liked to dabble in alien decadence, purchasing items that they believed were beneath the quality produced by the Centauri, but attractive for that very reason.

Not being particularly academic, Sophie Reece-Howard seemed set to follow her father in working for the family business. On the advice of a friend, she enrolled in EarthForce basic training, to give her the chance to do something different. There was nothing wrong with her father's business, just that Sophie had grown up with it, and wanted to try something different.

Despite not graduating at the top of her class, she was a hard worker, and Admiral Hamato noticed this trait when she was serving as a military adjutant at EarthForce Headquarters back on Earth. He was looking for someone to serve as a Watch Officer on board the Jupiter, and decided that she was perfect for the position. A tremendous promotion for one with so little experience, it took time for her to fill out the role, but she did her best to repay Admiral Hamato for the trust he had placed in her.

Sophie Reece-Howard took up the position of Captain of the Jupiter and made it her own when Admiral Hamato received his promotion and transfer back to Earth. When the time came for Admiral Hamato to pick someone to handle troop logistics, transportation and deployment, as well as several billion credits worth of military hardware, she was his desired choice. There were few individuals whom Admiral Hamato would trust with the safety of hundreds of soldier's lives.

Captain Sophie Reece-Howard
Level 9 Human Officer
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: +0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3)
Attacks: +9/+4 Melee, +9/+4 Ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Fleet), Rallying Call, Way of Command
Abilities: Str: 11, Dex: 11, Con: 16, Int: 12, Wis: 15, Cha: 17
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +3, Will +8
Skills: Computer Use +14, Concentration +4, Diplomacy +5, Intimidate +10, Knowledge (Alien Life)+3, Listen +7, Medical +4, Pilot +4, Sense Motive +13, Speak Language (Centauri), Spot +13, Technical (Electronics) +6, Technical (Mechanical) +3, Technical (Space Travel) +8
Feats: Data Access, Spacecraft Proficiency, Endurance, Point Blank Shot, Rallying Call, Skill Focus (Computer Use), Veteran Spacehand
Standard Equipment: EF Link, PPG.

Wing Commander David Nathaniel Sinclair

From a line of fighter pilots stretching back to the Battle for Britain, David Nathaniel Sinclair was a skilled flier and respected by his cohorts. Married to Gemma, a professor of North American literature back on Earth, and the father of two children, Malcolm and Jeffrey, David was a textbook pilot in many respects, but secretly desired a life with his wife and children. At some point in his future, he had decided to take up an alternative career, perhaps even in civil aviation, just to not lose the feeling of being free, and soaring through atmosphere and space like an eagle.

Loyal and wholly committed to his wing, David was a warm and spirited leader to his pilots. He did not tolerate rumour and gossip; more than once he instructed a chatty crewmember to ignore the cheap talk, and focus on what could be seen and heard. Away from his wing he was a quiet man, writing regular letters to those back home – a painful reminder of how much he missed their company. To David, he was an EarthForce officer, a pilot and a leader of others, but above all he was a father and husband.

Devoted to his wife and family, David made the best effort to make it up to them when on shore leave. A marriage conducted in EarthForce was hard, especially when a partner had a full-time job which kept them fixed geographically, and thus unable to move with different military assignments. Gemma often compared his looks to Spencer Tracy, a figure from Earth media history that was a field in which she was well qualified.

Perhaps the greatest statement that can be made about Wing Commander Sinclair is that despite losing the desire to kill, essential in many respects for a soldier and officer, he never backed down or quit, even when his fighter suffered a critical hit which ultimately killed him.

Wing Commander David Nathaniel Sinclair
Level 7 Human Officer
Hit Points: 22
Initiative: 6 (+2 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 14 (+4)
Attacks: +8/+3 Melee, +9/+4 Ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Pilot) , Rallying Call
Abilities: Str: 12, Dex: 15, Con: 10, Int: 10, Wis: 13, Cha: 15
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +4, Will +6
Skills: Computer Use +7, Concentration +6, Diplomacy +4, Intimidate +3, Listen +2, Medical +2, Pilot +15, Sense Motive +8, Spot +8, Technical (Electronics) +4, Technical (Space Travel) +4
Feats: Dogfighter, Fire Control, Improved Initiative, Spacecraft Proficiency, Skill Focus (Pilot)
Standard Equipment: EF Link, PPG.

Sergeant Major Alfredo Garibaldi

A proud New Yorker and larger than life figure, Alfredo Garibaldi came from a family with a history of law enforcement. Brought up with a keen sense of right and wrong, Alfredo knew that a career in the family tradition would beckon him in at some point. However, the life of a soldier had appealed to him since childhood, and he accepted a career with EarthForce after several jobs in his native country came to nothing.

In 2219, Alfredo met the love of his life, a fellow Italian-American named Aria who worked in the agricultural industry, and two were married during Alfredo's shore leave. Two short years later their first and only child Michael was born. Complications in pregnancy meant that Aria could not bear them any more children, which caused her to become understandably emotional at times, but aside from this they were happy.

Sergeant Major Alfredo Garibaldi had a lot of respect for his senior officer during the Dilgar War, Richard Franklin, and that respect was returned. When it came time to leave military service, he received a glowing recommendation letter from his senior, thanking him for all his years of service. Privately, Alfredo Garibaldi was happy to return home to see his family for a while. He took up a career as a police officer, and earned a reputation as an honest, trustworthy and in some cases feared lawman. He was determined and resolute, just as he had been whilst in EarthForce. Aria knew that the late nights were part of the job, and they treasured the time they had together. Sundays were especially joyous in the Garibaldi household – whenever Alfredo was not on duty they used to throw an open house in their apartment in Manhattan. Friends and neighbours used to come around,

normally bringing food with them to share, admittedly to assuage their guilt at sampling Alfredo's legendary Italian cooking.

The joy did not last long, as three years after returning home Aria died two days after Michael's fifteenth birthday. Broken hearted, Alfredo carried on working in law enforcement, even as his son went off to do his own thing. The one thing they always did together was eating Bagna Cauda, and this was a tradition that his son would continue. Alfredo still was this larger than life character, but inside his heart was broken. Despite several dalliances, Alfredo Garibaldi had met the love of his life, and lost her, and privately had decided to remain faithful to her memory, believing that one day in the future they would be together again. Sure enough, in May of 2244, Alfredo Garibaldi passed on from advanced Torg's Syndrome, and was rejoined with his wife in the place where no shadows fall.

Sergeant Major Alfredo Garibaldi (as of the Dilgar War)
Level 5 Human Soldier
Hit Points: 26
Initiative: 5 (+1 Dex, +4 Improved Initiative)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 12 (+2)
Attacks: +6/+1 Melee, +6/+1 Ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Ground), Covering Fire, To The Limit
Abilities: Str: 13, Dex: 12, Con: 14, Int: 12, Wis: 11, Cha: 13
Saves: Fort +6, Ref +2, Will +1
Skills: Intimidate +5, Listen +6, Medical +3, Move Silently +6, Spot +5, Survival +5, Technical (Electronics) +2, Technical (Engineering) +2, Technical (Mechanical) +2
Feats: Improved Initiative, Point Blank Shot, Toughness, Weapon Focus (PPG Rifle)
Standard Equipment: PPG Rifle

THE GALACTIC FRINGE

With the main interplay between the Dilgar Imperium and those opposed to them, there would inevitably be those caught in-between these two forces. Whether for good, for money or simply enlightened self-interest, these groups operated within a war zone unlike any the galaxy had ever seen.

THE BELT ALLIANCE

An Order of Termination

In June 2230, the Earth Alliance Senate became concerned that the presence of any Human-licensed vessel in League space could inflame the Dilgar's fight against the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Debating the matter, they passed an order barring the operation of any Earth registered transport, free trader or scouting craft from operating within the League of Non-Aligned Worlds.

Even though a war was going on, industrial giants and hand-to-mouth freighter captains alike protested at this decision, the severity of it coupled with the lack of consultation meant that sources of revenue were severely curtailed, if not downright crippled. The Limitation of Transportation Act, as it was named, hamstrung several organisations in one swift move, and one of these was the Belt Alliance.

There were areas within the Act that allowed for certain acts to be carried out in non-Earth Alliance controlled space. Two of these areas were scouting operations (some say that this was named specifically to appease Interplanetary Expeditions) and mining operations, which at least provided the Belt Alliance with the opportunity to gain at least some funding.

At that time, the Belt Alliance's revenue came from two distinct sources, having historical roots in the creation of the Belt Alliance itself. With dozens of mining concerns scattered across the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, the Belt Alliance was forced to examine the Act carefully. By the August of 2230, the implications of the new rulings were understood as far as their mining operations were concerned. The business, which the Belt Alliance truly was, could not be sustained on just their mining operations, and so drastic cuts were ordered in their operating budgets. This meant that ships had to be mothballed, or in the case of those crews who had been encouraged to take shares or even buy their vessels outright, their services were no longer required.

The severance pay cost the Belt Alliance greatly, although perhaps a greater cost in the long run would be the birth of a mercenary company made up of prior employees.

A Reversal of Intent

Even as the echoes of the bells ringing in 2232 could still be heard, the war drums began to beat as the Earth Alliance geared itself up for an offensive against the Dilgar. The drums did not beat for long, as military actions began without a declaration of war or any such nicety, which caught the Belt Alliance unawares.

Vessels that had been mothballed found themselves with crews of varying quality. For every Belt Alliance crewmember that would injured in an operation, there were volunteers who could offer their aid to any who could grant them a chance to strike back at the Dilgar. Whilst this was not always the case, the Belt Alliance never struggled for new membership during the Dilgar War. Many of these crews refused to claim their wages, the knowledge clear and plain that if the Belt Alliance went bankrupt at this stage, hundreds of thousands more innocent sentients would die.

For the first half of 2232, the Belt Alliance focused on the task which they were so badly needed – the protection of refugee transports. Whilst there was little money in this,

often none, there was a need to participate, at least in a support capacity.

This need was proposed to the committee which governed the operating procedures of the Belt Alliance, the Senate Committee for Belt Alliance Regulation and Monitoring, and a deal was agreed, as if the Belt Alliance was part of the merchant navy. The sum was only a portion of the Belt Alliance's operating cost, far less than what was needed, but severe cost-cuttings and the promises made to financial institutions carried the rest.

For players wishing to participate in a Dilgar war campaign in a military manner, but not play as characters associated with EarthForce or alien governments, the Belt Alliance is an excellent choice. It allows military characters of different races to participate in the running of the same vessel.

The production of mineral ores from the Belt Alliance's many mining facilities continued in the shadow of the Dilgar War, despite a handful being lost to Dilgar attacks. These ores were sold back to the Earth Alliance government at a reduced rate, who demanded that they had first rights to decide whether to buy the production of the mining efforts. EarthForce needed ships if it was to fight, and thus the Belt Alliance served a useful purpose as far as EarthForce was concerned, at least for the duration of the conflict.

With the Dilgar forced back, the Belt Alliance were able to open up trade lines again, protecting them from raiders and pirates, not to mention the Independent Mercenaries League who were not averse to occasional bouts of piracy, no doubt endorsed by one alien government or another. By the time that the hammer fell on the Dilgar war effort, and Omelos was taken, the Belt Alliance had pretty much returned to the state that it was before the war.

A Generation of Gratitude

Whilst the Belt Alliance did not participate directly in the major battles, being wholly outgunned and ill-suited for that particular task, the Belt Alliance was nevertheless not forgotten by those grateful sentients whose lives were saved.

The rebuilding effort was critical, and it was here that the Belt Alliance made a name for themselves amongst the League, perhaps more so than their efforts during wartime. With the Dilgar contained on their homeworld, there was a growing worry in the months and years following the war that Raiders would be able to capitalise on the weakened alien governments and corporations.

The Belt Alliance had hoped that their assistance in the Dilgar War would give weight to their argument to expand their military. The Starfox fighter, still officially on the drawing board but prototypes carried by several Vindicator Gunboats unofficially, would give them a chance to oppose the expected rise in Raider activity.

A fresh plea for support on developing this new fighter, to the Senate Committee for Belt Alliance Regulation and Monitoring, fell on deaf ears. EarthForce was seen as the future, and the Belt Alliance would need to continue as they had, at least for the foreseeable future. Some within the Belt Alliance saw this as a betrayal of the work that they had undertaken during the Dilgar War – as far as the Earth Alliance Senate was concerned, it was a job and they had been paid for it.

The Independent Mercenaries League

From Redundancy to Mercenary

Whilst even during the timeline of the last of the Babylon Stations the Belt Alliance are viewed as an arguably necessary evil by EarthForce, the Independent Mercenaries League are despised as being little more than pirates and privateers. The presence of any vessel openly belonging to the Independent Mercenaries League within Earth space after the end of the Dilgar War would often result on that vessel being shot at on sight.

The order barring any non-EarthForce vessel from participating in any combat zones threatened by the Dilgar had an adverse effect on the operating budget of the Belt Alliance. Unlike a normal military organisation, there was no taxation to pay wages and starship costs if missions were not flying. For a time, a number of Belt Alliance ships were mothballed, and their crews placed out on retainer.

Some crews, fearing the worst, took the discussion to leave the Earth Alliance proper, to find their fortune as freelancers out amongst the League worlds. Their skills as able crewmen, with military training, would surely put them in a position where they could charge for their abilities. In total, seven Belt Alliance crews, three from Vindicator Gunboats and the rest from smaller vessels, made the jump from employees of the Belt Alliance to mercenaries in the employ of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds.

Whilst two of these crews did not own the vessels that they crewed, the remainder either wholly or in part owned their vessels, in a scheme piloted in the early 2200's to encourage employee buy-in with the corporation's goals. These ships had running costs, and the life of a mercenary was one way of paying the bills. As 2230 drew to a close, these mercenaries offered their ships or their expertise as skilled stellar mariners to the highest bidder. With the individual members of the League suffering under the jack-booted heel of the Dilgar Imperium, the Independent Mercenaries League was in place to truly make a killing.

Profitability in Peacetime

The Dilgar War gave the Independent Mercenaries League a role to play in the time following the defeat of the Dilgar. Sadly, within each government there were elements that wanted to put themselves on top of the heap, to be first in the race to rebuild. Into this niche the Independent Mercenaries League were able to apply themselves and their abilities, their only requirement a sizeable sum of currency or goods to that effect.

Whether it was illegal raids, kidnapping, garrison duty, or simply engaging in military operations for alien governments who wanted plausible deniability, the Independent Mercenaries League earned their place as the darker sibling of the Belt Alliance. By 2235, when Omelos was vaporised the Independent Mercenaries League, sometimes abbreviated as the IML, had already undertaken several covert missions for both League governments and corporate concerns. The mercenary band had few mottos, but one of them was never to discuss a prior operation or client with another.

Rumours of the Independent Mercenaries League, and their activities, reached EarthGov. In March 2236, a decision was made to condemn the Independent Mercenaries League as a renegade military organisation, and to deny them any support. This included any Earth Alliance based corporation, including the Belt Alliance. Effectively, there was nowhere for the mercenaries to go, as far as EarthGov were concerned.

Over the next few years, the Independent Mercenaries League expanded their fleet, normally by liason with those governments and corporations who had provided them with the very contracts to continue their existences. Often, they acquired one vessel from one government, such as one of the Brakiri and then took that same vessel to another source for the weapons payload to be increased. After this, the vessel could be taken to another source for armour plating or any one of a dozen other possible modifications.

An alien mercenary campaign may make for an interesting idea for Games Masters wishing to try something new. By a Games Master allowing only races from the League of Non-Aligned Worlds as player characters in a game like this, the mercenaries group could operate on any side, in any conflict. They could even operate on opposing sides in the same conflict, if the paymaster for a given operation was different. To a mercenary, the only morals that matter are those that the current customer deems necessary to complete the job.

Whilst sounding like a logistical nightmare, over the years between the Dilgar War and the Earth-Minbari War the Independent Mercenaries League recruited heavily from the members of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. This was partly due to their operating location, but also because there was little enthusiasm for their mercurial natures from within the Earth Alliance. This situation meant that there was always someone on hand from the race concerned, or at least close by, who could advise on equipment manufacture. With no two vessels the same, finding a configuration to meet the requirements of any given mission never posed a problem.

An opportunity came for the Independent Mercenaries League to become involved in the Earth-Minbari War on the side of humanity. They declined, thus sealing EarthGov's opinion of them for all time. The Independent Mercenaries League did not particularly care.

Structure of the IML

Based from a series of offices on board the TFS Freedom base within the Tirrith Free State, the Independent Mercenaries League unsurprisingly keeps a low public profile. Whilst their existence may be an open secret, they are well aware that one particular government, if wronged, would be more than happy to send a military team or worse to cut the head off the mercenary chicken, so to speak.

Therefore, the IML does not allow direct contact between representatives from alien governments and themselves when a mission is proposed, at least not in the early stages. A traditional mail-drop at any one of a dozen locations across the League of Non-Aligned Worlds is normally passed through a variety of channels to ultimately arrive at the offices on TFS Freedom eight to ten days after the initial request is made.

The request is analysed, and passed through a group of five unnamed individuals who are charged with the allocation of contracts. These individuals decide which contracts are taken, and a majority vote is all that is needed for a contract to be accepted or declined. Sometimes, elongated contracts are requested and accepted, even for the IML to be placed on a particular government's retainer for a period of time. This never lasts for more than a year, otherwise it could jeopardise the neutrality which the IML profess as part of their charter of operation.

There are roughly eight hundred mercenaries working under the banner of the IML. Some are only part-time members, contracting themselves to the IML when times are short. Being a member of the IML has several benefits, including criminal connections such as fencing and transferring acquired (read: stolen) goods. There are few official benefits for a mercenary group being a member of the IML – the fee to be a member and thus receive contracted work equates to around a thousand credits per calendar month per ship, and fifty credits per crewmember. These fees are non-negotiable.

Unsurprisingly, the Independent Mercenaries League has a dim view of the Belt Alliance. It should not come as a great surprise either that the ill-feeling is entirely mutual; on occasion, the IML has been ordered to target a convoy protected by the Belt Alliance. In these situations, the Belt Alliance gives no quarter.

Kitbashed Fleets and Illegal Loadouts

Having no prescriptive fleet structure or standard fleet configurations enables the Independent Mercenaries League to take vessels on missions which will offer the optimum chance for success. This also has the advantage of confounding their foes- even though an Independent Mercenaries League vessel may structurally appear as a Drazi Sunhawk, the weaponry could be anything from Pak'ma'Ra originated Plasma Cannons to Brakiri Graviton Pulsars. Of course, no government within the League of Non-Aligned would give their best weapons or ship technologies to the IML, simply because at some point in the future those same weapons could be used against them. Thus, the crew complement tends to be higher on IML vessels, mainly because of the outdated ship control and computer systems

Care must be taken by Games Masters when designed IML vessels. By taking the best from each member race, a ship could be constructed that would allow it to stand toe-to-toe with the major ships of each government. If this is the desired effect, and the Games Master wishes to use the IML as a major opposing force, then this would create a hostile entity without upsetting the existing racial structures and fleets of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds.

Of course, fitting such mismatching equipment and upgrades can cause many problems. To represent this, a Gamesmaster may at the creation of any IML vessel make the following roll on a D6, to determine a flaw with the vessel which will undoubtedly occur at some point. Using this table is not mandatory, and may be skipped altogether if the Games Master has a more devious and specific plan in mind.

That said, occasionally planetary governments lease certain weapons and configurations to the IML, with the express instruction for those weapons to be returned. This means that in certain cases, admittedly rare, the sponsoring government gains valuable field test data on how their weapons work, against live targets. Ironically, this is something that the Dilgar would have been proud of.

Sample craft:

The Sashimi
Taken from the hull of a Drazi Warbird, the Sashimi is one of the most favoured vessels within the Independent Mercenaries League. With an outdated computer system and a generation old set of armour from sub-standard sources, the Sashimi was flown to an illegal port for the fitting of a weapons array from the Brakiri government, as part payment for a previous strike on the assets of one corporation by another. The Sashimi operated for an additional two years, from 2235 to 2237 with this loadout, until the opportunity to add Vree weaponry to the vessel's hull came with a strike against pirates sponsored by another government (the Vree suspected Centauri involvement).

Roll	Effect
1	When one weapons system (as selected by the Games Master) rolls a critical hit, the weapon explodes immediately after the weapon has fired. This power backlash causes equivalent damage to the hosting ship of base damage of the firing weapon.
2	A critical failure in the ship control system, several subroutines deep within the software, causes weaponry of different origination to vie for resources. On the rolling of any natural 1 for the ship's weapon systems, only one weapon is capable of firing per turn. If the ship has more than one weapon, then the weapon that can fire is selected by the Games Master
3	A power drain drags power from other ship's systems. If the ship's weapons are fired three times in succession on following turns, the ship's Acc and Dec scores are both reduced to 1 for the remainder of the battle.
4	The control systems on the lateral engine arrays fuse. At a point deemed suitable by the Games Master, the ship's handling score drops to +0.
5	An error in the ship's power grid causes energy spikes to be given out. These spikes are easy to spot by any craft in the vicinity. The ship's Stealth score drops by 10 points.
6	An explosion, at the Games Master's option, causes the ship to become hulled. The effects of this are dramatic, and disastrous for crewmembers not close to an oxygen suppy.

Sashimi (Drazi Warbird base)
Colossal III Spacecraft: hp 490; DV 10 (-12 size, +12 agility); DR 16; Spd -; Acc 3; Dec 3; Han +3; Sensor +5; Stealth 16; SQ: Long Ranged; Cargo 5000 lb.; 2 Officers, 4 Pilots, 8 Sensor Operators, 35 Crewmen.

Weapons:
Four Brakiri Heavy Laser Cannons; 2 Front Left. 1 Front/Left, 1 Front/Right; Attack +0 (targeting computer); Damage 40+4d10; Critical 18-20/x2; Range 6

One Vree Antimatter Cannon; Forward; Attack +2 (targeting computer); Damage 30+5d8' Critical 19-20/x2; Range 5.

THE INDEPENDENTS

Aside from those with the military might or ability to defend themselves, or indeed to start conflicts should they wish to, there were many others who were affected by the Dilgar War, and their participation in the fringes of it. From independent civilians working the space ways as enlisted personnel to the large galactic corporates, all were affected by their exposure to the wickedness of the Dilgar Imperium.

Raiding the Displaced

The Raider community, especially those who spread their wings coreward, had perhaps the greatest involvement with the Dilgar above and beyond any other race before the war began. The Raider Wars, as they Dilgar called them, gave the Raider community a chance to appreciate the abilities of Dilgar fleets and capital ships at first hand.

On the brink of defeat, the Raiders found that the Dilgar had shied away from obliterating them, and for a while the Raider bands took this as a sign of Dilgar weakness. Over time, they found that the Dilgar did have the will to fight, but were simply using the Raiders as a training opportunity, every once in a while launching a mission to cull the numbers of Raiders operating in any area close to their homeworld.

Throughout the war, the Raiders found their efforts compounded by the Belt Alliance, not to mention the forces of the Liberation Navy. Allies dried up, covert supporters had bigger fish to fry. Despite this, the Dilgar were not especially thorough in their stampede across the worlds of the League and thus some Raider groups managed to emerge from the war

The opportunities for the Raider community, especially those who dealt in slaves, were a great opportunity. Fleets of refugees made for easy pickings, and more than one was presumed lost forever in hyperspace. The truth was that the aliens, having lost their homes and everything that reminded them of who and what they were, became the property of another race and sold into slavery, often to the Centauri Republic.

Perhaps as important as the revenue gained from selling captured refugees as slaves was the fact that Raider technology experienced a boost. Very often, those same refugee transports they intercepted were often of technology that the Raiders did not had, and could use either for spare parts or to use in raids in the regions of space close to that of the former vessel's creators. This meant they could operate covertly, using the subterfuge to get them closer to an unarmed freighters or transporters before unleashing hidden weaponry to disable them.

Smugglers, Entrepreneurs and Wanderers

Blockade running, piracy and smuggling activities reached a high level during the Dilgar War. Weapons and individuals were commonly the main items to be moved covertly from one location to an arguably safer one – some unscrupulous smugglers were known to charge additional fees for the handing over of their carried items, making them little more than kidnappers.

Legitimate traders found themselves pinched severely by the Dilgar War. Markets which had previously been lucrative, particularly around the export and import of goods such as luxury items, suddenly dried up. Markets vanished overnight, almost as quickly as the speed at which their customers were being purged from the universe by the Dilgar. When the Earth Alliance imposed the Limitation of Transportation Act in 2230, Earth-registered vessels were prevented from travelling to certain destinations by law.

For fringe players wishing to participate in a Dilgar war campaign, but not as a direct combatant, it is entirely feasible for the crew of a ship to be seconded to the war effort. This would allow players to involve themselves, shipping cargo for EarthForce, but keeping their enforced neutrality.

For those traders who personally traversed hyperspace between worlds, often defying the Limitation of Transportation Act, their lives were threatened as much as their livelihoods. Neutral vessels were considered fair game by the Dilgar Imperium, and often used as target practice for squadrons of Thorun Dartfighters. Any hails emitted by a neutral vessel were ignored as the Dilgar pounded the unfortunate vessel with bolter fire.

One option open to those free traders was to sign up for service with the Earth Alliance, as part of a growing merchant navy which first started to take shape in February 2232. An unofficial operation had begun before this, with some free traders performing mercy missions for beleaguered League worlds, carrying foodstuffs and medicines donated by members of the public and compassionate organisations. Like many activities within the League, the establishment of the Limitation of Transportation Act caused those charitable organisations to seek alternate ways of getting aid through, usually by using Earth-built vessels registered with alien governments.

One avenue which ceased totally was interplanetary exploration. For humanity, all exploration was restricted until the decision by the Earth Alliance Senate to involve themselves in the Dilgar War, effectively from 2230 to 2232. Civilian exploration was regarded poorly by EarthForce in any case, which was also instructed to scale back its exploratory missions. The chances of an Explorer class vessel finding itself the victim of a Dilgar Pentacan's firing solution were considered to warrant a more isolationist viewpoint, at least for a time.

After the war, exploration continued as it had before, with Earth expanding their frontiers of knowledge as well as territory where that were allowed. Matters would continue this way until Humanity's first encounter with the Minbari. For the alien races, especially in the League, there was little in the way of scouting performed after the end of the Dilgar war, as almost all races had more pressing matters at home to contend with, like the simple matter of survival.

Interstellar Corporations

For those struggling to make ends meet during the Dilgar War, the effects that the conflict had depended largely on the particular avenue of product or services that a business or company was offering. Even the large interstellar corporations found themselves affected by the war.

Spending began to slump after an initial honeymoon period – general stocks and shares began to fall as war rarely proved to be good for business, at least for the duration. The net worth of those companies and conglomerates who were actively involved in the production of war material experienced a moderate rise in profitability and worth. These entities were able to hire more workers and embark on larger and more expansive projects. These companies pursued elusive governmental contracts, which would guarantee an income for a given project or product for the duration of the war. Governmental spending on military hardware increased as the war went on, which was exactly what those organisations who were profiting directly from the war wanted.

Medical corporations fared less badly out of many which experienced a downturn in profits and share value. They were aware that the need for more effective drugs and treatments went unsaid, and there was an implicit pressure there to provide more effective products and services. Those same corporations were also aware of the strides being made in so-called medical research by the Dilgar, and the fact that at some point in the future their skills would be required to examine any retrieved fortunes of war. Any research conducted into the medical efforts made by the Dilgar would ultimately assist their profits.

After the war, the interstellar corporations experienced a surge, not least because the shareholders were relieved that war was over. Earth based companies involved in construction gained a few lucrative contracts to assist the League, but for a large part those races who had suffered by the Dilgar seemed happier to handle that side of things themselves. Their main competition for these contracts was the Brakiri and Vree, who were both focused on improving their profits.

The main notable gain which the interstellar corporations received from the Dilgar War was knowledge. Despite the untold acts of butchery, in the name of scientific advancement some of the Dilgar's research was put to a less horrific use.

News Networks

During the early days of the Dilgar War the conflict was poorly covered, with the assault on the Alacan Republic barely got a mention in any of the media. Even Universe Today only managed an eight-sentence piece on a remote border conflict between two races that the Earth Alliance had ever heard of in passing. Even this piece focused on what was not known at the time about the Dilgar, rather than the act which had been committed.

Alien Attacks Draw Muted Senate Response

By James Wallace

A seemingly unprovoked assault on one alien race upon another was conducted in the last seven days, by an alien race identified as 'Dilgar'. The actual details of this assault are sketchy, but rumours persist of a trade vessel belonging to the Vree Conglomerate being caught in the crossfire.

Both races are located on the coreward side of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, far from Earth space. The number of casualties involved in this assault was not known, but information received by trusted third parties sources state that this attack was in response to sponsored Raider activity. The targeted world is, according to reports, under the control of the hostile power whilst investigations into the source of this suspected Raider activity are made.

No EarthDome senators or their aides were available for comment on this matter, but Universe Today will continue to observe this situation. The Vree Conglomerate, when enquires were made to their Earth-bound representative, declined to be drawn on the matter. MedCorps, when questioned, could provide no body of knowledge on either of these two races involved in the military incident, and thus were unable to provide any imagery to accompany this report.

ISN were the first to break the news during the lull between the Dilgar's conquering of the Alacan Republic and the invasion proper regarding the unprovoked attack and subsequent destruction of the *Persephone*. This was entirely co-incidental, as a reporter of theirs, together with a recording team, had been on the Persephone recording a documentary about life on board an Earth Alliance vessel in peacetime. Their reporting of the incident earned them several media awards in that same year.

Indeed, for a period of time after the news media had quietened down to a distant hum over the Dilgar race as a whole, ISN continued to report on the Dilgar. After a couple of months, there were no more stories to tell, and any reports of alien mistreatment were treated as unsubstantiated accusations against alien races far removed from the affairs of any human being.

This changed in 2230, with the commencement of the combined assault on the Abbai Matriarchate and the Drazi Freehold. Whilst the Drazi were portrayed as technologically equipped Neanderthals by the majority of the Human media, the Abbai were something else. Favourable trade agreements and good relations with the Abbai meant that the assault on them was portrayed in a higher level of detail. As time went on, no news network could ignore the reports coming in from alien space; subject matter

was often trimmed down to prevent unnecessary alarm. Sensationalism was avoided until the Dilgar Imperium invaded Abbai space, and then the gloves were off. Tales of the atrocities committed by the Dilgar could be seen almost nightly on news roundups, and the question was repeatedly asked why politicians had not done anything before. The fact that the politicians would have been publicly hung, drawn and quartered if they had approved military action earlier was neither here nor there.

If one good thing came out of the Dilgar War, was the fact that it increased the visibility of the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, and their member races, to the citizens of the Earth Alliance. Never before had alien governments had so much supportive coverage as they experienced during the Dilgar War. It could never hope to rival or even approach the amount of press coverage that the Centauri had received when they first contacted humanity, but it was at least on the same scale. Human media representatives were on hand at planetary liberations, reporting back on what had happened. The fact that most of the freed aliens praised the Earth Alliance instilled a feel-good factor that counterbalanced the atrocities in the minds of the programme managers.

For players wishing to participate in a Dilgar war campaign, but not play a character with levels in the Officer or Soldier class, an excellent choice would be a war correspondent. This character's chief motivation would be reporting back to their network or news outlet on the 'real' side of the war, alongside those participants fighting in it.

The effect of this publicity would not last forever, and had a countering effect in later years, as an increased level of alien involvement in Earth business and real-estate began. Certain elements within human society started to express dissatisfaction at aliens taking human jobs and human land, which would later culminate itself in formation of groups such as Earth First but more specifically the renowned Home Guard. The fact that, with the possible exception of the Drazi, few races supported the Earth Alliance during the Earth-Minbari War would be additional fat thrown on this particular fire.

Using the Dilgar in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game

The first, and perhaps most obvious way this book can be used is to allow a campaign to be conducted during the Dilgar War. An EarthForce or League vessel is the most logical choice for this campaign. This campaign would focus most heavily on military matters, perhaps in the search for a particular Dilgar military genius, possibly even Jha'Dur herself. This type of adventure could perhaps even utilize miniatures or card representations of the player's ship, and that of their opponents, to give a visual representation to the battles that the ship and her crew must go through in order to catch this war criminal.

In this campaign, there would be little scope for Minbari players. The Minbari Federation, with the exception of one notable instance, kept out of the Dilgar War, considering the whole conflict beneath their attention. Of course, it can be argued that their inaction, by implication, caused them to side with the Dilgar Imperium, in not contesting their crusade for bloodshed. This same accusation can be leveled at the Centauri Republic and Narn Regime, although those two governments actually had their own nefarious dealings with the Dilgar Imperium.

An alternative would be to allow the players to actually play as Dilgar themselves. Whilst playing a 'loyal' Dilgar would be quite an unsavory choice for most groups of players, there is the potential for the players to take part as a group of Dilgar who have either grown tired of the constant warfare or have discovered the acts being undertaken in the name of the Imperium are not to their liking. Even as simple one-off adventure, this could be quite intriguing.

Perhaps the most common implementation of the information presented in this book would allow a Games Master to run a campaign for Player Characters of different races to hunt down those members of the Dilgar race who managed to escape their homeworld before the Battle for Omelos. These Dilgar, considered war criminals by much of the League, would face an uncertain future, of always watching over their shoulder for the representatives of those races whom the Dilgar butchered. These individuals would have to gain skills in not attracting undue attention; otherwise they would make their presence and racial heritage known to those who are looking for them. Indeed, were it not for Na'Toth spotting Jha'Dur on Babylon 5, it is entirely possible that the Warmaster could have passed through the Zocalo without others identifying her. Other free Dilgar would in all probability not be so brazen.

Players involved in this type of adventure would find their work cut out for them. With many dead ends, and trails going cold for no reason other than time, the investigators would come to expect that an individual who has had perhaps twenty years worth of maintaining a low profile is a truly elusive quarry. Of course, there is no guarantee that the individual they search was actually guilty of any war crimes at all. This whole concept would be a powerful motivating factor for any alien character, creating a reason for the investiture of levels taken in the Agent class, for the express purpose of hunting down Dilgar who escaped the destruction of their homeworld.

The following examples present the two core avenues in which the Dilgar can be utilized in the Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game.

Canon Roleplaying

Introduction

Many groups of Babylon 5 players prefer to play their games under the auspices of Babylon 5 continuity. They prefer to leave the main story points of the Babylon Five arc, such as the founding of the last of the Babylon stations and the Narn-Centauri War, relatively untouched. Instead, groups of players who prefer this style of play commonly weave in and out of the main arc, pursuing their own adventures. These tales may not be of the epic scale of Sinclair, Delenn or Sheridan, with goals often going unnoticed by the major powers but no less important than their deeds.

The following examples present two common ways of utilising the material in this book without affecting the storyline of the Babylon 5 television show, as represented in a game.

Dilgar era campaign

Setting a game in the era of the Dilgar War is the most logical manner to use the content provided in this book. It is a time of bravery, steadfastness and acts of unimaginable atrocities. The Dilgar menace swept across the League, and only the actions of an initially reluctant EarthGov allowed the tide to turn against the invaders.

The playgroup would commonly be made up of either Human or alien characters, nominally assigned to a naval vessel, although many different alternatives are possible. As detailed elsewhere in this book, the playgroup could be members of the Belt Alliance, the Independent Mercenaries League, ISN or any one of a number of organisations.

The main excluded racial type in a Dilgar era campaign will unsurprisingly be a Minbari. For players who had wished to play a Warrior Caste character, then a Drazi may be a good alternative, perhaps with a wisdom score unusual for members of that race. For players who had wished to play a Religious Caste character, then an Abbai or Markab may be an excellent choice. The Markab in particular were particularly focused during the Dilgar War, being almost as fanatical as the Dilgar were tyrannical.

Centauri and Narn characters are feasibly possible, but would be more common outside of the traditional fleets of the line, finding a place instead in any number of the civilian organisations and groups.

How the Dilgar are portrayed is down the style of the Games Master and the play group. They may either be presented as soulless abominations, which need to be purged from League space, or as a complex opponent with many exploitable faults. Even if the latter is used, it is important to remember that the Dilgar are largely an 'evil' race, with some examples of that race pushing the definition to new limits.

The example campaign outline included in this book is set during this time period, set on a military vessel fighting as part of the Earth Expeditionary Force.

Babylon 5 era campaign

The remnants of the Dilgar were not all collated and returned to their homeworld prior to the supernova, despite what may be claimed. Just as with the death of the Markab species in 2259, some elements of that race survived the Drafa plague by being on outposts and vessels far away. In a similar manner, some members of the Dilgar were away from their home when the war was lost. These Dilgar were able to evade capture by any manner of subterfuge skills, or just by blind chance. Some rogue vessels remained free after the defeat of the Dilgar, but these could be counted on one hand. Rumours persisted of an Ochlavitia Destroyer Leader, which had managed to avoid capture but these were never substantiated. The existence of this vessel, if indeed true, would be a real concern to the main governments, as well as a target for Raiders who would covet such a craft as a battleship from which they could launch a campaign of terror.

Allowing the Dilgar to be used as Player Characters in the timeframe of Babylon 5 is up to a Games Master to decide upon, but there are ramifications that must be considered. Is the Dilgar character's appearance masked or disguised enough to prevent them being recognised? How has the Dilgar character managed to avoid capture? How old is the Dilgar character – is he a veteran of the war, or the child of a Dilgar parent who escaped the fall of Omelos? Is the character a Thrazan, or a slave of either Kathran or Rittacan descent?

A prerequisite may be force the Dilgar player to take any starting class levels in the Lurker class, to represent their time hiding within the dregs of society, out of sight of those who may recognise them.

Any Dilgar that survived the war would find day to day life difficult. The galaxy would fear and hate them; so many free Dilgar would be forced to keep their identities a secret. The arrival of Deathwalker, Jha'Dur herself, would in all probability be nothing but trouble for a Dilgar who chose to remain hidden. It would provide fresh imagery to a new generation of what a Dilgar looked like, and this would make any survival attempts worse.

The most common use for the Dilgar race in the Babylon 5 era are as adversaries. The opponents to a group of players may not wish them direct and personal harm, merely wishing to be left alone. For mercenary characters however, any Dilgar captured and returned to the more violent members of the League, such as the Drazi, would be worth a small fortune. Regardless of their actual role in

the war, the hapless Dilgar would be undoubtedly accused of war crimes and sentenced appropriately.

Some examples of members of the Dilgar race who survived the war can be found in Chapter 8.

NON-CANON ROLEPLAYING

The following two examples present 'what if' scenarios to allow the Dilgar to be played fully as a race in the timeline of the Babylon Five series. These scenarios break with Babylon Five canon, in a sense that the major events of that story will still track, but the actual personalities who perform them may be different.

For those roleplayers who are fans of the television show, this style of gaming allows a sense of wonder and unknown which may be lost if a storyline close to that of the Babylon 5 show are followed. In particular, the actions undertaken in the Dilgar War could have potentially altered a great deal of the back-story to the Babylon 5 show, as the following two examples will demonstrate.

Participation of Minbar

An EarthForce convoy, delayed by logistical difficulties, was in the wrong place at the wrong time as far as the Minbari Federation was concerned. At the height of the Dilgar war, they observed a firefight in hyperspace, between a formation of Dilgar vessels and an alien race in strange aquatic looking vessels that appeared almost hellish in the crimson ambience of hyperspace.

After the Minbari vessels present had finished their work, leaving the fragments of the Pentacan to drift away in hyperspace, they approached the newcomers. The convoy commander, Captain Dallas, who knew that his poorly armed convoy did not stand a chance, had seen the sheer firepower of these alien vessels. The target approached, gun ports opened, and simply waited, maintaining position.

Experienced as he was in first contact protocol situations, Captain Dallas observed the scene from the bridge of his Hyperion cruiser before instructing his weapons officer to charge up weapons, but to not allow a firing solution on the craft to be set. As his ship, the 'Aesop', did so, the Minbari fleet turned and left, evidently satisfied. Having expected the worst, Captain Dallas realised that the greeting had been a show of strength, and by some miracle he had passed the test.

The Dilgar offensive turned, as wiser minds prevailed. A counter attack decimated the Earth Expeditionary Force, but it did not matter. The Minbari had come to the aid of an humanity, who had responded correctly to the show of respect. With Earth under renewed attack, the Minbari intervened, and the war descended into a stalemate, as the Dilgar announced that they would return all other worlds to their owners, save Mitoc.

The Babylon Project began after the end of the Dilgar War, twenty years before it would otherwise have done. In command of the outpost was a fighter pilot of the Dilgar War, David Nathaniel Sinclair, who brought his family to the outpost. There was something about David's son Jeffrey that seemed to intrigue the Minbari, and it would take twenty years for them to reveal what this interest was.

A New Seat at the Table

After the conquering of Omelos, the Dilgar were treated with the contempt that they deserved. Ignoring their treatment, the Emperor made a direct plea to the Earth Alliance, despite the advice of the War Council that they did not. He revealed to all of the news outlets that the Dilgar had done what they had to find a new home, because their sun was dying.

The League wanted their pound of flesh, understandably, and the Emperor offered his own life in exchange for some 'innocent' Dilgar to be relocated to another world, to prevent their race being removed from the galaxy forever. He reasoned that the survivors would carry with them the knowledge of what had been done during the Dilgar War, and would never repeat the mistake again. They would be denied space-going vessels with any form of weaponry, effectively becoming the ward of another government.

Split on what to do, the League turned to the Earth Alliance for advice. With the trade of information and scientific secrets already underway between the Dilgar and the Earth Alliance, Senators from Earthdome suggested that the League select those individuals who were to be relocated. This compromise suited the League.

The effort was only half-way through when Omelos's sun exploded. Even so, over half a million Dilgar, comprised equally of Dilgar of Rittacan, Kathran and Thrazan origin, had settled onto their new home. It was nowhere near as pleasant Mitoc would have been, but it was better than extinction. With an array of defence satellites placed in orbit around the world, the League demonstrated that they had the capacity to forgive, but understandably never to forget.

JUPITER RISING

With all of the detail provided in this book regarding the Dilgar War, it would be remiss not to outline a potential way to use it. The following section contains a campaign outline to use within games set in the universe of Babylon 5. Or more accurately, in a time before the last best hope for peace had come into existence.

Players of a game using this setting are not recommended to read past this point. Doing so may disappoint in your enjoyment in the adventures highlighted in this section, as well as spoiling the story arc.

How to Use this Outline

Are you a player and still reading? If so, you do so at your own risk. If you are not, then the following outline will explain what this purpose of this chapter is, and as important what it is not.

The encounters presented in these modules are the 'primary' encounters necessary to advance the story of each module. A Games Master can, and is indeed encouraged to add additional 'secondary' encounters which whilst not necessarily advancing the plot, can help the game come alive to the Players. Personality clashes of other crew members or encounters with persons of dubious moral fibre on space stations are but two examples of situations and contacts that can help give an adventure module additional gravitas.

This outline does not detail adventures to the nth degree as featured in other products. The level of detail present here allows a Gamesmaster to add a little flesh to the structural bones of this outline. This will allow the Games Master to tweak and customise the aforementioned flesh on the bones of the adventure around the Characters that his Players wish to play.

If you are an experienced Games Master, you can skip the next section, otherwise read on.

A Note for Novice Games Masters

Running a roleplaying game as a Games Master can be a daunting experience. This chapter will explain the story arc and main elements of a series of games - the intention is that with a little bit of work on a Games Master's part they can be expanded.

If this is the first campaign that you have run as a Games Master, then don't worry. The main difference between campaigns and so-called 'stand alone' adventures is the ongoing story, which flows around the Player Characters and is above and beyond any actions they undertake. There will be highs and lows, rises and falls in the story, just like in Babylon Five. Whilst some episodes of that television show were not focused on the story arc of the Shadow War and the battles against William Morgan Clarke, the story was still there in the background. The main characters involved in that story would still have been conscious of what was occurring all the time, even if their attention was diverted to attend to discovering a hidden level on Babylon Five or dealing with an alien probe which offered advanced technology in return for answers.

If this is the first time you have ever been a Games Master, then again don't worry. The most important element of roleplaying, and often over looked, is to have fun. If a Games Master and his players are enjoying the game, then that is what matters. Even if a game veers off somewhat from the plan, then that is okay too.

There are a great many articles published previously and available on-line from a multitude of sources to help Games Masters run better and more effective games, but a few key points below are worth bearing in mind.

1. Know the rules. Seriously. It may be that from time to time you have to refer to a particular rule, which is fine and acceptable. However, you should have read through the rules as printed in the *Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book* first. (If you are going to run a Dilgar related Babylon 5 game, you should have read this book too.) You also need a good understanding of the required sections from the *Players Handbook* that are referenced in the *Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book*.

2. Be firm, but fair. Whilst as a Games Master you have the right (and indeed responsibility) to sometimes adjust things behind the scenes to move a game forward, do not let on that you are stacking the odds in or against the player's favour. Also, do not let the players know.

3. A chance to excel and a chance to hide. Offering Player Characters opportunities to excel is critical in a game session. Playing on weaknesses, and overcoming them, is also a Babylon 5 trait.
4. A Games Master who has consistently created a believable universe to his players is already halfway towards running a successful game. If a Non-Player character has a particular manner of speaking, even with regional dialects, there should be no reason why that character does not speak that same way the next time the Players encounter him.

5. To the players, you are their eyes and ears. Where they see Dilgar warriors, alien battle cruisers or ancient evil, they see you, relating what their Characters see. It is your job as Games Master to tell them that have saved the lives of countless innocents, out-negotiated a Centauri arms dealer or the look in a dying Non-Player Character's eyes as he agrees to hold onto an armed detonator for as long as he is able.

For details of how to expand these adventures into fully detailed adventures for novice Games Masters, it is recommended that the published B5 adventure supplements, *The Fiery Trial* and *Intro the Crucible* be read as good examples of fully-structured adventures. In particular, the *Into the Crucible* supplement features an adventure, *Requiem for the Dilgar*, which could be useful reading for Games Masters when considering how to 'style' a Babylon 5 adventure featuring the Dilgar.

THE JUPITER

The Head of the Pantheon

An Olympus Alpha, the EAS *Jupiter* was the former vessel captained by Admiral Hamato, the same individual who oversaw the Dilgar War on behalf of the Earth Alliance. Named after the leading figure of the Roman pantheon of gods, and holder of almost as many different responsibilities as there were Roman gods, the *Jupiter* was a perfect example of the Olympus class corvette. Often nicknamed 'The Old Man' by her crew, in reference to the historical depiction of *Jupiter*, it had a below average crew turnover, due in part to the strong sense of commitment the crew felt towards the ship.

Rolling off the production lines in the 2210's, the *Jupiter* was a reliable craft that never had a single breakdown that was not the cause of a deficiency on behalf of a crewmember. It served faithfully in several minor conflicts, including a state of civil war which existed between two of Earth's colonies in 2230. The EAS *Jupiter* was on hand to ensure that the tensions between the two colonies never left the region of space concerned.

At the first battle for Balos the EAS *Harmonia*, an Olympus class like the *Jupiter*, was destroyed by Dilgar fire. That battle had been a dismal failure, resulting in many EarthForce soldiers being trapped on the surface. The Earth Expeditionary Force retreated, to lick its wounds and refocus. For Admiral Hamato, it was a time to reconsider his plans and fend off those calls to have him replaced as the commander of the Earth Expeditionary Force.

As a result of the loss of the *Harmonia*, a vacancy in the Earth Expeditionary Force's battle line became available, and there were several candidates. Admiral Hamato felt under pressure, and requested to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he pick the replacement. He needed a vessel with a crew he could trust implicitly, and that was the *Jupiter*.

Reassigned from a role ensuring that the Earth Alliance's borders remained secure in mid-2232, the *Jupiter* departed at best speed for the front lines, through newly reclaimed Markab space to join up with the Earth Expeditionary Force. None of them would know the trials that they would face, and the personal dilemmas that would challenge them.

Commanding the Jupiter

Commanding the *Jupiter* is Captain Joshua Van Dieren, a novice commander with only three years of experience underneath his belt. Fresh out of the most respected EarthForce academies, and from a family with several generations of military service in both planetary and interstellar navies, there is a great expectation that he will bring honour to both his family name and the schools which educated him.

Whilst initially coming across as gruff and arrogant, Captain Van Dieren has more depth to his character than an observer may expect. He is overly conscious of the expectations placed on him, and is literally terrified that a mistake will lead others to question his command.

Games Master Information:
Captain Van Dieren will die during the course of the campaign. There is little that can be done to prevent this by the players, for it is necessary to allow the Players a chance to achieve command positions aboard the Jupiter. It is important this is treated as a dramatic event in the campaign, rather than a preordained event (which it actually is, but the Players should not expect this).

Games Masters are encouraged to make Captain Van Dieren appear as a likeable individual with a surprising amount of warmth, once the Player Characters have gained his confidence.

He is considered quite good looking, in a well-groomed manner, and this is accounted in his character's Charisma attribute score. He is a healthy individual, and is prone to become incredibly competitive, especially in sporting activities.

Captain Joshua Van Dieren
7th Level Human Officer
Hit Points: 19
Initiative: 0 (+0 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +8/+3 melee, +7/+2 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Navy), Rallying Call
Saves: Fort +4, Ref +2, Will +6
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 11, Con 12, Int 13, Wis 12, Cha 16
Skills: Computer Use +10, Concentration +8, Diplomacy +11, Drive +0, Intimidate +11, Listen +4, Medical +5, Pilot +4, Sense Motive +9, Speak Language (Centauri), Spot +7
Feats: Data Access, First Contact Protocol, Great Fortitude, Independently Wealthy, Skill Emphasis (Computer Use), Spacecraft Proficiency.
Standard Equipment: Wrist link, PPG.

TOWARD THE CORE

The second half of this campaign takes place in an area of space off the main map, as the *Jupiter* and her crew hunt down a renegade Warmaster. These worlds and systems are detailed in brief below, and are recommended to be expanded upon by a Games Master if so desired.

Tangraíkurra Nebula

The remains of a star long dead, the Tangra'kurra nebula spreads throughout much of the region beyond Wahant. Impassable due to the high levels of radiation and strong magnetic fields, the nebula forms a barrier that no sentient

vessel is able to survive crossing. When one looks coreward from point in the Sheiyame and Tenta systems, the nebula is visible as a faint pinkish haze in the sky.

Sheiyame

The Sheiyame system is perhaps the only colonisable planet in the region of space coreward of Wahant. The atmosphere of the chief planet of interest in this system, Sheiyame III, has a predominantly methane atmosphere, with electrical storms common. The temperature on this world is close to that required by most races in the galaxy, with a good supply of H_20, although trace chemicals in no way make these liquids drinkable.
This system has the main link back to Dilgar occupied space, and the main jump-gate was deactivated on a pre-determined signal one week before the Battle for Omelos.

Tenga

With a history unbeknown to many, the world officially classified as Tenga Minor is a dead world around a mostly dead star. It was formerly part of the domain of space owned by the Tal'kon'sha, but is no longer classified as part of their space. After the Tal'kon'sha withdrew, a species evolved on Tenga, with impressive intelligent abilities. However, it was their technical advanced which destroyed much of their world, as experiments with anti-matter went drastically wrong. Their barren world appears dented from space, which is a true disservice to the calamity which befell the inhabitants of Tenga. Many more afflictions on the surface of this world point to mass-driver impacts, essential for the testing of the weapon systems of several Dilgar capital ships.

It was here that, in the years before the start of the Dilgar War, the Dilgar attempted to enter Tal'kon'sha space, and were severely rebuffed. The only main element of note close to Tenga is a shadowport used by a mercenary group, the Independent Mercenaries League, which sprang up in the wake of the Dilgar's abandonment of this area of space. They were left without isolated in this region for several weeks, until a technically-minded member of the Independent Mercenaries League was able to restart it.

Courinís World

Situated on the edge of the vast Tangra'kurra nebula, there is a world which may have once offered a chance for the Dilgar to relocate, had it not been for the presence of the nebula a few thousand million miles away from the relatively habitable world. Affected by radiation way and beyond. The only item of note is a deactivated jump-gate, but as to why this jump-gate is deactivated, no one knows. There are ruins on the surface of this world, as the sentient race which began to evolve there were killed by events out of their control. An expedition that landed on this world, from an Abbai research team headed up by a scientist called Courin'Mel'Hazra, was doomed within minutes of landing, and so the world was named.

The effects of the radiation on the skies of this world are most visible in the dark side of the planet, where intense atmospheric distortions cause rainbow patterns in the skies which leave those of the Aurora Borealis, back on Earth, literally in second place. These patterns are indicative of the utterly deadly nature of the radiation caused by the nebula.

Site 4HX(b)

The site of a Dilgar research centre, Site 4HX(b) is literally a graveyard for Dilgar vessels. Roughly two dozen Dilgar vessels of different configurations here, and if the jump-route was re-established then any galactic power could simply arrive and take whatever remains they wanted. For the fringe community, this would give them unprecedented destructive power. They could also possibly help any rogue Dilgar agents or groups to reclaim their technology, and thus make another move for power.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

The Jupiter Rising campaign requires a group of Human Characters. Despite the level of co-operation between the Earth Alliance and the League of Non-Aligned Worlds shown in the face of the current crisis, there would be little possibility of a non-Human serving as a character on the bridge of an Earth Force corvette.

The Player Characters are not limited to being members of EarthForce, although some of them must be. The adventures will largely centre on the exploits of those characters, but a Games Master can include these non-EarthForce in the events unfolding to avoid them being stranded on the periphery. Six sample characters are provided at the end of this chapter to allow a 'quick-start' into the campaign if both Players and Games Master wish it. The sample party includes a mix of characters, from EarthForce officers to a news reporter from ISN.

The arc of this adventure will kick in three modules in, with the hunt for a Dilgar Warmaster, one of the legendary War Council and compatriots of Jha'Dur herself. Prior to this, the Player Characters will visit a Dilgar scientific research site, assist in the Alacans's task of resettling their homeworld and participating in the Battle for Omelos itself. As the arc kicks in, one of the characters will rise to the position of Captain, as a group of Raiders start to exhibit proficiency with mysteriously acquired Dilgar weaponry. The alien race on the borders with the Dilgar will start to make themselves known and the Warmaster herself, Yu'Dun, will be discovered at the site of one of Jha'Dur's greatest scientific disasters.

Module One: A Full Mobilisation

Module Summary

The *Jupiter*, berthed at Proxima, receives an activation order. It is to proceed into League space at best speed to take up position as part of the Earth Expeditionary Force as the battle takes a decisive turn against the Dilgar. The players have time to say goodbye to loved ones, purchase equipment not provided by EarthForce, and depart. En route, they will fight off a group of Raiders, before arriving at Balos to replace the destroyed *Harmonia*. There, they will descend to a base established by the Dilgar on the surface of Balos, and become involved in a search for a Dilgar agent who has been unable to detonate the base's self destruct mechanism.

Names and Places of Interest (in order)

Proxima (ground, orbit)
EarthForce Kestrel shuttle (Light Shuttle, statistics as presented in the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*)
EAS *Jupiter*, Olympus class Corvette
Captain Van Dieren, EAS *Jupiter*
Balos (ground, orbit)
Installation 41b (Dilgar designation of the installation constructed on Balos)
Wing Commander David Nathaniel Sinclair, EarthForce pilot
Sergeant Major Alfredo Garibaldi, EarthForce Gropos platoon chief
Cho'Gal, Dilgar agent

Encounter One: The Sorrow of Parting

In the opening stages of this adventure the Player Characters meet, in an assembly area for shipping off to their new assignment, duty on board an EarthForce Olympus Corvette, the *Jupiter*. They may be EarthForce officers or soldiers, ISN news reporters, fact-finders on behalf of an interested EarthForce senator, or even Psi-Corps advisers. Regardless of their reason, they have a common goal, the metal hulk waiting in orbit above them. Give the Players time to introduce their characters to one another.

This is the last chance for the Players to purchase any equipment in the campaign proper, and it is important that the Players realise this. Non-military players are especially vulnerable if they have requirements for an employer, i.e. ISN characters would be advised to take backups of equipment, as once en route they will be too far away to get replacements, for some considerable time.

Having transferred in, the Player Characters board their transport (after their belongings are checked over). Describe in detail the process of going into space, of their bodies gradually becoming lighter as they leave the safety of Proxima far behind. There is an opportunity to describe the *Jupiter* here, as it will effectively become their home, their equivalent to Babylon 5 in a traditional campaign, for the rest of this campaign.

Encounter Two: Stowed and Stewing

The voyage to the front lines is a long and arduous one. The route taken passes through sectors claimed by the Markabs and Brakiri amongst others. Two weeks is the estimated journey time, most of it spent in hyperspace. A stop-off for consumables at a Dionysus base is only long enough to refresh consumables, and not for any prospect of shore leave by ambitious crewmembers. This angers several members of the crew, who like the Player Characters have only minimal starship experience.

Games Masters can run several shipboard events during this time, to help those less combative characters feel useful. Perhaps an ISN character could interview Captain Van Dieren, or a power failure causes a technically proficient character to rise to the fore. An argument between two ensigns on board over a (stolen) entertainment data crystal could result in physical violence unless one of the Player Characters can exercise their skill in Diplomacy.

Encounter Three: Raiders, Raiders Everywhere

Halfway through hyperspace, during their second watch on the command deck, the *Jupiter* receives a distress call as it approaches the Gamma 7 jump gate. Under standing orders to respond to any distress call, a tired Captain Van Dieren, who is due to leave the command deck to get some well earned rest, orders the ship to revert to normal space via the Gamma 7 jump gate.

What is waiting for them is an empty Brakiri escape pod, and a veritable swarm of Raiders. Clearly, they did not expect an EarthForce vessel to appear, so far away from the front lines. There are sixteen Raiders in total, all flying Delta V fighters. Statistics for the Delta V can be found in the *Babylon 5 Roleplaying Game and Fact Book*. Only one flight is within range in the first round of combat, forcing quick and decisive action to prevent them being overrun. Captain Dieren orders his bridge crew, the inexperienced Player Characters, to take evasive actions and charge up all available weaponry.

Games Master Information:
If the Games Master wishes it, this is an alternate route for players of non-standard characters to enter the campaign. In the outline presented above, the escape pod has no occupants. There is no reason why the pod could not contain a single captive, whose only purpose to the Raiders and reason for survival is to function as bait in this particular trap.

If the players did well in this encounter, Captain Van Dieren explains that as a reward, if it can be classed as such, the players can go down to the planet to see take a set of portable power generators down to the relief effort down on the planet. If they did poorly, then Captain Van Dieren suggests that they can atone for their mistakes by taking care of this milk run, and get out of his hair for a while. He suggests that they do what they are told when they get down to Balos, in other words to keep out of trouble.

Games Master Information:
This combat could feasibly be run as an A Call to Arms conflict, with one Olympus Corvette on the side of the Players, and three flights of Delta V's (from the Raiders fleet list) as opposition. A single jump-gate would be placed on the map at the Games Masters's location. The Games Master is encouraged to make damage rolls for obvious reasons, especially if it appears that the Players are about to be blown to pieces.

Encounter Four: Balos and 41b

Arriving several hours after the end of hostilities in the second Battle for Balos, much to the annoyance of Captain Van Dieren, the Player Characters can venture down to the surface.

After a bumpy landing at a pre-prepared landing strip down on the surface, the players are requested to accompany the cargo and see to its delivery. The Kestrel shuttle will take two hours for the cargo to be unloaded and prepped for departure, and so the players can take up an offer to tour the base, a standard Mishakaine garrison. Accompanying them will be a group of EarthForce pilots (including David Nathaniel Sinclair), the tour led by a certain military officer called Sergeant Major Alfredo Garibaldi, who was a noted officer within the Fighting 103rd.

Games Master Information:
The dropping of the family names of Sinclair and Garibaldi is entirely intentional, and should encourage the players to take up the tour. Commander Sinclair mentioned the world in this adventure, Balos, in the Babylon 5 episode Deathwalker, when he was talking about his father's memories of what Jha'Dur had done there.

The base is a monstrosity, but mercifully most of the chambers in the medical wing have been flash-burned by the Dilgar to prevent their knowledge falling into enemy hands. It is comprised of one Command segment, one Energy segment, and three Research segments.

The Players should be left under no illusions to the savagery of the Dilgar, and several of the EarthForce pilots seem visibly shocked by what they see. They depart the tour, using the reason that they need to return to their ship. One of the pilots under David Sinclair may become nauseous, and that being the real reason for the pilots to make themselves scarce. Either way, the Player Characters are left alone with Sergeant Major Garibaldi. Apart from the command deck, the base is devoid of any EarthForce personnel. This is exactly what the lone Dilgar agent currently inside the base is counting on.

Encounter Five: Fahrenheit 22,000

Sargeant Major Garibaldi receives a message, audio only, stating that a Dilgar landing pod has been found ten miles away from the base. How a Dilgar vessel, in all probability a Protra Scoutship, managed to get close enough to deposit a pod close to the base. Garibaldi relays the news that the pod only had enough space for a single occupant. That is both good and bad, for it means that there is not a team of Dilgar expert soldiers on the way. The bad news is that, if it were Sergeant Major Garibaldi, sabotage or the detonation of some biological, chemical or nuclear device would be his intent.

Regardless of the order with which the players and Sergeant Major Garibaldi search the base (as detailed in the chapter on Dilgar Technology) the Dilgar agent will start to take pot-shots at them with a sniper rifle. The first shot hits Sergeant Major Garibaldi in the leg, forcing him to take up refuge. They can carry him as far as the Energy segment, but at that point he starts to grow weak, and plainly tells the Player Characters he will shoot anything that comes through the door – they have no time to waste.

It becomes apparent that the Dilgar agent is taking an indirect course down to the base. The EarthForce soldiers up in the command deck were ordered to seal themselves in, just in case the agent reached there and wreaked untold havoc with the base's defences at his disposal. A search team is assembling outside the main entrance in the Command segment, but there is literally no time to waste.

Regardless of how the agent is trapped, or whether the agent is actually murdered, the Player Characters will eventually realise that the destination of the agent is the Energy segment of the base, to detonate the reactor. If the players do not succeed in their endeavours, then the entire garrison will detonate, taking the players, Sargeant Major Garibaldi, and several thousand approaching EarthForce soldiers with it.

If the Player Characters manage to capture the agent, they would be surprised to find that the Dilgar agent is actually a female. Her name is Cho'Gal, and she is from a city on Omelos called Ujia, a coastal port. Aside from this, she has no desire to speak to the Player Characters, apart from admitting that she did not expect to survive this mission. Cho'Gal had accepted that she would die here on Balos.

Games Master Information:
Cho'Gal is not used further in this campaign, so it is up to Games Masters whether they wish her executed or imprisoned in some capacity. There is no reason why she could not be held in the Brig (if it can be called that, as it is so small) on board the Jupiter. This could give Diplomatic characters a chance to interrogate/interview the prisoner, as well as possibly giving an ISN or similar media related character a chance to land a real scoop.

Aftermath

If the players are successful and the Cho'Gal, the Dilgar agent, is apprehended or killed, Captain Van Dieren is happy with their performance and confirms their station as Deck Watch 2. This means that for a third of the time they will be answering directly to him as part of the command crew, rather than simply being an occasional relief crew. In addition, if they managed to capture the Dilgar agent alive or defeat the Raiders without the *Jupiter* coming to harm then he singles them out for an additional complement for their hard work. Characters that are not part of EarthForce may be permitted to be on the command deck as observers when Deck Watch 2 is on duty (useful for any characters from the Psi-Corps or more specifically a news network such as ISN).

Suggested Experience for This Module:

A list of suggested experience gains for this module can be found below. The last gain is for the players functioning as a team, rewarding them if all the players managed to avoid getting severely injured.

Defeating the Raiders with minimal damage suffered by the *Jupiter*: 750
Cho'Gal (Dilgar agent) found: 200
Cho'Gal (Dilgar agent) killed: 100
Cho'Gal (Dilgar agent) captured alive: 300
All characters survived, and no players dropped below 0 hit points: 250

Module Two: Avenues of Sorrow

Module Summary

The crew of the Jupiter are asked to escort the Pyrotinia, the last remaining Alacan vessel, back home to her world as it is claimed by the Dilgar. There, they can hopefully reclaim that which was theirs by right of evolution. A complication comes in the form of casualties of the Dilgar's biological weapons program, as a transport carrying passengers infected with one of the Dilgar's plagues approaches a Dionysus outpost requesting aid. The fact that the survivors are determined to put down on Alaca is an additional problem, and one that may spell death for the Alacans.

Names and Places of Interest

Dionysus Base 23h
EAS *Jupiter*, Olympus class Corvette
Alacan Navy *Pyrotinia*

Encounter One: Last Stop for Gasoline

Undergoing a brief upgrade of their missile launch equipment, the *Jupiter* is ordered ready for service. Captain Van Dieren pulls the Player Characters back from shore leave, with a new offensive underway to retake the Alacan homeworld. Although it had been bombed into submission and then strip-mined four years before the Alacan homeworld was an important symbol to the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. It was the first planet conquered by the Dilgar; if it was retaken and the survivors returned, a powerful signal would be sent, and a rallying call to continue the battle against the Dilgar all the way back to Omelos.

An Alacan observer going by the formal name of Shei'Tallin'Koor has requested to travel on board the *Jupiter* as the task force departs. This encounter will give players the opportunity to find out about the Alacans, the tale of the *Pyrotinia*, and the ambassadorial character of Shei'Tallin'Koor himself. The Alacan ambassador (Level 6 Alacan Diplomat) has with him several power generators of Terran manufacture, and has requested that, if the Player Characters have time, they assist in the creation of a settlement. After that, Shei'Tallin'Koor wishes that the *Jupiter's* crew leave Alacan soil, as without malice he explains it may be several years before off-worlders are welcomed.

Encounter Two: A Counter Action

Hooking up with the *Pyrotinia* and the Abbai task force, they are beset on by a Dilgar Pentacan keen on making an example of the last surviving Alacan cruiser. The battle is tough, but it should be noticeable that the Abbai *want* the *Pyrotinia* to return home, as much as a symbol as anything else. The fact that the Abbai did little to aid the Alacans in the first place is one that is conveniently being overlooked.

The surprise for the Player Characters will be that this is the only defence for the Alacan's home system – the Dilgar have pulled back, seeing nothing remaining on the world of worth to them or their Imperium.

Encounter Three: End of the Line

Arriving above Alaca III, the sight of a world destroyed by the Dilgar will greet the players. If they have interacted with Shei'Tallin'Koor, then the tragic fate of the Alaca homeworld should be doubly piercing. The *Pyrotinia* moves into a low orbit, and begins her descent down to the planet below. If the Players question Shei'Tallin'Koor,

he sadly explains that this was expected, and the world was still their home; if it was ash, it was *their* ash.

The Player Characters should be encouraged to help out in whatever way they can to assist the Alacans in resettling. Anything from establishing water sources (with significant decontamination equipment) through to digging irrigation channels. There is a certain futility to it all though; the Alacan homeworld may never truly heal from the activities of the Dilgar. What is certain is that there is little mineral wealth remaining on Alaca III for the indigenous species born on this world to exploit. Breath masks are still required in many places – the winds have so much dust-borne debris in them that the lungs of the unwary can become clogged with the airborne particles carried in the air.

The power generators (donated by a Mars based consortium known as Futurecorp) are easy to set-up and get running – at least in the interim Shei'Tallin'Koor will not need to worry about his people having enough heat and light. The rest of the Alacans seem highly wary of the humans on their world – enough to make the Player Characters that they truly are the aliens on this world.

Attacks by several crazed predators surgically altered by some Dilgar war scientists for sport, and the opportunity to visit the remains of an Alacan township to find survivors are possible expansions for this phase of the adventure. This is essential, for it can assist in making clear exactly *what* the *Jupiter* and her crew are fighting for, and what may befall other worlds if the Dilgar are not stopped, permanently. It also highlights the unglamourous aspects of war, in that all that is often left after a conflict is heartache and hard work, to attempt to put right what has been done.

Encounter Four: A Calculated Infection

At the moment when the Player Characters appeared to have relaxed, the influence of the Dilgar's campaign of terror is still present enough to throw a curveball into the efforts on Alaca III. An urgent communique from an assistant on Admiral Hamato's staff, via Captain Van Dieren, confirms that trouble is on the way.

For some unexplained reason, a medical experiment on a Koratyl Starbase has gone drastically wrong, with a group of infected Drazi able to leave the Dilgar installation via a captured Dilgar ship. The first port of call that the Drazi are able to make is Alaca III, but the vessel is so low on supplies that a landing on Alaca is mandatory. EarthForce suspects that this has been done on purpose, to force the League or the Earth Expeditionary Force to kill their own, by not allowing the Drazi to infect the Alacans.

Shei'Tallin Koor will wish them well – it is unlikely that they Jupiter's crew will be allowed to land again, and so unlikely that they will ever meet again. He wishes the Player Characters luck in their quest, and has one further to ask of them. The Drazi vessel heading to their world could destroy any hope the Alacans have of resettling their home, and worse it could threaten their race with extinction, something the Dilgar themselves had not been able to achieve.

Games Master Information:
If the Jupiter suffered damage to either their weapons or their engines in second encounter in this module, then it will mean that they will have to take on the Drazi running at less than 100%. The damage suffered will also be visible to the Drazi, making any attempts at diplomacy or intimidation harder.

The Drazi vessel is expected to arrive in the system at any point in the next hour, and speed is of the essence. In characteristically Drazi fashion, they have not responded to any hails from other vessels, and so are seemingly unaware that they are infected with one of Jha'Dur's plagues.

Encounter Five: The Hardest Decision

Taking up their places on the bridge, Captain Van Dieren directs them to hold steady by the jump-gate, and take up active scanning for any signs of the vessel. Sure enough, the Drazi vessel arrives for the jump-gate, and immediately splits into two, the smaller of the vessels carried aboard the larger. Whilst the larger vessel will take a less direct course, the shuttle is making a run for the planet itself.

The Jupiter is placed in a quandary, with having two targets to take care of. The shuttle is ready to land sooner, having an atmospheric capability. If the combat to catch (and destroy?) the smaller craft takes anything more than a specified number of rounds, then the larger vessel, the *Mo'Shalla*, is able to pull into orbit above the world, and begin to make preparations to land.

If the *Mo'Shalla* has made it into orbit, then the crew of the *Jupiter* are faced with a hard decision. If they allow the ship to land, then the Alacan people, who only number in their thousands, face extermination. If they open fire on the *Mo'Shalla*, then the deaths will directly be on their hands. It is a cruel choice, and a reminder that war is not a fair game.

Aftermath

If the players are forced to destroy the *Mo'Shalla*, then the Earth Alliance has a real diplomatic trial ahead, attempting to placate the Drazi for the destruction of one of their vessels. Whilst in principle it would be the correct thing to do, EarthForce would wish that a different course of action was the preferable one.

Leaving the *Pyrotinia* and the Alacans behind, the Player Characters should end this module accepting that the survival of the Alacans is by no means a certainty. Shei'Tallin'Koor and his people have their work cut out for them just trying to survive on a homeworld truly molested by the Dilgar.

Suggested Experience for This Module:

A list of suggested experience gains for this module can be found below. As in the other adventures in this campaign, the last gain is for the players functioning as a team and emerging from their escapades in good health.

Engaging in dialogue with Shei'Tallin'Koor: Between 100 and 250 (Games Master's discretion)
Assisting in the resettlement of Alaca III: Between 100 and 250 (Games Master's discretion)
Disabling the *Mo'Shalla*, without destroying it: 500
Destroying the *Mo'Shalla*: 250
All characters survived, and no players dropped below 0 hit points: 250

Module Three: The Battle for Omelos, Above and Below

Module Summary

The Player Characters are fortunate not to be on watch during the opening stages of the Battle for Omelos. A direct hit to the bridge sends the Jupiter spiralling out of control, in the direction of Omelos's gravity well. It also results in the death of the Player Characters friend, Captain Joshua Van Dieren. In his wake, the Player Characters must struggle to regain control of the vessel, whilst the Battle for Omelos spins around them, knowing at any point they could be picked apart and vaporised.

That done, the Player Characters can participate in the final, savage stages of the Dilgar War. The establishment of a beach head on the planet's surface below is essential, with the Player Characters able to perform ground based duties whilst repair crews work on their ships. It is whilst they that they become involved in attempts to apprehend a rogue Warmaster, who escapes.

Names and Places of Interest

EAS *Jupiter*, Olympus class Corvette
EarthForce Kestrel shuttle (Light Shuttle, statistics as presented in the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*)
Ogkarin Forward Base, Omelos

Encounter One: Hell in a Hand-basket

The Jupiter, along with the rest of the Earth Expeditionary Force, is called in for the decisive fight on October 22nd, 2232 against the Dilgar Imperium in the skies above their homeworld. The battle is nothing more than sheer chaos, and amid this confusion the *Jupiter* is hit by a Heavy Bolter shot, the blast hitting the bridge section squarely.

The members of Deck Watch 1 are killed in this strike, along with Captain Joshua Van Dieren. Spinning out of control, the only chances that the Jupiter and her crew have is if someone can reassert control of the vessel. No one knows how long they have got to repair their vessel and get it functional again before a Dilgar ship decides to pick them off. This adventure begins truly *in media res*, with the Player Characters forced to think and act quickly if they want to survive.

Games Master Information:
Running the Battle for Omelos and using the game statistics for all of the vessels that participated would take several days, even at breakneck speed. Instead, an alternate method is to roleplay out specific encounters in the battle, with the rest of the battle described in a cinematic fashion. Think of the major engagements in Babylon 5 history, such as the Battle of the Line or the Battle for Earth in 2261. The major points of action occur on few vessels, but the ramifications of the conflict happen around them.

There are several ways that the Player Characters can retrieve the situation. One example is to attempt to re-route control to the engine section, but at a greatly reduced capacity (-4 to all skill checks to operate spacecraft in any capacity, including weapons). Another option is for a Player Character to hack into the signal feed from the computer core to the bridge, at a Computer Use of DC 30 (this is military hardware, remember).

The bridge is hulled, and if spacesuits are used to access the bridge the pilot's station and gunner's station are available, but engineering and sensor information stations have been knocked out. The bodies of their comrades, including the frozen corpse of Captain Van Dieren, are still present on the bridge. There is nothing that can be done for them; they were killed instantly by the force of the blast and then the sudden exposure to vaccuum. Indeed, there is a hole in the side of the bridge a good five inches across, leading directly through cables and wiring to outer space.

Secondary systems work successfully, but occasional fires need to be dealt with, and this task is perfect for those Player Characters who do not have training in starship operation. In addition, the impact shook the vessel badly, and several crewmembers are badly wounded. This is an opportunity for some secondary characters to be introduced, as victims of Dilgar attacks.

The vessel being hit by fire from Thorun Dartfighters can help push the characters on to regain control quickly of the *Jupiter*. They have but minutes to do so – even so, it is a miracle that the Jupiter has lasted that long, considered by most combatants, including their own side, to be out of the fight and nothing more than a disabled hulk to be avoided.

Encounter Two: Winning the War

With the ship at least functional, the *Jupiter* can now get back into the fight. Depending on the narrative, the following combats are possible whilst the Games Master 'fills in' the progress of the battle outside of the immediate sphere of influence around the *Jupiter*.

Taking out a Delegor Suicide Frigate on a ramming run against a Nova Dreadnought.
Conducting hit and run attacks on Orgolest weapons platforms.
Thinning out the starfighter presence – anti-starfighter duty.
Locating and destroying a Protra Scoutship that is proving electronic warfare support to the Dilgar fleet.
Destroying a Tratharti Gunship harassing the Nova Dreadnoughts, in combination with other EarthForce vessels.
Protecting a Sagittarius Missile Cruiser from enemy fire whilst it unloads its armament into the Dilgar fleet from a distance.

Encounter Three: Reassignment to Downstairs

With the *Jupiter* undergoing emergency repair work to get it space worthy again, the crew of the vessel are requested to assist in the establishment of a perimeter a dozen miles outside of the largest Dilgar city, Ogkarin.

The majority of the Dilgar citizens are sealed within their homes, especially on the outskirts of Ogkarin. The continual message relayed from the Earth Expeditionary Force instructs the Dilgar to remain in their homes for a period of twenty four hours whilst negotiations commence with the governing bodies of the Dilgar for surrendur.

Whilst these negotiations are ongoing, EarthForce, in the absence of Admiral Hamato, has decided to plant a forward base in the rough countryside outside of Ogkarin. The Fighting 103rd, backed up by the armoured might of the Rolling Thunders, took up a position on the outskirts of the city. The aim was to secure a landing zone for the transfer of orbital forces. In time, barracks and other such temporary constructions would be based here for the court martials of the War Council and the Emperor.

With their recent experience in helping the Alacans to get settled, and their vessel in a somewhat sorry state, the Player Characters are assigned to help out in any way they can on the homeworld of the Dilgar. There is a potential here for the Player Characters to meet up with Alfredo Garibaldi again, along with Richard Franklin, who is now in command of the Fighting 103rd. Their ship will touch down just after dawn, the Dilgar ability to see in the dark well known to EarthForce soldiers.

Whilst an element of the Fighting 103rd moving off to engage a rogue Dilgar tank column which has defied the order to stand down, platoons of the Fighting 103rd are dispatched to the outskirts of Ogkarin to perform reconnaissance operations. With the technically minded soldiers required to finish the creation of the forward base, the Player Characters are asked to participate in the investigation of a telecommunications centre by Richard Franklin. A communications relay needs to be set up there, to listen in to Dilgar terrestrial communications as well as giving the victors of the Dilgar War the means to utilise the Dilgar's public communication system. If they accept this mission, then they will see a side of Dilgar society that few will see. If no players have a skill bonus of +10 in either Computer Use or Technical (Electronics) a Non-Player Character should be provided with a similar skill set.

The Player Characters and their military escort will progress through a dull looking suburb on the outskirts of Ogkarin, eyes in the windows looking for images of the victors. The armed soldiers are intently watching for any sign of sniper fire, but none is forthcoming. There is an atmosphere here, of a people being largely broken, cowering into a corner and unable to mentally handle the concept of fighting back. The surroundings are bland in nature, with the majority of the structures around them following the brutalist style of architecture – plain walls and large blank areas of concrete are the norm rather than the exception. The communication centre is located on the far side of the suburb, and whilst there were alternate ways to investigate the suburb and telecommunications centre, Richard Franklin is keen on it being done on foot. Their instruction is to be back before dark, for obvious reasons.

Games Master Information:
If a Games Master so desires, this adventure can be split in two, or potentially into more parts at this point. Depending on the campaign and the wishes of the Players, it may be that a break in the style of the modules is warranted. This can easily be accommodated by the repairs to the Jupiter taking either a shorter or longer amount of time than it would normally.

The disabling of the Jupiter is, in large part, a plot device to allow the Player Characters to experience the Dilgar Imperium first-hand. If it transpired that the Players liked this part better, then much more of the campaign could be set on Omelos, possibly altering the opening phases of the final module to represent what happened if all of the information gained in Modules Four, Five and Six was gleaned whilst still on the surface of Omelos.

The communications equipment is not particularly advanced, and the insertion of the communications spike which will allow any messages, verbal or otherwise, to be intercepted will take a matter of hours. During this time, the Player Characters can assist in keeping watch, and perhaps even having contact with some Dilgar curious about their conquerors. It may even be Dilgar slaves, sent out by their masters in case the EarthForce soldiers proved to be hostile.

Encounter Four: A Spike in Communication

With three hours before dark, the Player Characters and two EarthForce soldiers make their preparations to return back to base camp. As they are gathering their equipment, the computer spike picks up a transmission sent, using a keyword that the system was set to recognise. It is the name of one of the Warleaders, and the message destination was the spaceport.

The discovery that one of the Warmasters is intending to make a break for it greets General Swift, one of the officers who served under Admiral Hamato, with apparent disdain. The computer spike has revealed something that it was never expected to, at least not in the first few hours. A Sense Motive check at DC 20 may cause a character to wonder if the manner in which the information was revealed was actually intentional. The Player Characters are told that a Baldur Infantry Vehicle is on the way, complete with one full platoon, and air support will be provided. The Player Characters are to take the Baldur directly to the spaceport, and apprehend the War Criminal in any way possible.

This encounter will give Players the experience of being involved in a targeted and calculated deployment of EarthForce ground-pounders, something of a novelty to EarthForce naval officers who rarely go into combat planetside.

It transpires that this is nothing more than a ruse. The twist is that Warmaster Yu'Dun is already in orbit at this point, whilst the attention of the landing parties are focused on Ogkarin. Creating a fake message is a trivial task for a Dilgar who holds the War Council command in charge of communication. Truth be told, there is a group making a break for the spaceport, but these are actually a group of Rittacan slaves who have no idea how to operate a shuttle, never mind space craft. With the advanced levels of training that the fleet officers will have received, together with the life skills of those Player Characters who are not fleet, they should realise that these are not military personnel. The Player Characters may then contact General Swift, and report their findings, but the officer in charge is not convinced. This operation will leave a fair amount of egg on his face.

Aftermath

The Player Characters receive notification that they will be setting sail, with one of them as Captain of the *Jupiter*. The individual selected may not be the most obvious – perhaps even the individual who came to the realisation first that the Dilgar fleeing to at the space port were not officers or military personnel. General Swift will not pick someone who seems too aware though – he has his own private agenda that he will pursue in due course. Before then, he congratulates all the Player Characters, but warns them that with Warmaster Yu'Dun on the loose, it may be them who are part of a task force sent to apprehend her.

Suggested Experience for This Module:

A list of suggested experience gains for this module can be found below. As in the other adventures in this campaign, the last gain is for the players functioning as a team and emerging from their escapades in good health.

Fixing the *Jupiter* enough so it can participate in the Battle for Omelos: 300
Participating in each encounter in the Battle for Omelos: 100
Participating in the reconnaissance into the outskirts of Ogkarin: 300
Participating in the assault on the space port: 200
Assisting / taking charge of the establishment of the communications spike: 200
All characters survived, and no players dropped below 0 hit points: 200

Module Four: Running With the Alien

Module Summary: The hastily repaired *Jupiter* and its crew begin in earnest their quest for Warmaster Yu'Dun and Jha'Dur's chief engineer Ehrol'ki. Formed as part of a taskforce, the group of EarthForce vessels suffers an early setback when a booby-trapped Dilgar wreck wipes out their flagship. There is no time to turn back, and the players must continue. All of this time, the *Jupiter* is being carefully by watched by ships from a race who was sailing the stars as humanity first discovered fire.

Names and Places of Interest

Omelos
EAS *Jupiter*, Olympus class Corvette
EAS *Peredur*, Hyperion class Heavy Cruiser
EAS *Valentine*, Hyperion class Heavy Cruiser
Dilgar *Eve of Destruction*, Jashakar class Frigate (derelict)
EarthForce Kestrel shuttle (Light Shuttle, statistics as presented in the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*)
Dilgar *Bleeding Wound*, Jashakar class Frigate
Unidentified Alien Shuttle

Encounter One: Kneecapped at the First Hurdle

Leaving Omelos and the rest of the Earth Expeditionary Force behind, the small task force headed up by the EAS *Valentine* departs for regions of space unknown to EarthForce, in pursuit of Warleader Yu'Dun and Ehrol'ki.

The Player Characters, on board a patched up EAS *Jupiter*, must be made to feel like they have been singled out for a special honour, to accompany the larger EAS *Valentine* and EAS *Peredur* on the mission to find one of the last remaining Warleaders. However, at the first hurdle, they will be left with a handful of badly wounded survivors and the dawning realisation that they are the only vessel capable of finding their quarries.

After the first jump, the *Valentine* hails the Jupiter, to inform them that it has picked up a derelict Jashakar Frigate on their sensors. They are going to go in, with the *Peredur* as backup, and request that the *Jupiter* guards their rear.

However, after a period of time the Players should become aware that something is wrong, especially when the *Peredur* disengages from its position beside the wrecked Dilgar frigate. Whether by Sense Motive checks or contacting the *Peredur*, they become aware that something is deeply wrong on board the *Eve of Destruction*. There is a bomb on board, and attempts to deactivate it are failing. If the *Jupiter* does not retreat to a safe distance, then it will be vaporised.

The bomb goes off early, hitting the *Jupiter* by the shockwave. The *Valentine* is less fortunate, being mere miles from the detonating point and is rendered to fragments instantly. Explosions on board the *Peredur* indicate that there are multiple internal fires, and the engines flare out and die. The Peredur emits a fragmented SOS, and the crew of the *Jupiter* has a duty to respond. There are still life signs on board the Hyperion class cruiser, but they are spread throughout the ship, and occasionally flicker out and die.

Games Master Information:
Whilst not intended as such, this conflagration may serve as a back-door for certain characters to leave the arc. It may also allow new Players to join the campaign, as crewmembers from the badly damaged EAS Peredur.

An alternative for this game could be for the Players to play characters stationed on board the Peredur, wanting to escape from the doomed vessel, instead of their usual characters. This could be of benefit to a campaign that has begun to slow down, or if the Players wish to try something a little different.

Encounter Two: Falling to Pieces

With the life signs on board the *Peredur* trapped in bulkheads and sealed sections, there is little alternative than for the players to attempt to board the vessel and retrieve the crewmen aboard the doomed vessel. The engine core is dead, with emergency batteries only able to provide intermittent power.

There are many problems that can beset a rescue operation such as this. Unexploded ammunition, energy fires, electrical surges from loose currents, even the acts of desperate crewmembers who have misplaced usual common sense can cause problems. Doors will not work, requiring either a bypass of some description or opening with an arc welder or equivalent. Sections exposed to the vacuum of space may surround sealed sections complete with internal air supply. This will make the extraction of any EarthForce personnel inside those sealed sections difficult.

Games Master Information:
The deck plans of a vessel suitable of representing the EAS Peredur, a Hyperion class Heavy Cruiser, are produced by Mongoose Publishing. These deck plans can aide in either the Games Master or the Players to visualise the environs they must explore. These deck plans can be an additional benefit to a Games Master, to help plan the location of the survivors and any complications the Player Characters will meet en route.

Where there are still sections containing a breathable atmosphere, small fires are common, normally from power outlets that have malfunctioned and set alight. An additional complication may be the leaking of the ship's meagre water supplies, freezing in the cold of space like solid rock. The cold of space also affects some sections, often damaging those systems never designed to work at a temperature close to absolute zero.

Encounter Three: Assisting the Fallen

The life support systems of the *Jupiter* are capable of handling an additional twenty crewmembers, but this will make living conditions unpleasant on board the Olympus class corvette. The air will become stuffy (although still breathable) and the average temperature will rise up a notch or two.

In all, there are twenty seven survivors all with radiation related conditions, and many with fire related injuries; the Players must find a way to manage this, preferably by sending those most exposed crewmembers back to more civilised space for medical treatment. The shuttles on board the *Jupiter* are in better shape than those on board the shattered *Peredur*, with those on the doomed Hyperion prone to burning out when activated. This will of course leave the Jupiter with only one shuttle, but the injured will need to be cared for.

This encounter can test the abilities of the Player Character's medical abilities, perhaps with the Player Character most well versed in medical procedures to conduct battlefield surgery, perhaps even on a crewmember that has been impaled onto a falling bulkhead.

Encounter Four: To the Victor

The second Jashakar frigate, from the remains of a Pentacan which was defeated above Omelos and managed to slip away, returns to see the effects of its handiwork at possibly the most inconvenient moment for the crew of the *Jupiter*. The survival of the *Jupiter* from the nuclear blast is unexpected by the Dilgar, and the Jashakar's crew are under orders not to let any survivors past this point.

This battle is compounded by electrical problems on board the *Jupiter* caused by the radiation and energy surges from the Dilgar bomb, only manifesting under the stress of combat. In any conflict until a full system diagnostic is completed, any skill roll which rolls *less* than a natural 5 automatically fails, as the *Jupiter's* systems fail and die, give incorrect readings or simply no indication at all that anything is wrong. Thus, any action that the Players take has a 20% chance of failing until the gremlins caused by the effects of the bomb can be dealt with.

Encounter Five: A Warning from Outsiders

Having watched the battle develop, an outsider approaches the *Jupiter*. At this point, the Player Characters will in all probability not wish for social contact, preferring to lick their wounds. It is precisely for this reason that the outsider has elected, just this once, to ensure that these newcomers do not make the same mistake that the Dilgar did. The Tal'kon'sha have small, discreet probes throughout the fringes of Dilgar technology, and the thermonuclear explosion lit up their probes like a Christmas tree.

The vessel is a mottled brown, and appears to be an unarmed vessel, like a shuttlecraft. What will be clear from the description is that it is some kind of organic craft; Players should be under no belief that this is a Shadow or Vorlon vessel. This vessel actually registers as a single lifeform, because it truly *is* a lifeform. If the Players instruct a firing solution on the brown vessel, it will evade the first time. If it suffers damage, or is fired on a second time, it will retreat and provide no further role in this campaign. If the vessel is destroyed, then at a later point in the campaign the Jupiter will be forced to defend itself against 1d10 organic fighters, similar in colour and surface features to the shuttlecraft. In terms of construction, the Games Master may use the statistics for the Delta V if he does not wish to create vessels from scratch, but doubling the damage resistance for these organic fighters to represent their advanced living 'skin'.

The vessel pulls alongside the *Jupiter*, if no action is taken then the ship begins transmitting and receiving. A Player Character may realise that the computer system and language files are being accessed; these files being open for retrieval by alien vessels are not uncommon in EarthForce vessels in this time. The alien vessel, upon digesting these contents, requests permission to deposit an information package in their computer system, with one phrase as recognition: Killer of Dilgar.

Games Master Information:
The alien vessel plays no further part in this campaign, but the information uploaded to the Jupiter's logs can do so. If a Games Master wishes, or has an idea that the alien vessel can play in his version of the campaign, there is no reason why it cannot be reused.

If they do so, then the information package details the boundaries of space that the *Jupiter* is not allowed to cross. It also details an intense battle between the Dilgar years before, and the constructors of the brown alien vessel, a race called the Tal'kon'sha. It is in effect a warning given, but the information retrieved will help the Player Characters avoid blundering into the domain of another without realising. It demonstrates that the enemy of my enemy is also my friend, but also only for a short time, as the alien vessel departs; if followed, a dozen fighters as described above will arrive to prevent further pursuit.

Aftermath

EarthForce would rather the *Jupiter* continue on her own than return to rearm and resupply. In effect, EarthForce wishes the Jupiter to function as a spotter for the vessels taken by Warmaster Yu'Dun. When contact is made, the Player Characters should be under no illusion that they are to contact senior EarthForce personnel for further instructions.

This extended operation means that the availability of weapons such as the railguns of the *Jupiter* may start to run short on ammunition during this part of the campaign. Players should be aware, and if not made aware, that the resources at their disposal are well and truly finite.

Suggested Experience for This Module:

A list of suggested experience gains for this module can be found below. As in the other adventures in this campaign, the last gain is for the players functioning as a team and emerging from their escapades in good health.

Retrieving a crewmember (XP for each rescued crewmember): 50
Handling the problems on board the Peredur imaginatively: 200
Sending the injured crewmembers to a better facility for treatment: 300
Destroying the *Bleeding Wound*, the second Dilgar Jashakar: 100
Scuttling the *Peredur*, and/or her fighters: 100
All characters survived, and no players dropped below 0 hit points: 200

Module Five: Ports of Call

Module Summary

With the trail going cold by virtue of the delay, the crewmembers of the *Jupiter* are forced to improvise. A pirate's den and smuggling freeport may show potential for information on any sightings of the Dilgar convoy fleeing Omelos, but will require the players to lay aside their EarthForce loyalties for a while to get the job done. This far out from space, humanity has only been heard of in passing, and the crew of the *Jupiter* are easily the foreigners in this region of space. Military might, previously the favoured response of EarthForce, will not achieve their goals here.

With the Raiders in this space carrying hallmarks of Dilgar weaponry, and the disappearance of an EarthForce agent who was investigating the rise in offensive firepower of those Raiders, the Player Characters will need to uncover both mysterious, which will be of benefit to their mission proper.

At the end of this module, whoever is the captain of the *Jupiter* will receive a set of orders that may not sit well with their conscience, but the consequences of not doing exactly as told in those orders are fatal. If these orders were revealed to any other character, were they Player Character or Non Player Character, then the captain of the *Jupiter* would surely face a court martial upon return to Earth space.

Names and Places of Interest

EAS *Jupiter*, Olympus class Corvette
EarthForce Kestrel shuttle (Light Shuttle, statistics as presented in the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*)
Tenga 4 (Dead world)
Rulan's Shadowport (Smuggling base)

Encounter One: Trail Dun Gone Cold

For the last six days, the *Jupiter* has been searching for any Dilgar ships in the immediate area, and all signs have gone cold. They receive information from EarthForce about an established smuggling base in the area, and are ordered to investigate. An EarthForce agent was present in this area of space, and the last status report the agent logged was when en route to this smuggling base, or 'shadow port'.

Encounter Two: Any Shadowport in a Storm

As long as their vessel makes no offensive moves, a group is allowed to come aboard. The smugglers and pirates who frequent Shadowport make no guarantees as to their safety, but individual in charge of the facility does state they will not be singled out for any specific 'attention'. This is a dangerous place, and in another place or time then the *Jupiter* would charged with launching a pre-emptive strike.

Encounter Three: Racing through Dark Places

The journey they will undertake into the region of space around Tenga is a ponderous one, but it should be made apparent to the players that something is wrong.

Rulan's Shadowport, often referred to simply as Shadowport, is fashioned inside an old asteroid, wrinkled and deformed, with black and brown ores lacing through its predominantly grey stone formations. At odd angles, segments of starships jut out, forming rough and ready docking attachments for any starship captain brave enough to chance using them. Some of these attachments still feature their original weaponry, although whether these weapons have power or even are still capable firing is anyone's guess. From a distance, the asteroid appears that technology is growing out of its innards, much like lichen or moss on a stone. It has very little in the way of defences, with only a handful of Delta V's available for defence. These vessels are however fitted out with the same weaponry as the Dilgar's Toruska class fighter, which is a surprise for any traveller who dismisses the threat posed by these light fighters. They are not under Raider control however, answering directly to Rulan.

Internally, Shadowport can be imagined as a zero gravity rabbit warren. Occaisonal lights flicker and work. There is a real atmosphere in this place, a dark and oppressive environment which is, with the exception of the Raider influence, entirely lawless. The only law within Shadowport is the law of the gun, and the only rights wielded by the owners of said weapons. There is only one law above that, of Rulan himself, a Drazi gunrunner who made his fortune and allows the Raiders and IML to exist on the Shadowport at his convenience.

Located on the far side of the asteroid is a crudely implemented rotating section, which is the province of one of the Raider leaders in this part of space. In this facility, there are bars and some small trading establishments, although only a fool would expect a guarantee from any of these outlets to be worth anything. These are merely here to service the needs of the Raiders, and those who do business with them. There are other diversions, baser in nature for those who have the currency. Slavers sell their wares on an informal marketplace at the entrance to the rotating section, and at any time between one and six sentient beings are available for sale by buyers of dubious moral persuasions.

The gravity in the rotating section is roughly eighty percent norm – whilst this is fine for normal usage, those who are used to Earth standard feel a little 'fleet of foot' when in this area of the Shadowport. The oxygen supplied is a little dry, but otherwise not harmful for consumption. Water is at a real premium, as it often is on space based installations.

The Independent Mercenaries League, hereafter referred to as the IML, is based here, having an unofficial relationship with the Raiders in this part of space. Whilst their goals may at some time oppose one another, they are both aware of the benefits of mutual co-existence. The players must investigate this facility, careful not to say or do something that would surely get them killed.

Games Master Information:
Whilst the agent may tell the players that he is there to uncover why the Raiders have been so well armed of late, this is a lie. The reason for the presence of the agent is to investigate wherever possible if the alien race sharing a border with the Dilgar, the Tal'kon'sha, possess alien technology of benefit to EarthForce. Even in 2232, EarthForce is obsessed with alien technologies.

The IML wants the agent dead, because the EarthForce agent discovered that the IML had been trailing her, and had an extensive set of information on her movements and whereabouts. There was enough gathered information on the IML in the agent's archives to give EarthForce a reason to permanently shut them down.

The IML is currently holding the agent, who in a poor state of health, even though the indicators are that the Raiders are responsible. This misdirection is intentional, and the players will need to make friends (or at least as close as possible on Shadowport) and contacts to uncover the location of the agent. A canny group of players may attempt to bring about a conflict between the two groups resident on this facility, which could be an adventure all by itself.

Once the agent is uncovered, he will need medical treatment that can best be provided on the *Jupiter*, and when on board back to Wahant the agent reveals that the Raiders are holding the Dilgar scientist Ehrol'ki on the Shadowport, who has been working for them under duress!

Aftermath

The Player Characters have a brief respite whilst EarthForce decides to do next. There are undoubtedly better trained and equipped troops to retrieve Ehrol'ki, but none are close enough before the Raiders realise what is going on, and move the Dilgar scientist elsewhere.

Suggested Experience for This Module:

A list of suggested experience gains for this module can be found below. As in the other adventures in this campaign, the last gain is for the players functioning as a team and emerging from their escapades in good health.

Finding the EarthForce agent: 400
Discovering the secret of the Raider's weaponry by their own efforts: 400
Discovering the secret of the Raider's weaponry from the EarthForce agent: 100
All characters survived, and no players dropped below 0 hit points: 200

Module Six: Empty Altruism (Points of Call Part 2)

Module Summary

With the agent safely aboard the *Jupiter*, EarthForce sanctions a retrieval mission for the Dilgar scientist Ehrol'ki. With the Independent Mercenaries League no doubt suspicious that they were responsible for the recovery of their agent, they have recalled one of their larger military vessels, the IML *Claude Duval*, to deal with the *Jupiter*. Likewise, EarthForce is sending a Hyperion class vessel to receive Ehrol'ki, assuming that the Player Characters are able to extract the scientist from the clutches of the Raiders. Of course, with everyone on Shadowport on a heightened sense of alert, the task required of the *Jupiter's* crew will be anything but easy. To make matters worse, time is well and truly of the essence.

Names and Places of Interest

EAS *Jupiter*, Olympus class Corvette
EarthForce Kestrel shuttle (Light Shuttle, statistics as presented in the *Earth Alliance Fact Book*)
Rulan Shadowport (Smuggling base)
IML Claude Duval
EAS *Briareus*, Hyperion-class Heavy Cruiser

Encounter One: A Modicum of Planning

The next time that the *Jupiter* enters the area around Shadowpoint, there will be eyebrows (or alien equivalents) raised at their appearance for the second time. The rarely spotted Rulan does not want trouble of any kind, hiding behind the pretence of neutrality. He will not oppose the arrival or docking of the Jupiter, merely that any of her crew that come aboard remember that this is a neutral installation.

The IML have a ship on the way, the *Claude Duval*, to deal with the *Jupiter*, and do not take any overt action. They are waiting to see what the *Jupiter* and her crew do – the IML believes that if they do not oppose the EarthForce representatives, and allows them to do whatever they intend to, then the chances are that the *Claude Duval* will arrive and the *Jupiter* attacked whilst docked.

There are many ways that the strike can be planned, and so therefore the following encounter details the strength of the Raider forces on Shadowport. The recovery of Ehrol'ki is paramount, but there is an additional concern which he is aware of. There is a starship graveyard in this area of space, where the Dilgar were able to test weapons of unimaginable power.

Encounter Two: Laying the Groundwork

Ehrol'ki is held in a dusty storeroom in the quarters of the Raider leader, a Drazi named Shujjim (Drazi Level 7 Soldier). Despite the benefits he has given to the Raider group, Ehrol'ki is still a Dilgar, and deserves no sympathetic treatment as far as Shujjim is concerned. To the Raider leader, all Dilgar are responsible for the crimes inflicted on his race; although a pirate, Shujjim still classes himself as a patriot.

At any time, Shujjim has ten guards at his beck and call (all 1st Level Soldiers, from a variety of races). Any attempt by the Player Characters to take on Shujjim directly would in all probability lead to failure – even though the guards are only 1st Level, Shujjim would use them well, keeping the Player Characters pinned down whilst he and another group moves to outflank them.

Shujjim's junior is a lower Centauri from House Jaddo (Centauri Level 4 Agent), who fell in with the wrong crowd in his youth. A loyal second-in-command and a bully to boot, Kiron Jaddo is nevertheless a coward who drinks too much and enjoys the pleasure of female company more. His vices may allow players who wish to exercise a little subtlety to gain entrance to the Raider controlled areas of Shadowport.

Aside from Shujjim, his guard and Kiron Jaddo, there are roughly twenty other Raiders with experience of space travel (all 1st Level Officers or Workers, from a variety of races). These are the crews of his vessels; his fighter pilots tend to be more skilled than these hired hands.

In terms of quarters, Shujjim has a large set of quarters to himself, roughly sixty feet square in size. This is where most of his raiding efforts are co-ordinated from, when Shujjim is not out himself. His soldiers have a set of quarters anything from ten feet square to shared accomodation – Shujjim does not care how his Raiders apportion up the space between themselves. Shujjim's quarters have their own airlock, but this has been welded shut to was Shujjim's worries regarding a coup.

The only other installation of note is a small hangar reserved for Raider use. It is in this hangar that Ehrol'ki spends much of his time, fitting Dilgar based improvements to Raider fighters. Shujjim has big plans for the Dilgar scientist – he intends to charge other Raider bands for his services, but only after Ehrol'ki has ensured that Shujjim's fleet is the nastiest on the block.

Encounter Three: A First Class Execution

Clearly, the Raiders are unhappy with the potentially loss of their advanced weaponry, and all of the skulduggery and sneakiness exhibited by the players will be replaced by a brutal firefight. If the Player Characters are forced back through the zero gravity sections of the Shadowport, then the conflict will take place up and down rocky corridors that look one and the same. If they think to do so, the resources on board the *Jupiter* are at their disposal.

In some semblance of shape, and hopefully with the noted scientist Ehrol'ki, the Player Characters return to the *Jupiter* to depart the system. As they do so a new vessel appears within sensor range. It is an Independent Mercenaries League vessel, named the *Claude Duval* after a highwayman from Earth history. The crew of this vessel is desperate to silence the *Jupiter* at any cost. The IML are not amateurs, and proceed to target the engines of the *Jupiter* first. Once this is done, they can pick away at the hull of the *Jupiter*, taking it apart at their leisure. The IML mercenaries on board the *Claude Duval* are not crazy enough to attempt a ramming action, valuing their own lives above anything else.

If the players get into trouble, then the *Briareus*, a Hyperion class heavy cruiser arrives a few hours ahead of schedule, and the weapons of that vessel make short work of the IML *Claude Duval*. If this happens, the players will get no experience points for combating the IML ship, even if they scored significant damage.

The players may be able to flee to the jump gate to escape the *Claude Duval*. If they can accomplish this (perhaps more difficult than actually dealing with the threat head-on) then they will still receive their allotted experience points.

Games Master Information:
The communication to the current captain of the Jupiter would make an excellent prop. A letter inside an envelope, for the eyes of the captain's Player only, would create an air of mistrust that something was going on. This is exactly what is intended by the communication being for the captain only.

Aftermath

With the thanks of EarthForce General Swift, who is commanding the Earth Expeditionary Force on its tour of the League before heading home, the characters receive their orders after Ehrol'ki has been transferred on a ship bound for Omelos. This is in fact a lie, and General Swift intends for the Dilgar scientist to be put to work for EarthForce, designed bigger and faster fighter craft and capital ships.

The Player Characters, their duty seemingly completed, are ordered to withdraw to Wahant and wait for the information obtained to be analysed by the Joint Chiefs. When these orders come, they are given to the individual in command of the *Jupiter*, and that individual alone. The rest of the crew are told that a proper task force will be dispatched to deal with Shadowport, assuming that Rulan opposed the actions of the crew of the *Jupiter* in some way. The Player Characters will be told they have other engagements to occupy their attention.

Suggested Experience for This Module:

A list of suggested experience gains for this module can be found below. As in the other adventures in this campaign, the last gain is for the players functioning as a team and emerging from their escapades in good health.

Ehrol'ki found and retrieved alive: 1000
Destroying the *Claude Duval*: 500
All characters survived, and no players dropped below 0 hit points: 250

Module Seven: The Last Dance

Module Summary

The truth behind the sequence of events becomes known to the Players, and the truth behind the sudden interest that certain elements of EarthForce has with Yu'Dun and Ehrol'ki. The desire of one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Swift, is to bring the Dilgar escapees to a secret facility to begin work on constructions better weapons of war for EarthForce. Obsessed with his own prestige within EarthForce, General Swift has little concern for anything other than his career, and the first part of his plan is already in place, with Ehrol'ki in all probability in his custody. The Players will need to decide whether to do as their government asks, or stand against their own government, a crime for which the punishment is spacing.

Names and Places of Interest

EAS *Jupiter*, Olympus class Corvette
Courin's World (Jump gate)
Tangra'kurra Nebula
Hyperspace
Site 4HX(b)
Dilgar *Nighthawk*, Ochlavita 'D' Destroyer Leader
Olgata Assault Shuttle
EAS *Briareus*, EarthForce Hyperion-class Heavy Cruiser

Encounter One: Into the Rift

The difficulty of entering the rift, and locating the jump gate depends on the source of the . If an information package has been deposited in the ship by the Tal'kon'sha earlier in this campaign, then the ability to find the jump-gate is made much easier. If not, then the Player Characters will need to search for the jump-gate; the approximate location is known, but a level of radiation damage will be suffered, increasing for every hour the *Jupiter* is within the rift.

Alien forms can be visible in the rift; it may be that the most scientific minded members of the *Jupiter's* crew wish to investigate, but this will detract from the search for the jump-gate and expose the crew to further doses of radiation. The truth is that these alien lifeforms were disturbed by the passage of Warmaster Yu'Dun's Ochlavita Destroyer, the *Nighthawk*, passing through this region several days before. They play no part in this adventure, but can be if the Games Master desires.

The hyperspace journey to the other end is surprisingly short, but is essential to get to the site identified as the source of the Raider's technical advantages and the last known position of Warmaster Yu'Dun. The beacon signal is strong for the most part, but can drop in strength quickly due to strong energy fields which Players may surmise are residue from the supernova in real space (the truth behind this need never be revealed). Either way, the

The jump-gate at the other end is, for some reason, locked. Whilst the beacon functions well enough for the *Jupiter* to get there. The Player Characters will need to crack the encryption whilst the *Jupiter* holds position in space. This is difficult, especially as time goes on. If the *Jupiter* loses the lock on the beacon, the Tal'kon'sha vessel appears behind them and opens up the jump-gate, allowing the Jupiter to aim for the open jump point and hopefully use it before it closes.

Games Master Information:
The goals of the Tal'kon'sha in this campaign are never truly revealed to the Player Characters. The actual status of the Tal'kon'sha race is never revealed, whether they are actually alive or dead, their living ships still carrying out errands on their behalf. The only time they interact directly with the Player Characters is to provide a warning, along with some additional information on what has transpired in this sector. As Commander Jeffrey Sinclair once stated, 'Life is full of mysteries – consider this one of them.'

To unlock the jump gate code, a series of Computer Use rolls will be necessary, at varying difficulties. These will be necessary to decode the signal encryption, sorting the sequence into an order that the jump gate can understand and formatting the data for transmission.

Encounter Two: The Truth about Cats and Dogs

The jump gate brings the Jupiter into a veritable eye of the storm, a gap in the mass of the nebula that contains only background levels of radiation and random energy matter floating free. What greets the Jupiter is a shocking sight that may make they reassess the Liberation Navy's chances of controlling Omelos.

Eight or nine Dilgar Pentacans, of various configurations, float free in the vacuum of space. These vessels appear unmanned, placed here and ready to be activated in an emergency. It is only if the Jupiter gets closer than the effects of small arms fire and other such activities are visible, along with the thousands of Dilgar corpses drifting away from these vessels. Something happened here, and the Player Characters will find out from an unexpected source.

Hailed from behind, the Jupiter receives a communication from the Nighthawk, the Ochlavita Destroyer Leader they have been searching for. In a prime position to vaporise the ship, the Dilgar do not do so. In a brief message, spoken in broken English, the Dilgar vessel states that a shuttle is coming over. The tone of this message may give rise to a suitably wise EarthForce crewmember that the Dilgar are not requesting it, they are instructing it.

At this point, the Games Master should inform one of the players that he has a headache. This will be the Player Character with the lowest Wisdom attribute score, and where there is a tie, the lowest Charisma or Constitution attribute scores. This will have an effect later in the adventure. Whether the Games Master makes this public, or informs the Player privately that their character is feeling a little unwell,

On the Olgata shuttle sent to dock with the *Jupiter* is none other than Warmaster Yu'Dun herself, and she brings with her the wish to destroy this entire facility, together with all the Dilgar vessels gathered here. The reasons for this are to do with the experiments of Jha'Dur herself, which have compromised more than just the spiritual well-being of the Dilgar race. If the Player Characters will assist her, then she will be willing to surrender, along with her vessel, to the Earth Expeditionary Force. If not, the *Nighthawk* is under orders to destroy the *Jupiter*, with Warmaster Yu'Dun still on board.

Encounter Four: Artefacts of War

The newly arrived Yu'Dun reveals to the Player Characters an obsession that Warmaster Jha'Dur had for a particular type of weapon, especially during the last few months of the Dilgar War. Even Jha'Dur could not mentally comprehend the technologies that were required to make such a weapon work, and that lack of understanding was compounded by problems in this region of space.

The weapon that Jha'Dur had attempted to build was, in effect, a hyperspace bomb. It would open a jump-point to hyperspace and then attempt to close it in a micro-second, creating a wash of energy capable of taking out a planet or a fleet in one shot. However, the subtleties of the premise were beyond the Dilgar, a fact which annoyed Jha'Dur greatly. Her first and only attempt to craft such a device was here, where the failure of a weapon would have no effect on any of the efforts by the War Council and the Dilgar navy to acquire a new homeworld.

Yu'Dun reveals that Jha'Dur had not been aware, and nor could she have been, that there was a problem with the fabric of space at the detonation site. Already weakened, by forces Warmaster Yu'Dun admits she did not understand, the bomb ripped a hole in reality to a realm not in hyperspace, but literally *through* hyperspace. In its place was a rift in the

reality of space. Half of the Pentacans, their captains going mad, had charged into the rift, never to be seen again. As insurance, the jump-gate had been locked out, ensuring that none of the Pentacans affected could return to normal space. This was of course until the Raiders found the gate, and started stealing the technology. Ehrol'ki, and several Dilgar agents, had been dispatched to uncover whether the Raiders had been affected by this mysterious madness, and had been captured. Ehrol'ki had survived, only because of his ability to fit Dilgar technology onto Raider fighters. Warmaster Yu'Dun reveals that she suspects that the other Dilgar met with a long and painful fate.

Games Master Information:
The rift has little purpose in this campaign other than as a plot device. There is no indication apart from the slow maddening effect of the rift as to what lies on the other side, if anything. The actual purpose of the rift could be an adventure in itself, but the theme of that is outside of the scope of this book.

If the players choose to go with Yu'Dun, a set of nuclear devices she brought with her. If they question her motives, then they lost the war, but she does not want her people to be remembered solely as butchers. Yu'Dun is not naive enough to believe that it would be any other way with them losing the war, but had to believe that something good would come of it.

The device must be placed on a vessel as close as possible to the rift, to hopefully take out the remains of the Dilgar Pentacans as well as the rift itself. Yu'Dun recommends that they take an Olgata class shuttle in. Clearly, one device may not be enough, and a nearby Mishakur dreadnought has an array of nuclear devices within its arnament, which in theory can be detonated to overwhelm the rift with enough energy to hopefully close it.

There is something else here that is investigating the treasure-trove of technology. It is the same Tal'kon'sha vessel witnessed previously in the adventure outline 'Running with the Alien'. If that vessel was destroyed before, another one has taken its place. It is studying the wreckage in this part of space, almost as if it is looking for something. During the mission on board the Mishakur, the Tal'kon'sha will destroy a Jashakar frigate, seemingly for no reason, before departing for the jump-gate.

Games Master Information:
The goals of the Tal'kon'sha vessel is to locate one of the vessels which participated in the invasion of its space and to destroy it. Whilst this may have little purpose, with no crew on board, to the sentient vessels of the Tal'kon'sha this does not matter.

The effects of the rift manifest themselves, draining away the mental fortitude of any sentient within range. Whilst the Nighthawk and the Jupiter are far enough away to only be marginally affected (with crewmembers experiencing headaches and becoming either neurotic or paranoid), the Dilgar Pentacans are squarely within the zone of effect of the rift. Once per hour, every character not on board the *Jupiter* or *Nighthawk* must make a Willpower check with a DC of 15. Failing this roll reduces the Intelligence attribute score of the character concerned by 1d4. If the Intelligence attribute score of the character reaches 0, the character goes insane. When in this state, the character gains the benefits of the Power Attack feat, may not make any Intelligence attribute checks or related skill rolls, and immediately attacks the character closest to them.

The Mishakur that contains the majority of the nuclear devices necessary to hopefully contain the effects of the rift. The dreadnought is not unoccupied however, with several crazed Dilgar crewmembers still on board. These crewmembers are at varying levels of experience, but all are under the effects of the induced madness, as described above. Also present are various space-borne alien parasites, of which the players may surmise are from the rift. They are actually genetic experiments that Jha'Dur lost track of, with the intent that these creations would be inserted onto enemy vessels and then gorge themselves on the power reserves. With so little power remaining in the Mishakur, the energy in the space suits worn by any who venture on board the Mishakur seeming like a feast to a starving man.

If the Players work with Yu'Dun, she is serious about sealing the rift. She remains noncommittal about why she is doing this, simply that it is a housekeeping matter to be taken care of. She has another reason for doing this; gaining the trust of the Player Characters may help them assist in a later decision, when Yu'Dun announces that she wants to take her own life rather than be a prisoner to General Swift and his research teams.

Yu'Dun wishes the Ochlavita to remain behind to cover their escape. If the Player Character in charge of the operation disagrees, then Warmaster Yu'Dun will reveal a private communiqué on a data crystal addressed to her, from General Swift, from EarthForce. It contains details confirming amnesty for Yu'Dun's crew if she is handed over to General Swift voluntarily. She says that the Ochlavita will remain here, sealed inside whilst General Swift decides what to do with her. Any authentication checks that the players attempt on the data crystal will not disprove the authenticity of General's Swift's offer of amnesty.

With the jump-gate locked behind them again, sealing the Ochlavita in, the *Jupiter* can get underway. As it leaves Site 4HX(b) behind, the crewmember who was possessed begins to feel better, and a telepath can confirm that there is no lingering presence.

As the *Jupiter* opens up back to normal space on the safer side of the Tangra'kurra nebula the beacon fitted to the other jump-gate at Site 4HX(b) suddenly stops transmitting. That region of space was now off-limits forever, which as Yu'Dun reveals is the safest way. The War Captain also elected not to depend on the mercy of EarthForce, and chose to die. This is something which Yu'Dun explains she may have to request herself.

Encounter Five: A Matter of Direction

Upon returning to the region of space on the civilised side of the Tangra'kurra nebula, the EAS *Biareus* is waiting for them, and General Swift is on board himself. If the Player Characters still wish to turn Warmaster Yu'Dun over, then the Dilgar will plead for her life; not to keep it, but rather for the right to end it. She appeals to the most noble or honourable Player Character (in her eyes) to argue on her behalf. If the Player Characters chose not to turn Yu'Dun over, then the players will be almost certainly facing a court martial for disobeying a direct order as well as not handing over a war criminal.

Aftermath

Depending on whether Yu'Dun was alive or dead, to all intents and purposes the last of the Warmasters is gone. The Dilgar War, proudly claimed as a victory, is a shallow one with EarthForce under no illusions that Jha'Dur escaped. One renegade Warmaster can be denied, two would be harder to explain away.

Regardless of the outcome of the campaign, General Swift will not want the Player Characters to be around to reveal any questionable acts on his part. They can expect to be split up, or assigned on extended duties away from home for at least enough time to enable him to bury the evidence. The Player Characters will be lucky if they return home to Earth controlled space anytime in the next year.

Suggested Experience for This Module:

A list of suggested experience gains for this module can be found below. As in the other adventures in this campaign, the last gain is for the players functioning as a team and emerging from their escapades in good health. Of course, if EarthForce believes that they have been betrayed, then this bonus is not applicable, with one or more Player Characters potentially facing a court-martial.

Opening the Site 4HX(b) jump-gate without assistance: 100
Destroying the supply depot / allowing it to be destroyed: 1500
Handing Warmaster Yu'Dun over to EarthForce: 500
Allowing Warmaster Yu'Dun to escape without arousing suspicion, or to commit suicide: 500
All characters survived, and no players dropped below 0 hit points: 250

FUTURE GAMING

There are more that can be done to follow up on the threat of the Dilgar Imperium, including the outposts and colonies detailed in this book that escaped the attentions of the major galactic powers. Just as Warmaster Yu'Dun escaped, there may be many more Dilgar vessels that for some reason were not able to answer the recall order and return to Omelos in time for the final battle. These vessels and their crews may simply want to survive or liberate their homeworld. It may be that one of these vessels harbours nothing than a desire to launch a pre-emptive strike on their enemy, as retribution for being beaten by the combined efforts of the Earth Alliance and the League of Non-Aligned Worlds.

In this campaign, the motivations and capabilities of the Tal'kon'sha are hinted at, but never revealed. It may be that the Tal'kon'sha, now acquainted with the crew of the *Jupiter*, may require the involvement of an external entity to root out threats against them. The crew of the *Jupiter* may not be able to refuse such a request. Equally, EarthForce may want the *Jupiter's* crew to go along with it, to study the strange alien technology this race seems to possess.

Finally, the Earth-Minbari War is just over a decade away, and a Games Master can give a number of experience points to the Player Characters to represent the time between the conflicts if wishing to start a game set during that conflict. Of course, the Dilgar War took place in the heyday of EarthForce, the Earth-Minbari war was to prove nothing short of a nightmare…

SAMPLE CHARACTERS

The following characters represent some sample quick-start characters which can be used in this campaign. They can also be used as 'stand in' characters, should one of the Player Characters die during the course of the campaign. All of these sample characters are pitched at second level, to give them a little additional breadth over and above starting characters at level 1, as well as an increased (but still slim) chance of lasting longer in a combat situation.

The adventures in this campaign are in no way tailored around the histories of these sample characters, allowing character histories to be altered. Thus, for example, if a Player wanted to play as Matthew Connelly, but would rather he originate from Vega instead of Mars, this could be altered with very little difficulty. They can also be used if for some reason a Player's character dies during the campaign, and no replacement is available.

Delta Anderson, EarthForce Lieutenant

Coming from a wealthy American family with links to renewable energy methods, Delta Anderson could not decide on a career at school, the typical dreams of undertaking a media career of some description giving way to something more practical. She decided on a military career, bring something of a tomboy in her youth. To Delta's reasoning, a term or two of service would put her in a good position to return home and undertake a different role, perhaps even with her family's company should she wish it.

Delta has not carved out her particular niche within EarthForce, but when her captain requires a well-rounded individual to complete a specific task, Delta is often the name at the top of the list.

Lieutenant Delta Anderson is somewhat of a jack-of-all-trades, and has not yet decided on an avenue for her abilities within EarthForce. In game terms, she may not be able to excel in any one area at this stage of her career, but when she does select a long-term career path she will not be left with any deficiencies in other areas.

Lieutenant Delta Jane Anderson
2nd Level Human Officer
Hit Points: 9
Initiative: 1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee, +3 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Navy)
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +3, Will +4
Abilities: Str 11, Dex 13, Con 14, Int 13, Wis 12, Cha 15
Skills: Computer Use +4, Diplomacy +5, Intimidate+5, Listen +4, Medical +4, Pilot +4, Sense Motive +4, Technical (Electronics) +4, Technical (Engineering) +4, Technical (Space Travel) +4
Feats: Data Access, Lightning Reactions, Point Blank Shot, Spacecraft Proficiency
Standard Equipment: Wrist link, PPG.

Matthew Connelly, EarthForce Lieutenant

Born to Mars citizens without any money or future to speak of, Matthew narrowly avoided a life of crime. Without an affluent family to fall back on, the young Matthew was forced to rely on his wits and his fists to survive. Beneath the domes, life was hard and tough.

A career in EarthForce showed Matthew had a talent for systems development and design, but despite this aptitude he only passed through his officer exams by the skin of his teeth, hampered as he was with a limited schooling. He took to life on board a starship with ease, his first few months as a crewman on a Tethys class giving him valuable experiences.

Matthew is painfully aware that he is not as intelligent as his compatriots, and this is one weakness that will almost always provoke a response. Should he be able to contain his considerable anger, he may mature into a respected military officer and over time make up for the deficiencies in his education.

Matthew Connelly has the highest number of hit points and base attack bonus of all the sample characters. Level growth with this character will be penalised by an average Intelligence attribute score, but the character could become a leader with high scores in Wisdom and Charisma.

Lieutenant Matthew James Connelly
2nd Level Human Officer
Hit Points: 12
Initiative: 2 (+2 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 12 (+2 Reflex)
Attacks: +4 melee, +4 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Navy)
Saves: Fort +0, Ref +2, Will +5
Abilities: Str 14, Dex 14, Con 10, Int 11, Wis 15, Cha 15
Skills: Computer Use +8, Intimidate +4, Pilot +4, Sense Motive +3, Technical (Electronics) +5, Technical (Engineering) +5, Technical (Space Travel) +5
Feats: Data Access, Improved Unarmed Strike, Skill Focus (Computer Use), Spacecraft Proficiency
Standard Equipment: Wrist link, PPG.

Saigo Itagaki, EarthForce Lieutenant

A gifted student, Saigo (pronounced Say-Guu) Itagaki was selected by the top universities as a desirable candidate to learn. Having a dream of flying through the stars from an early age, Saigo joined EarthForce as soon as he was able, taking an accelerated route in due to his academic performance. Whilst not gloating of his technical abilities and keen intellect, those around Saigo are sometimes aware of the aptitude this young man has. His speciality is in starship systems, specifically the maintenance and configuration of such complex items.

Saigo was disliked by his former commanding officer, who viewed him as an egotist. For the majority of his first tour of duty, Saigo was placed in charge of a work team, which was charged with EVA activities and general maintenance. Despite gaining skills which he did not previously have, Saigo felt that the work was somewhat beneath him. Desperately unhappy, Saigo is desperately seeking a change from the routine tasks of starship maintenance.

Saito Itagaki has the highest Intelligence attribute score of all the presented characters, but an average Charisma attribute score. The character will have to work hard at his leadership, given that he has to try harder than his compatriots to get them to follow his requests. It may be that Saito has to focus on his negotiating skills (Diplomacy) or his command abilities (Intimidate) to get things done, should he decide on a career in a command role.

Lieutenant Saigo Itagaki
2nd Level Human Officer
Hit Points: 10
Initiative: 1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee, +3 ranged
Special Qualities: Branch Specialisation (Pilot)
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +4
Abilities: Str 11, Dex 13, Con 14, Int 17, Wis 12, Cha 10
Skills: Diplomacy +6, Intimidate +5, Listen +6, Pilot +3, Medical +4, Sense Motive +6, Spot +6, Technical (Electronics) +11, Technical (Engineering) +8
Feats: Fire Control, Skill Focus (Technical: Electronics), Spacecraft Proficiency, Weapon Proficiency (Spacecraft Weapons)
Standard Equipment: Wrist link, PPG.

Serena Pauley-Jones, Warrant Officer

Serena works for as a ship's counsellor, a common EarthForce requirement on board a starship. It falls to her to perform the tasks required of a chaplain in wartime, such as remembrance services for the dead. Whilst others have the primary concern for the operating efficiency of the Jupiter, of equal import to her are the hearts and minds of those on board.

Serena is always the calm voice at the centre of any storm, and is a skilled negotiator. In any group that she is a part of Serena often stands out as the voice of reason and humanity. Whilst she could earn a small fortune working for the public sector, Serena has little interest in money for its own sake. She misses her husband terribly, and wants the Dilgar War to be over so she can return home, perhaps to even start a family.

Serena Pauley-Jones is the calm voice of reason within the group. With maximum skill ranks placed in Diplomacy and Sense Motive, as well as the Skill Focus feat assigned to these two skills, Serena is a skilled negotiator. She has a useful set of knowledge skills, including alien life forms. Whilst she is in no way the most combat-capable member of the group, Serena has a keen eye for spotting trouble.

Warrant Officer Serena Pauley-Jones
2nd Level Human Diplomat
Hit Points: 7
Initiative: 1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +1 melee, +2 ranged
Special Qualities: Contact
Saves: Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +6
Abilities: Str 10, Dex 12, Con 14, Int 13, Wis 17, Cha 13
Skills: Appraise +5, Bluff +2, Diplomacy +11, Gather Information +1, Intimidate +2, Knowledge (Alien Life) +6, Knowledge (Earth Religions) +6, Knowledge (Military) +5, Listen +7, Sense Motive +11, Spot +8
Feats: Skill Focus (Diplomacy, Sense Motive)
Standard Equipment: Wrist link, PPG.

James Madison, Psi Corps

The Corps is indeed Mother and Father to James Madison, a telepath nominally assigned to the commercial branch. With his telepathic potential noticed when he was in his early teens, James felt ostracised by his school friends until a representative from the Psi-Corps arrived to confirm the youngster was developing psychic potential.

Taken under the wing of an older, more experienced telepath, James grasped the opportunities by his expanding mental powers fully. Despite only being gifted enough for commercial work, his enthusiasm was noted, and James was assigned to the commercial divisions of the Psi-Corps, offering services to corporate clients.

The statistics for James Madison credit him as being evaluated as a P4. This prevents him gaining access to those abilities which could imbalance a campaign not focused around telepathy or the Psi-Corps. Being ranked a P4 will also allow James to place skill ranks in atypical telepathic skills, to represent his experience gained away from the Corps.

James has the traditional attitude of a member of the Psi-Corps, in that he feels both oppressed by those without telepathic gifts and pities them for a level of vision and awareness they simply will never possess. He wishes to return to commercial work at some point, but is enjoying his time within EarthForce. Whilst his work is only auxiliary, James is well aware that military service is usually prohibited to telepaths, and his current assignment could come to an end at any time.

James Madison, Psi Corps (P4)
2nd Level Human Telepath
Hit Points: 9
Initiative: 1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 11 (+1 Reflex)
Attacks: +1 melee, +2 ranged
Special Qualities: P-Rating (P4)
Saves: Fort +0, Ref +1, Will +6
Abilities: Str 11, Dex 13, Con 10, Int 12, Wis 16, Cha 13
Skills: Climb +5, Computer Use +6, Concentration +5, Diplomacy +3, Intimidate +3, Knowledge (Telepathy) +6, Listen +7, Sense Motive +6, Spot +5, Telepathy +6, Technical (Space Travel) +2
Feats: Adaptive Mind, Meditation
Telepathic Abilities: Accidental Scan, Mind Shield, Sense Telepathy, Surface Scan, Warning
Standard Equipment: Wrist link, PPG.

Malcolm Pinsent, ISN

A junior reporter, Malcolm Pinsent received possibly the greatest break of his life when he was assigned to accompany a veteran news reporter to interview the survivors of a vessel destroyed by the Dilgar, the Hyperion class cruiser *Persephone*. An award winning documentary later that year cemented Malcolm Pinsent as an up-and-coming journalist within ISN.

Malcolm had a dim view of the Dilgar ever since that day, and his private opinions were vindicated as the Dilgar began their reign of terror. He became skilled at doing whatever it took to get a story, even if it proved to be illegal. On more than one occasion the ability to create a forged identity, and then ease himself into a trusted position to gain information created notable stories. Before his assignment as a war correspondent, Malcolm crossed some Vegan businessman. His discovery of their illegal deals, including tech running, ensured that he made some enemies in high places.

Malcolm has no family save his aunt, who lives back on Earth in a small Scottish village called Invertrossachs, just off one of the infamous lakes, called Lochs, in that rugged country. He has a long-term girlfriend on Proxima, although this relationship tends to be off more than it is on.

Malcolm Pinsent, News Reporter (ISN)
2nd Level Human Diplomat
Hit Points: 9
Initiative: 1 (+1 Dex)
Speed: 30ft
DV: 13 (+3 Reflex)
Attacks: +2 melee, +2 ranged
Special Qualities: Contact
Saves: Fort +1, Ref +3, Will +4
Abilities: Str 12, Dex 12, Con 12, Int 11, Wis 13, Cha 17
Skills: Appraise +2, Bluff +11, Computer Use +2, Diplomacy +5, Forgery +5, Gather Information +8, Intimidate +4, Knowledge (Military) +2, Knowledge (Star Systems) +2, Listen +3, Sense Motive +6, Spot +3
Feats: Lightning Reflexes, Skill Focus (Bluff)
Standard Equipment: Wrist link, PPG.

BABYLON 5
Baptism of Fire
Claudia Christian

PROLOGUE

'Damage to navigational. Unable to take evasive action!' Maddison called out, managing to avoid the full brunt of the explosion. He tilted his head back, keeping his left eye shut as blood ran down 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!' she ordered.

'Particle cannon, re-targeting,' Berensen said. 'Firing!'

The monitor flashed white as the full force of the heavy particle cannon ripped through the enemy ship.

'Narn heavy cruiser disabled,' Lieutenant Commander Amelia Graydon announced, grabbing the railing in front of her station as incoming fire again rocked the ship. '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.'

ONE

November 2nd 2261, Babylon 5

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, all wrapped in its two million, five-hundred thousand tons of spinning metal. For once she felt no sense of urgency. She could drift at her leisure.
The waves of her long brown hair spread out 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 zigzagged around the station, bringing light and warmth and energy.

She embraced 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 Lurkers who came to Babylon 5 chasing a dream that failed to materialise, Dockers unloading precious cargos from the multitude of transports filling the docking bays, and alien ambassadors debating in the Council Chambers. 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 as she spiralled toward Command and Control at the very front of the station. Few believed Babylon 5 would succeed. It had united League governments 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, when 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 a MedLab bed. 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 into an urgent din of voices.

A blur of colour swam in front of her as she opened her eyes. She blinked and focused, and as the colours separated and shapes took form, her eyes jerked in their sockets. Her vision 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 next to her. It lay face down, but she immediately recognised the black hair and the dark Anla'shok robes. As the nurses lifted the prone figure, 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.

She 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 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 eat, Franklin left it until she was ready, and he stayed to review the results of the recent tests he 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 than his fatigue was the feeling of guilt from having failed to get back before it was too late.

When he had finally arrived, Franklin found the medical staff congregated in the corridor outside the MedLab, fearful of going back inside. The facility looked like it had been turned upside down. He 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 found a bracelet strapped around her wrist, attached to a similar bracelet strapped to Marcus. She 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 noted 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 said. '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 medication, but with this machine she bought from an alien trader. Obviously it didn't come with a handbook of any kind, but she'd 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, as if his recollection of that event held more emotion than he cared to feel at this point. 'It came into my custody. I still didn't know very much about it. 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. We locked it away after that. 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 for Marcus. 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. Marcus for her.

'He never did anything by half,' Ivanova said, not sure whether to laugh or cry. '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 smiling. 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 depravation. 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 smiled sadly. 'John did this big introduction in his office, apologising for having kept me out of the loop. He showed me his Ranger's pin,' 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 cooperation and communication, he said. The metals were forged in the white-hot flames in Tuzanor, using tools said to have been 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 own blood. The blue stone was an Isil'Zha, which are 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 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.
'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. 'It's been taken care of.'

The medical staff had laid the Ranger 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 corridor's light.

'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 darkness enveloped the room.

TWO

November 4th 2261, Babylon 5

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 specially made for each of them after Babylon 5 declared independence from Earth, a sly grin crept onto his face that Franklin did not even attempt 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.'

'So we dodged another bullet. The amnesty is for everyone?'

'Everyone on the station. Zack, Corwin and everyone in C&C. All the 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.

Ivanova took a second to digest this. '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 persuaded 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 to be the President.'

'John Sheridan's the President of the Interstellar Alliance?'

'He's a president. You're a captain. And I'm still just a plain old doctor,' Franklin said.

'I'm 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 growing smile slipped from Ivanova's face as she looked around her.

After Franklin left her quarters, Ivanova washed and dressed and made the call 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 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 took it in his stride and promised a quick reply. They may not want you, she had thought as she paced her quarters. Then what do you do?

She waited nervously 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 toward 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 brushed the fabric down, polished the EarthForce badge and gold duty stripe that ran across the left breast, as well as 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 her old uniform 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. Ivanova tried to hide her shock. When she saluted, she could tell he was pleased to have her back, and, oddly enough, she actually felt pleased to be back.

It took less time than she expected for Franklin to be back at her door. 'I just stopped by to make sure I didn't leave any mind-altering 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 men 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 and 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 possessions she had either brought with her when she was first posted to Babylon 5 or picked up over the years aboard the station. 'Make that two hours. This won't take long.'

Michael Garibaldi stood from the table and smiled as Ivanova worked her way through the restaurant. He looked healthier than when she last saw him, but the smile still worried her. It usually meant he had some foolish plan up his sleeve that would end 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 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 it worse than most. Abducted by Shadows who had swarmed around the station, only retreating after Sheridan plunged a White Star armed with Gaim thermonuclear warheads into the heart of their homeworld, Z'Ha'Dum, Garibaldi had been turned over to the Psi Corps and reconditioned. First he 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 said with a forced casual tone as they ordered from the menu. Garibaldi explained how, once he was of no further use to them, Psi Cop Al Bester took fiendish pleasure in showing him the steps 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 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 his forehead and over 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 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. 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 said to 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 where encouraged to share their dominant beliefs.
'All those banging gongs and 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 Londo had become one with his inner self,' Ivanova smiled.

'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 said as she gave the waiter her credit chit, refusing to let either of them pay.

THREE

November 5th 2261, Babylon 5

Ivanova stood at the window of the EarthForce Office, looking out over the length of the Hydroponics Garden. Finally she turned away, her hands brushing the fabric of the chairs as she wandered around. She circled the desk but had no inclination to sit down. So many plans had been formulated and fates decided here. 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 that desk?' Sheridan asked from the doorway.

Ivanova had patched into the Command & Control Deck, listening 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 took her place in the

interim and, although his voice occasionally betrayed an occasional flutter of uncertainty, he was good at the job. The crew spent over a year shouldering additional responsibilities onboard Babylon 5, and they had 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. '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 she was in no mood for celebrating, whether it was their wedding or the end of the war. She did want to see Sheridan before she left though.

'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. 'What can I do to talk you out of this?'

Ivanova shook her head firmly. 'I ship out in three hours.'

'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. 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, but 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 they had altered her and nothing remained of the woman he once knew, he had to see her die a fiery death when he took the fight to the Shadows' own doorstep. Just recently he suffered torture and humiliation in his fight to rid his home of the evil that had 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 can 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 decline,' Ivanova said.

'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 said.

'And I should still get two days of liberty if everything keeps to schedule,' Ivanova said. 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 been an 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 said. 'Hopefully things should quiet 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 said. As Ivanova started to go, Sheridan held her back for a moment. 'The one thing I learned from death,' he confided, 'is to enjoy every second of your life afterward 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,' said Ivanova.

She stepped to one side, allowing a delegation of the Gaim to pass. Of all the races that made up the former League of Non-Aligned 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 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, Ivanova had always associated their voices with the detached electronic rasp of the computer translators when she chaired debates in the council chamber. '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. '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, spotting 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 searching for the answer to a question she knew she should know. Then

she fixed her gave 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 were coming to accept each other for who they were.
Ivanova imagined G'Kar looked her way, but 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!' said 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?'

'This station 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, 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 away and found herself face to face with G'Kar. The reptilian-faced alien stared at her suspiciously as light bounced over his mottled features. His deep-set eyes, mismatched in colour after the implanting of the temporary blue-coloured artificial one, 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 took her seat aboard the shuttle and passed through the station's docking portal to rendezvous with the waiting transport.

FOUR

December 17th 2261, St Petersburg

The shuttle swept 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. She was always heartened to see it, still managing to dominate the skyline of St. Petersburg four centuries after its completion.

Once the ship touched down, Ivanova remained seated while the other passengers from Mars hurriedly disembarked. She wanted to savour the moment, not rush it. Coming back to St. Petersburg felt like a homecoming even though, truth be told, no actual home waited for her here. 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 was born.

During dinner with Franklin and Garibaldi, as the conversation touched on her returning to Earth, Ivanova had realised this would be the first time in over four years she 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 journeyed to Epsilon 3, the barren planet Babylon 5 orbited. Even then, she only visited 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 just come back from Mars,' Ivanova countered.

'But 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. I was wearing a breather all the time and scrabbling around over 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 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 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 hangars, 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 and burned inside her lungs.

She descended the steps onto the tarmac and looked 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 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. 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.

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 toward 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 that had joined her on the flight disappearing toward the distant hangars. '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 hangars, across the criss-cross of runways to a small administration block that flickered like a mirage through the heat haze from the jet engines. 'The drive 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, 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, looking her up and down. Ivanova had fully intended to requisition one once she arrived at the base. 'Cold of space is not like cold of Russia!' Gorev exclaimed. He pushed down the intercom and called his secretary into the office.

Ivanova had already met Natalya Castranov when the driver 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 looked like a frail bird behind the computers at the secretary's station. When she stood 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,' Gorev explained to Natalya, using his hands to trace the shape of an overcoat in the air in front of him. Natalyla 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.

She stood in the outer office while Natalya sorted out temporary accommodations 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 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, nodding toward Gorev's office.

Vasney nodded back. 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 if she understood what Ivanova meant by being allowed to have time for herself. 'Because of the Interstellar Network News?' Natalya asked.

Ivanova smiled ruefully. '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 suddenly appear around her. On the rare occasions when the transport had a hostess service, the crews had to hide their discomfort around her.

EarthForce personnel at Promixa Station had treated her well. Proxima III, after all, had been the first world liberated by Sheridan and the White Star fleet, but Ivanova still felt an air of tension hanging over the general staff. The closer she 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

December 18th 2261, St Petersburg

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. Afterward she 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 watched parents doting over their children and listened to 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.

Outside 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 positioned itself over St. Petersburg during her journey north. Foreshadowing the onset of night, one consequence of the premature darkness that descended over the city was that it highlighted the elaborately designed and brightly lit Christmas decorations 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 know what to expect. After so many years away, it did not surprise her to find that many of the businesses had undergone significant changes. 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 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 new 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 were very careful to keep the original facades intact. Although the city proved 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 a 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 conversation between the intellectuals looked like a puppet show gone out of control. Even their father was joining in, and the young Susan would have 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 the whole argument was started by a narrow-faced historian with half-moon glasses and thinning blond hair. He was bemoaning the fact the recent spate of high-rise developments in the city, in particular an ambitious project to the west of Moskovskiy Prospekt that effectively joined Baltijsky Station and Varshavsky Station together, would spell the end of any future Russian heritage.

'Everything will look the same,' he 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 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 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 that 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 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, and she felt reassured to know that some things 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 Prospect, Ivanova found herself forced to watch out for the steady stream of cars, cabs and delivery trucks, most of them dusted with a coat of white frost, jockeying for position in the wide lanes. Intoxicated by her surroundings, she almost stepped straight into the oncoming traffic without thinking, but an abrasive car horn sent her back onto the sidewalk.

Snow crunched underfoot as she continued her journey. Before she realised, she 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 history of every building. On every occasion she would dutifully answer the questions he quizzed her with, 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 Neviskij 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 Ekonominichesko 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 did well answering his questions, Andrei Ivanov would hold open the door and usher his daughter inside. 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 never be as good as what she 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 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 never hid 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 own life to escape from the twilight life dulled by Psi Corps 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. Replicating those moments or being that person was no longer possible. Everything around her, the microcosm of the old St Petersburg, only made her realise 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 favourite 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 was sent abroad to school,

returning briefly after each term ended, St Petersburg became merely somewhere to come back to.

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

Andrei Ivanov 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, tried to intervene, but she pushed him away. When she was finally done her father said nothing in reply. Ivanova could see the emptiness of his soul in his eyes. As she turned away, she knew 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 – she wanted to show him 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 the repeat her instruction when the cab jerked away from the kerb into the stream of traffic.

SiX

December 18th 2261, St Petersburg

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 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 the 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. Sitting 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 within. All that was now gone.

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 had 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 leading up to 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 wore 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; 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 long hours 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. Storage boxes were stacked against the walls, 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 among 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. The first time she had found her mother suddenly lucid, she was shocked. If she remembered correctly, she ran screaming from the bedroom when it happened. Later 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 stare 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 among her things. 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 the lid off the mother figurine. There should have been the biggest of the four wooden children neatly fitted inside. Instead only the smallest child rolled 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. Space for a fourth lurked menacingly next to the others. 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 insisted he be 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 flyer.

Ivanova had visited him before the cruiser shipped out. She had given him one of her earrings – meant for good luck. 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 wore only one earring in memory of Ganya.

Laid to the other side of Sofie was Andrei Ivanov. This grave was new to her. The last time she 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 conditioned worsened, he 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 bartered for one last moment of clarity to unburden his soul.

In his last remaining minutes Andrei Ivanova 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 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 regained his daughter. As the words passed his lips, Andrei Ivanova looked as if 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 stood still and looked in her direction.

'Ganya,' Ivanova murmured as the wolf's dark eyes fixed upon her.

The animal took two steps toward 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 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 toward 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 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 said. It had been almost four years since she had last seen Yossel Koslov. After her father's death, the Rabbi travelled all the way to Babylon 5 to sit Shiva for Andrei. It had been a struggle at first, but eventually he helped her come to an understanding about her father. To return the favour, she 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 among ourselves. What would Andrei have said? It would have broken his heart to see our 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. Kosol 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 said. '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 floated aimlessly 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 said as they set off for the cemetery gates.

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

DIARY

As I sit listening to Faure's Requiem, I wonder at the chance meeting with Uncle Yossel. What were the chances that we met in the cemetery? Am I being paranoid? Could he have let the Corps in? How much does he know? I am amazed at the way my mind runs these days. Is it Marcus who is paranoid for me, or is it me who is frightened for him? I will not have children; I know that, so Marcus' soul is my child and I protect it…my God, have I gone mad? Thinking of things this way does not suit me nor get me anywhere except back to the start. I am pleased that I can listen to the great classics. I remember papa making me play Bach, Handel, Dvorjac…and Sibelius…perhaps I

should have stuck to the violin. It certainly seems a safer career. I have never confessed my music career to anyone, nor would I want to share it for it is my home, the one in my head and in my hands. Even now I can play the wind as if it is the finest Stradivarius, but the audience comprises one…one frightened, lonely woman.

SEVEN

December 19th 2261, St. Petersburg

The shuttle took off from St. Petersburg just after midnight. Ivanova was the sole passenger, heading south and west, toward 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 finished pouring over the images in the old photograph albums. Ivanova was surprised by how many there were. 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 the individuals. Finally he admitted that he had looked through them 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 so after he was gone, I could pass the information on to you.'

He reached for a large plain envelope slipped under the cover of one album, pulled out the pages 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 it was time to get 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 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 pieces of her mother's precious jewellery. Ivanova doubted she would ever wear the necklaces or rings, but she took them to have a little piece of her mother with her.

She 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, Geneva, Ivanova reported to the Duty Office. 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. A chill hung 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, interrupted only by the rush of shuttles flashing across the sky.

She spotted the tail within the first ten minutes. In the Duty Office, the Lieutenant who processed her identicard tried not to show any surprise when he logged her details into the system. 'Captain Susan Ivanova,' she had announced, noticing 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 made and the consequences they led 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 ever 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 had observed as he stroked 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 assist 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 wanted to see a proper sunrise, but 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, watching 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 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 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 stood by her side as they went head-to-head against the ships intent on ambushing Sheridan's fleet as it headed for Mars to end Clark's rule. He made her laugh and drove 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

December 19th 2261, EarthDome, Geneva

Ivanova reported to the main reception of the EarthDome 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 lengthy instructions she received.

'You will come with me, please,' the receptionist said as she came around to the front of the desk. 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 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 the woman looked at her with an air of someone whose gaze had fallen on something terribly unappealing. She wondered if it was just her, or if the receptionist saw everyone who came through the doors of EarthDome.

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 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 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.

She felt as if she was a youngster again, sitting outside the headmaster's office at school, waiting to receive a reprimand. Back 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, whether they were government officials or military personnel in their mixture of grey, green and blue uniforms, she looked every one in the eye.

Some were too busy to notice her as they hurried to their next appointment. At times the rumble of conversation coming down the corridor would tail off when 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.' Other officers grinned when they saw her, giving her a quick nod as they carried on their way. As the minutes ticked by, she wondered 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 said. 'Sorry that you were kept our 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.'

'Walk with me,' he told her. Outside 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 put in enough years to be a canny player in the politics of war. Adept at reading the signs, Smits managed to survive – 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 a calculating mind still worked. 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 reached an intersection, and he stood for a moment, as if deciding which direction to take.

'This way, I think,' Smits said, waving his cane to the right. Ivanova obediently followed 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, staff hurried past them. While listening to the General, she 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.

'Some corridors here in EarthDome have a lot of empty offices,' the General said once the elevator had taken them five decks up. 'Some recently vacated, given the sudden spate or retirements or re-assignments. Others have stood that way for well over a year now.'

He stopped and stared at a door that invoked 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 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 were efficiently erased.

'It left us feeling impotent and jealous, 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

December 19th 2261, EarthDome, Geneva

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 on 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 a chair facing 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 the General had not followed her inside.

'Please, take a seat,' President Luchenko said. She sat behind a desk at the far end of the room. Her hair was tied 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 her clothes. '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 became President,' Luchenko added, 'and I'm keeping it in the interim to conduct business away from any prying eyes.' Finally Luchenko put down the pen and 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 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. She turned to the first page. 'Sorry to have kept you waiting. It was not intentional,' President Luchenko said. '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 said.

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 said. '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, and here in Geneva.'

'That's right,' Ivanova said.

'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 different cultures,' Ivanova said.

'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 said.

Across the desk Luchenko smiled. 'And you had a brother.'

'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 Commanders-in-Chief,' Luchenko said. '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 in your corner very well, and he was not alone. Just between us, one Susan to another – we're not back in 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, then settled back in her chair and nodded to herself. 'Would you like some tea?' she asked, reaching for the intercom. 'And then you can tell me what it was that made you not want to stay on Babylon 5.'

DIARY

I cannot stop thinking about President Luchenko. She seemed to see right through me, yet was clearly on my side. If one can entertain the idea of putting trust into a politician's hands! I like her. I just wanted to grab the folder she held with all of my background information and read it for myself. I want to know how I have been evaluated and prodded and summed up as a human being over the years by analytical, boorish judges. I have never desired this before, actually prided myself on not caring. So what has changed? I feel myself slipping into the pedestrian role of caring what other people think of me. How am I going to react upon meeting my new crew? I do not nor cannot recall feeling that way when I first arrived on Babylon 5. Was youth on my side? The brick wall everyone always related to me already in place? I cared but my soft thoughts were returned full-fold by a group of individuals whom I came to depend on. The shapes of their faces, timbre of their voices. It felt like family. I now feel like I am walking into hell and I cannot shake the feeling. Having no one to speak to is a reflection of my

life spent pushing people away. I deserve to deal with this alone, this battle is mine and only I can move forward and survive. And most importantly…forget.

TEN

December 21st 2261, EarthDome, Geneva

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 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: EANS-398G. From the moment it touched down, he waited to oversee the transfer of the storage containers and hand luggage that had come from the earlier flight 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 as 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 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, among the lower echelons it was sometimes the first thing they were told, bypassing all military protocol.

Wynant himself stayed on the periphery of the discussions, but he 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 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 set to give him possession of the document case from the Chief of Naval Operations Office. On the second evening his parents had flown over just to see him.

The glass doors hissed open again. This time the waiting was over. There she was. 'Captain Ivanova, I'm Lieutenant Wynant,' he announced with a salute.

'Lieutenant,' Ivanova said, as she returned his salute.

'Junior Grade,' Wynant said.

'Junior Grade?' Ivanova repeated, unsure whether to feel slighted that such a low-ranking officer had been sent to meet her.

'Everyone 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 that made Ivanova smile.

'The shuttle is this way,' Wynant said, directing her to the departure gates. '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. She 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 again. 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 through the layers of cloud until it reached the mesosphere. As she looked through the viewport, Ivanova saw a convoy of large Condor troop transports heading for Earth.

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

Ivanova nodded. 'I see them,' she said.

Before Clark 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 had been assigned the task of finding them billets. Typically, in the calm before an 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 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. '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 lively debate,' he finally said, 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 said, looking past her.

Through the viewport, Ivanova saw the rotating centre-section 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 advance-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 were 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 they were called the Omega-X class, or Shadow Omegas, 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 cannon tore through the Omega-X's hulls. She had risen from 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 toward her. Oxygen escaping from ruptured compartments and feeding 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*.

ELEVEN

December 19th 2261, EAS Apollo, *Earth Orbit*

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, gripping a handrail to steady himself in the zero-gravity portion of the *Apollo*.

'Captain Ivanova,' he said, as she floated down the shuttle's exit ramp.

'General,' Ivanova said, somewhat taken aback by Lefcourt's presence.

Lefcourt smiled as he waited for Wynant to grab the carry-on luggage, which was floating the exit ramp as he floated alongside Ivanova.

'I'll admit, I'm surprised to see you here,' Ivanova said as they left the landing bay, returning to normal gravity as they entered the rotating section of the *Apollo*.

'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, they 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 to see me to my ship,' Ivanova said.

'Few ships in the fleet at present 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 said. '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 said, 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 were hard pressed, and it were 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,' a voice announced.

'Get us underway, Charlie,' Lefcourt said. 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 said as she picked up the leather pouch.

'Do you know who you've got serving under you?' Lefcourt asked.

'Not yet,' Ivanova said.

'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 said. '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 said 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 said. 'Long enough to 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 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 said.

'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

December 19th 2261, EAS Apollo, *Earth Orbit*

Though reticent at first, as the meal progressed all the officers began to include Ivanova in their conversation. Even so, the topics were trivial and 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.

Mention of the recent events was rare, and even then only made 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 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.'

'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 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,' Mitchell 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, clearly 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. Wherever 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 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 said.

'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*, the *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 the *Roanoke* and the *Agrippa* had been destroyed. The *Roanoke* was broken in half after being rammed by a 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 was 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 major 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 away that I truly miss.'

He handed back the pages to Ivanova, glancing at some of the photographs. 'So what do you think?' Lefcourt asked.

'They certainly sound able,' Ivanova said.

Lefcourt nodded and took a sip of coffee. 'As they should. 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 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 near-complete annihilation, Sheridan had instructed the fleet to destroy the chain of defence platforms before their particle cannon 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* appeared in time to take out the platform and save the *Agamemnon* from destruction.

'Our orders changed,' Lefcourt said 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 one another. Held in place by large gantry arms ringed with floodlights, their immobile centre-sections stood vertically as they were retro-fitted and repaired.

Automated cam-bots swarmed around the ships, carrying out repairs to their hulls. Ivanova squinted to read the destroyers' names. She could read only one: the *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* had 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 frameworks, top and bottom, which supported the large lighting rigs. Facing inward, 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 blocky 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 advanced 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 and 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 riposte 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 many 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 whispered, already two steps ahead of her.

THIRTEEN

December 20th 2261, EAS Titans, *Cyrus Shipyard*

Lieutenant Commander Amelia Graydon shifted her weight from one foot to 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 is 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, whom 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. 'Bad business for sure, but even you must have had doubts about what was happening back home, right?'

He looked at the other officers standing behind them and wondered who else had these 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,' explained Berensen. 'When Sheridan's forces liberated Proxima III and then took on the fleet off Mars, they made a point of disabling the ships, not destroying them. The ones that went down fighting were hardliners.' Berensen tried 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 eye-socket. Berensen wondered if having Graydon's ire and opinions blasting inside his head was giving him 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 parted 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 stood waiting for the hatch to open, Lefcourt, not wanting to look like he was pulling rank, insisted that Ivanova was first off. Instead she 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 revealed her plan, and he imagined that Ivanova, a couple of steps behind him, wore 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, 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 the 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 a vanity lurked 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 in a loud stage whisper that elicited a hearty laugh from Lefcourt.

'Captain, may I introduce Senator John Feldon and his aide Eldon Vathek,' Berensen announced, turning toward 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.

'I'd like that,' Feldon said with a smile that seemed to unsettle even 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 hangar. 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 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 allow them the time to get there. 'Six smaller ones are used by our shuttles. The larger bay we came from is primarily used to launch the Starfuries you saw back there. The *Titans* has two squadrons that include the standard SA-23E Aurora model and the SA-32A Thunderbolt fighter-bomber for atmospheric 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 said as he reached in and dragged the last case out.

FOURTEEN

December 20th 2261, EAS Titans, *Cyrus Shipyard*

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 lasers and pulse cannon,' Graydon explained to the Senator.

They stared through the thick glass and looked at the racks of missiles and automated conveyors that would load them into the silo blocks extending from either side of the Warlock. 'Although the *Titans* has been outfitted with two Aegis-pattern, particle cannon 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 the more recent troubles.

'Yes sir, I would say,' Graydon replied. 'We also have mixed grade 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 Interceptor Grid Energy Projectors.'

'Okay, I'm impressed,' Mitchell whispered to Ivanova.

'Yes, she is good,' Ivanova said, 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 tics 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 even a Psi Cop. He might not have the black uniform, instead wearing a dark grey suit and black rollneck sweater, but there was something about, of all things, 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, and the 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 warcruiser and can seize a military installation or planet 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 distain. 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; Lefcourt and Mitchell 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 led him 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. Something about the ship unsettled her, whether she could hear screaming or not.

In the engineering section, Graydon wisely handed her party over to Lieutenant Spencer Sheehan, the *Titans*' Chief Engineer. Attempting to get all the final checks completed on time, which would be tight even 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 to bore them out the door. 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 becoming obsolete, 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 improves the ship's linear acceleration and rate of turn,' Sheehan quickly continued. To try and get across the fact that he was busy, Sheehan purposely carried on reviewing reports handed to him by his team as he reeled off the facts and figures. Now he was getting into his stride, ignoring 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 Ivanova appeared 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 said, 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 said. 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.

DIARY

I cannot explain the feeling I got from Vathek. I couldn't figure him out. Why did I not feel him scanning me? He must have been scanning everyone, yet all I felt was a sharp pain in my head. Perhaps that's what he felt, yet described it as the screaming I could not hear. Gray is easy to read, she resents me for the battle against Earth, thinks of me as an infidel, an enemy. However, I did not feel hatred from her nor do I consider her a threat… at least for now. Why did he hear screaming coming from the ship? I snuck away briefly and listened with my mind open, but I heard nothing at all. Maybe he's a nutcase, or maybe he's right. I have to keep the crew together and focused and the last thing we need right now is someone losing it before we're even out of the gate! Good thing we escorted him off the ship. Only a few of us were witnesses. I still have a residual headache and cannot figure out what it is. I have been careful about my health, eating well and exercising daily. When I looked at him, he was clutching the same side of his head as I was…that's where the pain is. Dear God why is this looking more and more difficult on a daily basis? The funny thing is the feeling I have on this ship, is as if something is watching me, not wanting me here… something that I have seen or met before. I truly have to watch my sanity or trust my instinct. I wish I had the people who care for me around. I may not have taken advantage of my friendships or shared my problems with anyone on Babylon 5, but at least I knew they were there if I needed them, and that is far more consoling than the empty promise of most people's offers of help. I feel very alone.

FIFTEEN

December 20th 2261, EAS Titans, *Cyrus Shipyard*

On the way back, Graydon steered the party past the small-arms munitions lined with ABPro-34 assault rifles, G29X gauss 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 managed to have his hair trimmed even shorter than Lefcourt's. His pink scalp glistened under the harsh lights.

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

'At ease, Major,' Ivanova said, the temporary increase in rank intended to remind him that there could only be one captain on board a ship.

'Major 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 ten-thousand troops into combat if the situation requires it,' Graydon informed the Senator.

'Ten 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 had not 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 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 *Titans'* 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 put 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 showed little interest otherwise.

'Although primarily used as operating rooms,' he explained, showing off the six hermetically sealed IsoLabs, 'the facilities allow us to 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 bed were available to accomodate one hundred crewmen, Benton sidled up to Ivanova.

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

'Oh, you're good,' Ivanova said.

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 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-tinted 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 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 Earth Alliance 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, currently displaying boxed scanner readouts, a graphic of the Cyrus System and the seven planets orbiting the G6 V sun. A column of monitors 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. The Senator seemed to come around and remember where he was only after the monitors switched to port and starboard views of the ship, revealing images of the *Apollo* floating alongside and the distant shipyard rushing to complete the next trio of Warlock-class destroyers flashed in front of him. '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 someone might 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

December 20th 2261, EAS Titans, *Cyrus Shipyard*

'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 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.

Lefcourt 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 toward the shuttle. Ivanova waited until they entered the shuttle and retracted the steps 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.

'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 more than that. Before the headache started, before Vathek began his one-man meltdown, something else troubled 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, spread her fingers out as her hand hovered over the floor. Suddenly a sense of prickling cold crept 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 aboard 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 commanding officer 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 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 saw 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 also. 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, informing 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.*'

'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 sweeping around the *Apollo* and heading 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 shakedown 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 outward, 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 *Titans*' designated Simulations Supervisor, and his team of 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. Given the cost of a vessel like the *Titans*, however, such a scenario would only be used under the most extreme circumstances. A more likely turn of events would involve 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, and possibly longer. 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. Specific combat drills involved 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 anyone else experienced the same sensation. Instead she found herself alone.

Ivanova fought the impulse to race back and seek solace in the company of the bridge crew, instead searching for a rational explanation to the phenomenon. She stood under a ventilation grill, and then she reached up to investigate whether the sudden chill was simply the result of incorrectly programmed climate control. As she reached to the ceiling, she pulled back her hand instinctively – 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 already she was wondering whether she had made the right decision. Worse was the fact 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, carefully 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, 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?

DIARY

Leaving Babylon 5 was a necessity. I keep telling myself I did not have a choice and that I would have died there. Well, I did die there and I honestly believe that something was left behind and a new thing is in its place. I cannot shake the feeling that Marcus is inside me. His voice comforts me at night, and I feel an unearthly presence when I am under stress or when the wolves are at my door. I dream differently. At first it was uncomfortable – strange to dream like another person. My dreams were always so neat and tidy, a chance to rehash my day and solve problems. But now I fly. I fly maybe five times a week, only not in a Starfury and not in a shuttle. I fly on my own and visit places I have never been but am convinced are real. I fly through trees and over planets whose names form on my lips only to be sucked away at waking. I fly over cities and people's homes, oceans and deserts. I feel more alive dreaming than I do in my own day-to-day life. I yearn for those nights of flying, crave them. I have taken to not reading at night just so I can fall asleep quicker and enjoy the magnificent world of my dreams since Marcus died. It's hard even now saying that…Marcus is dead. Marcus died for me. Words, which do not fit into a normal person's vocabulary, should not form a normal part of anyone's vocabulary. I miss him.

SEVENTEEN

January 3rd 2262, EAS Titans, *Deep Space*

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 started 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, and neither was the time taken to complete each simulation. As Ivanova expected, Breck had planned a simple emergency evacuation. With his team monitoring the progress, the reactors were shut down and sealed off, the armoury locked down, and the crew walked through their escape routes. On the bridge, the designated officers 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 atmospheric loss simulation where, to replicate 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 chemical contamination by burning 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 evacuate 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 said when they first started charting the program.

'See who has got leadership potential amongst the non-coms?' 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 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.'

'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 actually fall asleep. She might have slept soundly on this occasion, if only because she was simply tired out from all the previous nights, which had found her jolted awake, the blue silk pyjamas she had bought in St. Petersburg soaked black with sweat.

Dark and terrible dreams haunted her, where she felt herself constricted by fibrous appendages, black as midnight, which wrapped themselves around her. She 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 happened, Ivanova had pulled on her robe and padded across the room to the comm 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, though she 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 to Breck as she hastily refilled her mug. All she could remember clearly was stumbling from her quarters after hurriedly getting dressed, checking the chromatic tab attached to her uniform, specially adapted to register levels of the same mild toxin used now as a 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 the breach was contained. Berensen was there as well. She remembered seeing a look of concern on his face, directed at her.

'You look tired,' Berensen 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. 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 Earth/Minbari 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 circled 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 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 ever forgive Breck. Harriet Crawley was certainly not as forgiving. Among 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 display 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 to ensure the weapons to be used had their plasma caps removed, the Quartermaster's staff issued marines involved the vests.

'So as not to place undue demands on sickbay, you will be wearing one of these,' Major 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 he bravely stood his ground.

'The object, therefore, is not to get shot,' said Major 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 display on the vest glowed bright red and stayed red.

'I'm afraid you're dead, sir,' Dorland announced. 'I suggest next time someone points a gun at you, you step out of the way.'

During the first simulation, which saw them guarding Engineering and the hangar bays, only the marines were issued with the vests. Ivanova had been making her way back to the bridge when a voice bellowed 'Make a hole!' and a squad wearing green armbands 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 vests. In no uncertain terms, Dorland 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 displays 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 a bulkhead, splitting her lip.

Ivanova reviewed the results of the first round of test with Dorland and Marine Lieutenant Lindsey Garland, the assigned assistant, and was pleased by the performance. Wondering if they could do better, she 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, 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 failed.

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 a ship failed to form a symmetrical jump point due to problems with the vortex generators, or when 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

January 3rd 2262, EAS Titans, *Deep Space*

'We're experiencing a near-total system failure,' Berensen explained as Ivanova arrived on the bridge. An acrid smell hung 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 Comm station.

'Engineering has managed to get the gravitic drive system back online 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 cannon 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. At least none have been reported yet.'

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 to 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. If the *Titans* lost power and drifted off the wire, it was more than likely 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?'

'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 inquired, which provoked laughter from some of the officers seated around the table.

'That is not what I'm trying to suggest,' Sheehan said, 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. EarthForce technology I can deal with. This is something else altogether.'

'Alien technology?' Ivanova asked, intrigued 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 a 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?' Ivanova 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 the 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 that 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 had 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.'

'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 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 system-wide failure, the *Titans* would drift off the beacons. They would have to take the risk. Although nobody expressed any doubts outright, Ivanova could feel the tension in the air.

Before they jumped from normal space, Ivanova formulated a plan of action if they ran into any problems. 'Worst-case scenario, we employ a variation of the tactic we 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 re-supply, the ship lost its navigational systems and began 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. 'All twenty-four Starfuries leave the *Titans*.' 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 another 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.

'Maybe,' Ivanova said, 'but it's been tried and tested.'

'Then we'll go with it,' Graydon agreed, 'but it's still beyond insane.'

'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 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 another 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, feeling the slightest pang of guilt. '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 or so 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 allied themselves with some of the younger races, inciting them to war or simply using their worlds for strategic military bases.'

Ivanova glanced at her crew, hoping to see some sign of comprehension on their faces. All were blank, so she continued. '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 pick up the beacon's signal. Eventually they found it and traced it back to the source. A research vessel called the *Icarus* was dispatched. There they awoke a terrible evil.'

'What happened to them, to the Icarus 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 their 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 it's 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 very likely. It would certainly explain Vathek's behaviour. Having been allied to Vorlon technology in the past, I have to admit that I have found aspects of this ship quite unsettling.'

'But what if we discover this is something else all together?' asked Graydon.

'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

enemy's 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 lie to the crew?' Graydon asked.

'No,' replied Ivanova, 'I'm just saying we don't tell them about it right now. Or anyone else.'

NINETEEN

January 9th 2262, Babylon 5, Epsilon Eridani

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 continued to voice her 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 Psi Cops 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 watched the blazing cone of blue and white light ripple 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 *EAS Titans* to Babylon Control,' Maddison announced over the comm 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 when he eventually 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, viewing 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 shuttle 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 space-locks, waiting for air to be pumped in and the

atmosphere to equalise with the hangar bay, 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.

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, it's good of you to come over on such short notice,' Ivanova said. 'Are you okay?'

'Fine,' Sheridan said, forcing himself to step down onto the deck. As they walked toward the hangar bay bulkhead, Sheridan turned and looked back at the shuttle. 'It was the oddest sensation, like someone had just walked over my grave,' he told her as they stepped out of the hangar. Ivanova didn't find the metaphor at all unusual. If anything, she seemed more relaxed than she had appeared on the comm 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 comm 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 toward 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 gotten 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 surrounded by the multitude of different races had been 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 said.

'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 the station's records upon her arrival, references to the Shadow War had come up but details were sketchy in places. 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,' added Franklin.

'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 exchanged little more than pleasantries when Sheridan introduced them, but Ivanova thought she 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 seemed to Ivanova that Lochley was more than prepared to shoot first and shake hands later.

'All of them had cyber-web implants attached to their heads and linked to their cerebral cortexes,' 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.

'Not really. 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 Corps 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 and 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 knows. 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.' Garibaldi grinned.

'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 saw it as a fait accompli.'

'Would that have been before or after you filled their sky with nearly a hundred armed White Stars?' Garibaldi said. 'That might have made them 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, with 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

January 10th 2262, Babylon 5, Epsilon Eridani

All the years Ivanova had served on Babylon 5, Docking Bay 13 had been the designated berth for Vorlon Ambassador Kosh, and off limits. 'Why are we here?' Ivanova asked. The meeting had broken up. Sheridan outlined the basics of his plan once Lyta arrived. It appeared to be a long shot to everyone, but she was prepared to help. As everyone left Sheridan's office, he called Lyta back to speak to her alone, asking 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 aboard 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 no interest in humanity's well-being. 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 announced that the new Vorlon ambassador had to go.

It was easier said that 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 suddenly came alive and tore 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 burst free from Babylon 5 as the glowing embodiment of Kosh forced Ulkesh out of the station.
She remembered watching as their essences rippled across the surface of Babylon 5 and, still intertwined, coalesced into the departing Vorlon vessel. The resulting explosion lit up the darkness of space with such ferocity that she was surprised the image was not burned into her retinas still.

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 right now. 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.'

'And this seemed like a good idea to you?' she said as quietly as possible while still making herself heard.

'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—'

'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 six large chunks recovered. Except the next time I got a chance to check in down here, there were five bigger pieces, then four even bigger, 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, of course. 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 from chewing at a nail in frustration.

Whether the plan Sheridan mapped out would work was anyone's guess. A few elements were clarified for her when she asked what the risks to the station would be if things did not go according to plan. Otherwise, feeling unqualified to add any constructive suggestions, Lochley simply watched and listened.

Still trying to digest the sudden rush of information about the Shadows and the Vorlons, Lochley 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 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 were branded as renegades and traitors, she had fought on the side she believed was right. Now she discovered that side had been infected by an alien sickness that tainted everything EarthForce 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 and watched 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 BabCom screen, ready to receive his transmission when Corwin informed her it was audio only.

'Mister President, are you all right?' Lochley asked.

All she could hear initially 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. The sense of wonder and awe in his voice 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. As she waited for Sheridan to get back to her, Lochley could 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. 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 that Sheridan only reply was a directive to 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 helped her perceive the 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 Kosh following an attempt on his life. Almost immediately she had been recalled to Earth by Psi Corp, which was interested in what she had learnt from the encounter. Guessing that the experiments she would be forced to endure would culminate in her ending up pickled in a row of glass jars, she escaped and went underground.

Drawn to the mysterious Vorlons, she eventually gained 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 his consciousness in her mind on the occasions the ambassador wished to travel incognito.

She was 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. Of her. Of what she could do.

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 waiting 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 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 spliced into the exposed tangle of thick, coloured cables. They rose 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 a thumbs-up sign in reply. 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 the entire bridge crew staring at the screen in awe. It reminded her of the first time she saw the Vorlon ship come through the jump gate. She considered turning off the viewscreens on the bridge, but she 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 ship-wide 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.

'Hangar doors open.'

'Aye, Captain.'

It was a sentient ship, created using advanced bio-technology. 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 other angles, the bulbous, organic look reminded Ivanova that once she 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 Vorlon weapons was formidable. The fury unleashed by the larger Vorlon cruisers was as terrifying as anything the Shadows could produce.

'This could get rough,' Ivanova warned her officers.

DIARY

I recall Ganya as a small boy protecting me, and I focus on this at night when I cannot sleep. Ganya, Marcus and John… all wonderful men who protected and cared for me. Why was I so blessed? The question must be becoming boring to my poor diary. The incessant queries of a lost soul. Delenn once told me that the old human saying 'still waters run deep' applied to me. Not the first time I have heard that, but what does it mean? That the more closed one is to the simple human desires such as sharing and closeness, then the more you actually feel them? I cannot afford not to start thinking about these things. I have spent my life pushing down the enemy, the thoughts and feelings I considered to be dangerous and counterproductive. I am truly my father's daughter. I sometimes wonder if therapy would help. If someone had suggested that a year or two ago, I would have thrown them out of an airlock. But now, I feel I cannot hold it together and do my crew and myself justice if I am haunted by the ghosts of my past. I cannot begin to heal until I heal, and going home was just a tiny baby step in the direction. My cerebral mind wants to congratulate myself for visiting my father's grave. Who am I kidding? I am a failure at the things that come so easily to most people. Simple feelings, emotions, caring, forgiveness and forgetting… impossible. I recall catching a glimpse of the paperwork of the person who interviewed me before my assignment to Babylon 5. Under the column of 'obvious behaviour' the first one on the list was 'anti –social'. He may have been on to something.

TWENTY-ONE

January 10th 2262, Babylon 5, Epsilon Eridani

Lyta took long, measured breaths to keep calm and focused. She fixed her eyes on the warning lights. Once they flashed red, she looked across the docking bay as the large hangar doors slid apart, revealing the Vorlon ship. Lyta thought she had put this episode of her life behind her, but obviously it wasn't going to go away that easily.

She was more than a little surprised to discover the Vorlon ship was still in Babylon 5's docking bays. When the Shadows murdered the first Kosh, the Vorlon government requested his personal effects be placed inside the vessel. The ship, a living extension of Kosh, then left the station on its last journey, unfolding its wings as it flew into the heart of the sun to rejoin its master.

Lyta assumed the Vorlon ships could not survive without their masters, but here was a lone one, sliding gently into the bay. The ship hovered over the metal frame before delicately lowering itself onto the computer relays. Once it was properly attached, melding itself snugly 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 saw the *Titans* on the monitor in Sheridan's office and marvelled at its size and obvious power. When Sheridan began the briefing, her first thought was that he might ask her to go aboard 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 hangar lights, which glistened on the curved surface of the Vorlon ship, flickered briefly and went dead, plunging the hangar into darkness. From the blackness a faint glow pulsed within the Vorlon ship. The light fluctuated, and she felt a roaring wind blast through her, snapping at her safety harness.
Sheridan's plan involved Lyta guiding the Vorlon ship's consciousness deep into the ship, seeking out the black heart of the Shadow technology, but Lyta found she needed 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 display 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. The distinct danger that it would overload the fusion reactors worried her, which was why she had moved the *Titans* away from Babylon 5 to what was hopefully a minimum safe distance. As the metal groaned around her, barely standing up to the stresses inflicted upon it, Ivanova wondered if the ship might simply be torn apart. If this did not work, there will be a lot of explaining to do, Ivanova thought. At least I won't 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 skidded 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 doubted they would get the Vorlon ship onboard in the first instance, but Ivanova assured her the space-locks could be overridden, and she kept her promise. Lyta 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 hangar bay roared out into space

as the Shadowtech tried to rid itself of the enemy presence that dared to come aboard.

Although distracted for a moment, Lyta was determined that both she and the Vorlon ship were not leaving until their job was done. She could feel the Shadowtech's rage pounding in her mind. Scream all you want, she thought. I want to hear you scream louder. I want to hear you scream in pain.

The Vorlon essence stabbed deep into the core of the Shadowtech. The two mortal enemies were locked in combat one last time. The light and dark entwined, lunging and slashing at each other. Lyta parried with her own strokes, stopping the Shadowtech conscience 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 mentally as the Shadowtech thrashed and struggled against her. In that instant she sensed its increasing fear, which was all she needed to press on with her attack. This one is for Kosh, Lyta thought as she felt the energy of the Vorlons connect with her, then 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*. The echoing vibrations of its death rattle gradually faded and finally it was over. In the darkened hangar 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 whispered, 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 hiss of air being pumped back into the hangar bay, Lyta collapsed 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 hangar 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 back on. Most of the screens returned to normal and the comm 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 hangar 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 tried to get rid of the alien intruders. The Vorlon ship obviously managed to stay put and, she assumed, so did 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 Major 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 warmer and more inviting, I have to say.'

'The interior temperature's running hot,' Ivanova laughed. She knew what he meant. The chill was 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 wrong that we can't fix. I guess we were lucky this time.'

'That's good. And it's 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.'

'Just try not to bring so much excitement with you next time. We have enough here already,' Sheridan said. 'It's a fine ship you've got.'

'I've got a good crew too. 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 other's 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, 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 her help. When Ivanova got down to Hangar 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 stretcher-bearers 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 them to take Lyta ahead to the shuttle.

Although Sheridan instructed her to seal off Hangar 7, she opened the hatch and leaned against the bulkhead, watching the Vorlon ship. Maybe it was down to the acoustics of the hangar, 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 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 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.

DIARY

I knew it! It all makes sense now, the 'living' feeling of the ship, the coldness. I am only regretful that I could not thank Lyta myself, and I hope she did not sustain any long-term injuries. She is strong though, more so than anyone really realises. The ship feels so much calmer and centred. I sound like some old-fashioned new-ager. I suppose it is the relief I feel now that we have rid ourselves of the alien

tech on board. What the hell were they thinking anyway? How perverse to put a crew like this, any crew, in jeopardy by installing something like Shadow technology and not tell anyone. A part of me wonders if it is any coincidence that they gave the command to me of this altered ship – perhaps to see how I would react to it… and it to me. I am being smoked out by someone, that I know. I can feel it in my bones. We will stay as far away from Bester and his kind as we humanly can for now. Back to work.

TWENTY-TWO

March 14th 2262, EAS Titans*, Orion System*

The incessant bleeping 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. Two months had passed since the *Titans* had been purged of the Shadow influence. The ship 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 more simulations.

With the alien intelligence gone, Ivanova had found herself sleeping soundly most nights. Her dreams were peaceful and untroubled by anything alien, although the normal nightmares were still there: lost family, lost friends, lost love. The only true blips were 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 about the timing of the drills.

'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 comm 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 barked orders to an aide, who 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 saw him glaring at her, she saluted and kept walking.

Ivanova knew full well that he had timed the call 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 received 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 said. '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 comm 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 anyone noticing we were missing.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' he said.

'How are things with you?'

'As I said before, 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 with.'

'Bowden called you? I bet he was pleased to reveal I had come cap-in-hand to EarthForce,' Sheridan said. 'We had a new alien race come through the jump gate a couple of days ago.'

'Hostiles?' Ivanova asked. Sheridan nodded.

'Very. Delenn surmised they were an 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 they warned us of the 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 would 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 maintenance drones, 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 initiate 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 larger warships. They broke off, engaging the squadrons of Starfuries moving to intercept. The fighters twisted and turned, evading the streaking arcs of fire from pulse cannon. Bright clouds of gas blossomed against the blackness of space as ships taking direct hits disintegrated and the atmosphere inside briefly igniting.

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. 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 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. 'An as-yet unidentified alien race. Obviously hostile. A scouting party and subsequent larger fleet attacked Babylon 5, mistaking it for 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 Lieutenants Michael Oliver and Andrew Rowland, the *Titans*' Starfury squadron leaders, as the footage continued. Sitting side-by-side, both men studied intently the battle playing out on the monitors. 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 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 heard 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 said, 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.

'Major Dorland, your opinion?' Ivanova asked, turning to the Marines Commander. She 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 he turned from the monitors to Ivanova. 'They may decide they can carve us up with their cannon; however, they may also 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 maintenance drones, revealed a small, horned breaching pod as it homed in on the station.

'If 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 EarthForce and find out which of the Explorer-class ships are on active service, where they are, and the courses 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 is 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-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 former Markab space, which is down here, bordering Earth Alliance space, nor from the Narn Regime or Centauri Republic.'

'That doesn't mean anyone hasn't encountered this species. They simply might not have survived to report the attack,' Major 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 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 toward 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 Maddison. 'And,' he said pointing, 'Sector 49. But the EarthForce garrison has 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, the Earth Alliance established a military base at Sector 49, 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 said, half jokingly.

'Okay then,' said Ivanova, 'we head up this corridor toward—'

'The Hyach Gerontocracy,' Maddison said.

Ivanova nodded. 'All right then,' she said. 'Let's go hunting.'

DIARY

'First Contact Protocol' with an enemy who has already engaged the Rangers? Sheridan has a lot of trust in us and our ability to succeed here. Is he paying me a compliment or trying to engage the warrior spirit I have seen so casually slip away since my accident? I sometimes try to hear the voice which has become louder in my head, not Marcus but the other, the one the Corps could never find. It has become stronger, yet elusive, as if it taunts me to ask for its help instead of always being something I have to force down. I hope I have not given it permission to leave me be, for I cannot bear to be alone now. Perhaps the key is to befriend it, not fear it. When I see Bester's face in my mind, I panic and fall back on the skills I learned as a child, put the blocks up, like the Matryoshka, one block in another block in yet another block, enough to keep even him out. I have no idea how I learned how to hide my ability and why my mother never could. She died for lacking that one skill, one that I seem to have been born with. I have only let one person truly read me… Talia. I do not regret that, I loved her, she deserved to see inside my mind. My only regret is that what she saw frightened her away. I have many demons and many wolves trying to claw their way out. I sometimes wonder when they will win and be set free. God help me if I ever lose control. Had my mother not sent me away I would have been found out, my soul taken like hers, my mind theirs. Why did they paint the smallest Matryoshka's face with the Psi Corps logo? How did they know I have the gift, or the punishment as most see it. Time for sleep.

TWENTY-THREE

March 16th 2262, EAS Titans*, Hyperspace*

Ivanova knew the search would be a long, drawn-out process. The hunt for a new alien race across the vast reaches of space was not going to be easy. This game of hide-and-seek could stretch across the infinite.

The course was plotted, and the *Titans* left the Orion System, heading out between Beta 9 and the old Markab territory. She could sense the excitement of the crew, but she understood all too well that if results were not forthcoming, it could easily turn into pent-up frustration. The waiting would get to them.

She felt the same anxiety when she was 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 almost limitless. Back then Marcus accompanied her. Whether he was annoying her or amusing her, at least he kept her occupied.
On the next occasion Lorien acted as her guide. Ivanova could still remember how frustrated and useless she felt. Sheridan decided the time had come to put an end to it, once and for all. A vast armada of every conceivable vessel amassed at Babylon 5, the biggest fleet ever assembled, preparing for the final showdown with the Shadows and Vorlons.

When he ordered Ivanova to seek the last remaining First Ones so close to the time of engagement, she questioned his motives. Thinking that it was his way of keeping her out of the fight, it brought back painful memories of when her mother, drugged by the sleepers, told her to wait with the neighbours next door. Sofie Ivanova promised she would come for her daughter later in the day. Except she had not. She never did again.

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 found the last of the First Ones, persuading them 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 was pleased by the results. It would be easy to brag, given she had the most powerful and advanced ship in the Earth Alliance fleet at her disposal, but this time she commanded the crew that

could 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 current 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 why?' Graydon asked, shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

Ivanova put down the cutlery and pushed the plate toward the files. 'Coriana 6 was where we made our stand against the Shadows and the Vorlons,' Ivanova told her. 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 hear what she had to say.

It did not surprise her. Ivanova remembered when she was first assigned to Io, 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, very few 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 had not needed to be 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, and through the telling, Ivanova found herself connecting with the crew in ways she had not thought possible. She was pleased to see Lieutenant Commander Graydon included among them.

'The war had taken a frightening turn. The Shadows and the Vorlons were not engaging each other directly,' Ivanova said. 'Instead each attacked worlds the other had influenced. And their destruction was complete. The Vorlons 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 we did. But before that, when the enemy was out there among 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 hoped to survive. And to show their gratitude, they joined forces again to help him take back Earth because they believed in us. We belong out here among the stars. And we need all the help we can get.'

'And Coriana 6?' 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 or want 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.

'Someone certainly had to be there,' replied Ivanova.

On the bridge Ivanova stared at the screen in front of her. If they were

in luck, the watching game should be over soon enough. They 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 gave way to 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. 'No 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 said.

'This is *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 *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 a hundred,' Berensen said.

'Maybe they're at lunch?' Graydon suggested. Her smile faded 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.

'The 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 said.

'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 said, 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 said.

'Launch Starfuries,' Ivanova instructed.

'Alpha Squadron, immediate launch,' Graydon said over the intercom, 'Repeat, immediate launch!'
The Starfury squadron powered away from the *Titans*. The fighters closed into a tight formation as they turned on an intercept course. Piloting the lead Starfury, Commander Oliver activated the fighter's smart-targeting computer. As the on-screen contacts flashed closer, he powered up the uni-pulse cannon.

'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 relay 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.'

'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 readied to depress the trigger, but 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 said. 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 about using the pivotal thrusters and headed back toward 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 among 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 cannon 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.'

'Commander, we've got something over here,' Oliver heard in his headset. He piloted his ship past 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 vessel. 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.

TWENTY-FOUR

March 19th 2262, EAS Titans*, Sin'talith System*

The alien fighter was mounted on magnetic grapples and carefully moved into the landing bay. Ivanova and Berensen 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 reviewed the footage from Babylon 5 and reprogrammed the flight simulator, but 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 to examine the weapons, absent-mindedly 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 placed on the deck. Oliver climbed up onto the ship and scrabbled 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.

'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 into 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 look 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 stepped 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 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 toward 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 hangar and was about to leave herself when Berensen wandered over.

They watched the fighter being carefully manoeuvred across the bay. The crew gently lowered it onto a platform just large enough for the ship and the deck crew, as they huddled closely around it. On instructions from Mitchell, the platform sank below the deck.

'Mister Mitchell certainly has a unique attitude,' Ivanova said.

'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 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.

'Our 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 as 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 heavy 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, red eyes burning through the screen. 'This is Warleader Ke'Tal of the heavy cruiser *N'Tek*,' he announced.

'Captain Susan Ivanova of the *EAS Titans*,' she said.

'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 Narn 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 arrived too late here,' she said.

'The convoy through 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 the Regime's 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 abruptly 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

March 20th 2262, EAS Titans*, Hyperspace*

Once the *Titans* slipped back into hyperspace, on course for the next star system, Ivanova was summoned to the MedLab. With the alien pilot successfully removed from the fighter, Benton prepared to conduct the 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 examine the body. All were wearing breathing masks and protective clothing. Cameras mounted on the ceiling covered the table below them, and multi-angle views of the alien appeared on a bank of monitors.

It laid spread out on the operating table. The crushed hand had already been removed, probably in the flight bay, and the stump was expertly bandaged. The uniform, Ivanova noticed, was similar to that of the shock troopers who had invaded Babylon 5. It was the deep-rust red 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 silver faceplate 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 said.

Marilyn Farber, one of the nurses assisting him, carefully felt around the seal of the helmet. She depressed a stud that her fingers 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 said. 'That's a particularly heady brew.'

Benton nodded. 'Okay, carefully now,' he said. Benton and Daley reached under the alien's shoulders and lifted the torso 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 before she could see the alien properly.

'Hello, mister ugly,' Benton murmured. The alien's skin was the colour of faded ochre, 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 broken 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 said. For the time being he contented himself with pulling the lips back. The pearl grey teeth grew irregularly from the almost black gums. 'Fierce-looking little suckers,' he added, 'and one with a very different view toward orthodontics.'

In his last moments of life, the alien had coughed up blood which speckled the lips and dried a deep indigo on the chin. 'Get a swab of that,' Benton told 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 said, speaking toward the microphone hanging from the ceiling. As he recorded his initial findings and observations, Ivanova looked at the helmet resting on the counter. At first she thought it was decorative, but judging from the angles displayed on the monitors it was purely functional.

Separate ridges beginning on the brow, just above the eyes, curved in toward the top of the forehead, overlapping and continuing 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 a sitting position while the head was turned from side to side, making sure that the cameras captured all views.

'They look like horns that had been put on backward,' 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 Gamma 7. 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 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 either.'

'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 then pulled off the existing hand, revealing long jointed fingers that by comparison seemed exceptionally delicate.

'What are the sensor capabilities like on Gamma 7?' asked Ivanova.

'Pretty limited,' Graydon said. 'They're stuck on that rock, only interested in ships that bring supplies or come to take away the Quantium-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 full 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, it's 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, 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 Mitoc, and then Krish in the Cascor Commonwealth. Next came the Hyach Gerontocracy, and after that the emptiness of barely charted 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?' Ivanova 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 said. '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

March 22nd 2262, EAS Titans*, Gamma 7*

Ivanova was finishing her lunch when the call came through her link. 'Captain, we've got contact,' Berensen announced from the bridge.

'How many?' she asked.

'One.'

'One?'

'Just the one,' he confirmed.

She wiped her mouth with her napkin and headed for the bridge. The *Titans* had dropped out of hyperspace less than thirty minutes ago. Over breakfast, Ivanova 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 Quantium-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 altogether, and Ivanova was inclined to agree. But Berensen recommended they cover all the ground now so as not to have to double back later, 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 has "bait" painted across the hull in big letters.'

Having mulled over the idea of ignoring the Gamma 7 System altogether before rejecting it, Ivanova hoped they would find some evidence of the aliens. Not to break the monotony, but only to weigh favour to her growing theory that the aliens were not so much retreating as leading *Titans* by the nose. It may be a paranoid fantasy on her part, but with sleep elusive and her brain active, she had come to the realisation that the aliens might be letting them catch up.

They had a two-day 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 dead less than two days. The aliens were not running. They were dawdling. Ivanova wanted to know why.

The screen changed to the blackness of space. Among the stars drifted a small cruiser. 'It matches the ships that attacked Babylon 5,' said Ivanova. '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 slowing them, 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 their current speed, nine hours.'

'Maybe we should pull up alongside and ask which direction they're heading,' Ivanova said. '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 Krelecz,' a voice finally replied. 'I am H'Lan. I am... 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 Krelecz 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... 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 Krelecz 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.

'We accept... invitation,' H'Lan said. 'We come to you in 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 said. 'Sheridan hoped it was possible to make peaceful contact with them rather than simply 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, correct?' Ivanova said.

'Yes, but I've never had to put it into practice.'

'Well, now seems as good a time as any.'

'The alien cruiser is launching a shuttle,' Berensen said.

On the screen Ivanova watched a small, bulbous shape drop away from the cruiser's underbelly. Ivanova turned to Berensen. 'You have the bridge,' she said. 'Direct them to the main landing bay. If anything happens to us, you have my permission to unleash hell. In fact, let's make that a direct order.'

Exiting the bridge, Ivanova contacted Major 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 said.

'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 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 hangar?'

'I'm not sure they should even be allowed in the hangar,' she said 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, while 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 troops 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 their 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 punch-drunk boxer just up off the canvas, and Ivanova wondered if it were 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, finely detailed around the edge, was draped over shoulder pads 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 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, faintly tear-shaped helmet. A swirling gas filled the helmet. Bursts of light sparkled inside, moving almost haphazardly, swirling as if borne on a wind. 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 the lights resembled a pair of glowing eyes.

The figure that stepped out from behind it looked from a different race altogether – 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, however, 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 toward them.
The slender figure had positioned itself in front and to the left of the swaying alien. 'I am H'Lan,' he said.
'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 toward 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 a 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 Vorlon in the past, yes. The nature of our work means that we trade with numerous races,' Ivanova tried to explain.

The Var Krelecz 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 Krelecz emissary lowered its head. The rattling in the helmet was subdued, directed solely at H'Lan, who stepped toward 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 hangar 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 gotten 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 aboard 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 said.

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.

'Hangar 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 from the deck. Ivanova looked around at the Starfuries, turning to look in the empty corners of the hangar. A feeling didn't sit right with her. She shook her head, stepping out of the hangar. The marines followed behind her, and the hatch slid shut.

'That could have gone better,' Graydon said 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 afterward.'

'Oh, nasty!'

'Exactly.'

TWENTY-SEVEN

March 22nd 2262, EAS Titans*, Gamma 7*

'Captain on the bridge,' Berensen announced as they returned from the hangar. 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, noticing she seemed preoccupied. 'Captain?' he asked.

Ivanova watched as the shuttle circled the Var Krelecz cruiser and disappeared into the hull.
'They're Var Krelecz,' she said. 'That much we know.'

'Var Krelecz,' 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, Mr. Maddison.'

'We're not following them?' Graydon asked.

She spun the chair to face Berensen. 'Not right away. Keep them within sensor range. As they get toward the gate, alter course to intercept.'

'If we make it too obvious, they may not take us where they want us to go.'

'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 in this system. 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 said.

'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 said.

'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 said.

Ivanova nodded. The Shadows may have passed beyond the Rim, but they had left many of their former allies 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,' 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 touching their food. Instead, Ivanova poured 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. Berensen 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 Krelecz ship heading for the jump gate.

'The Var Krelecz 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 haunted look on his face, as if he had been caught red-handed doing something wrong. 'Captain,' he said breathlessly, 'I was waiting 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 are 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 the Narn 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, and Breck looking like he hoped 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. When he caught sight of Ivanova, he looked as if there was something he wanted to discuss with her but he was unsure 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, but Breck was gone.

'Call me the moment they stray from their course,' Ivanova said as she headed for her quarters.

Ivanova was awoken by a burst of bright light that washed over her. She sat up, bleary-eyed. Her hand brushed against the files she had been reviewing the evening 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 on 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, looking around her quarters. Her jacket was slung across the back of the chair, and her trousers lay in a heap on the floor beside her boots.

She brought her hand up to her mouth, to talk into her link, but then she realised it had not been a voice that had awoken her. Something else had done that. 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 before. 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 active 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 Krelecz 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. A smell of burning flesh assailed her nostrils, coming 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 Krelecz 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 Krelecz 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 from 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 Krelecz's overconfidence.

Ivanova was thrown to her right as planned. Her head cracked against the wall, but the horrible pain she felt at that moment came with the realisation that she wasn't going to die after all. Her hand grabbed for the small metal cylinder on the narrow shelf. It rested on a shallow polished mahogany stand, one she 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 swung 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 coursing 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 and 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 dissipated, 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 limply at its side. The alien wavered, then toppled over, landing hard beside her like a tree felled. 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 Krelecz'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 into 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. 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.

DIARY

Marcus saved my life again today. If I had not had his pike, I would be dead. Had he not taught me how to use it, I would be dead. How often is his ghost going to rear up and face me? I nearly lost it today, could not control the emotions that came from feeling him in my room, urging me to grab the pike and use it, calming me with his voice, encouraging me in his teacher-like manner. I almost died again. The enemy was far more powerful than I, yet I walked away… again. I ask God why. I need to know why? Why am I here when I should be lying next to Ganya and my parents, buried in a box and slowly rotting away, back to the earth where I belong? Why spare me? Not once but twice. I have no answers and sleep evades me. Marcus, please visit my dreams and give me the answer. The ghosts are becoming more important than the reality, though I know not which is the one I should care for more.

TWENTY-EIGHT

March 23rd 2262, MedLab, EAS Titans

The thumping ache in her head subsided. The jumble of noises finally became clearer, transforming into distinct voices. 'Pulse is weak and 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, checking the pulse in her wrist.

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 looked puzzled until Benton moved aside, and she saw the twisted body of the Var Krelecz 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 whispered hoarsely.

'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 either.'

'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 Krelecz,' Berensen said.

'Tricky bugger,' Ivanova nodded, her voice cracking. Her arms ached as she tried to pull on a robe Nurse Farber offered 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. Major 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 it 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 Narn.'

'That's good,' Ivanova said, standing on weak legs.

'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, but I'll be along in a minute,' Ivanova said. 'And I need a new link.'

Her quarters were in disarray. A stain on the carpet remained from whatever had seeped out of the alien's helmet after the pike skewered it. 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 on Babylon 5, and he happily showed her a few basic moves. 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 collected herself and apologised, trying to wipe the smile of her face.

Marcus held his arm out, his hand gripping an 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.

So long ago. A lifetime ago. Not her lifetime, but his. And she couldn't thank him.

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 someone might see him there.

'Lieutenant,' Ivanova said. She started toward the bridge then stopped when she saw that he was rooted to the spot. 'Do you want to see me?'

Breck opened his mouth to speak but then looked up and down the corridor again, as if unsure whether this was the best 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, entering her quarters quickly.

'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 was obvious to Ivanova that the two officers had not been on the best of terms of late. She tried to remember when she first noticed. Exercising in the gym, Breck would leave when Graydon arrived, and neither of them seemed to eat at the same time in the Officers Mess. On more than one occasion, Ivanova 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 comm system. To begin with, I wasn't sure what it was, so I ran diagnostic tests that came up empty. And then, when everything started playing up, I thought it was the Shadowtech stuff playing tricks with me. But after we left Babylon 5, it still happened.'

'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 they were actual transmissions.'

'Have you been able to isolate the comm stations being used to send the messages?'

'Not so far. It's even possible 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 said. 'Some sort of covert operation.'

'A hangover from the old EarthGov regime, maybe. Like whoever installed the Shadowtech, just a different department?' Ivanova suggested.

'Neither of them knowing about the other.'

'It's not a regularly 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 said.

'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 sadly. '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 said 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.'

DIARY

I am beginning to feel more at home and certainly more welcome. A successful mission will do that to a crew, and one where most survive is even better at solidifying deeper relationships. Why are people always surprised when ex-soldiers recall with great detail and passion the friendships they shared in the trenches of war? Of course they are the most important, visceral relationships we will ever have as humans, for it is life and death and trust and blood and selfishness and selflessness. It is the absolute indicator of an individual's true colors and the indelible mark of their soul. There is only one chance in battle. Your life, and the person next to you's life, become inexorably linked and forever burnt into your mind. It is the ultimate test and every other cliché in the book, but if you haven't been there and if you have not died those tiny deaths and those bigger ones… you will have no idea what I am talking about. I do not know whether to pity those or envy them the freedom that brings.

TWENTY-NINE

March 23rd 2262, EAS Titans, *Hyperspace*

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 Krelecz 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 three 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 calmly changed 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 toward 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 a 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 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 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 even now considered the largest armoured battle in Earth's 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 Nazis 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 hangar, Rowland was climbing up the ladder into the cockpit of his Thunderbolt.

The marines made a hole for Ivanova as she made her way to the bridge. Dressed in full body armour, they passed 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 cursed herself for not seeing this sooner, but the steps they took to get here were necessary to ensure 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 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, three of the four flights of standard Starfuries would take on the enemy fighters. The remaining six craft would stay in reserve until called upon. Staying close to the *Titans*, they would also help the gunners destroy any breaching pods before they latched on to the hull. The Thunderbolts 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 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 cannon on line,' Graydon announced. 'All missiles ready to launch. Pulse cannon green. All weapons cleared for action.'

Ivanova had chosen not to follow the Var Krelecz 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* came through. 'Anyone want to be there when that happens?' she had asked in the briefing, looking at the solemn faces of her staff. '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

March 24th 2262, EAS Titans, *Mitoc System*

It was a massive armada of spaceships – 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. The enemy vessels filled the screen, almost blotting out the stars. 'Not so all alone now,' Berensen said as the Var Krelecz vessel they followed 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 Krelecz 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—'

'They're hailing us,' Breck interrupted.

'This is H'Lan of the Var Krelecz,' the voice said over the intercom.

Ivanova looked at Graydon. The faltering voice the alien creature had used earlier was gone. 'Well, he sounds much more confident than before,' Ivanova said.

'You have crossed into Var Krelecz 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, so Ivanova continued. '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 glimmering on a 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 Krelecz would be their downfall. Their ships were too close together. As the front line of vessels manoeuvred to avoid the first incoming salvo, the missiles slid past, impacting into the heart of their fleet.

The sudden white-hot glare of the particle cannon firing lit up the monitor. The beam lanced through space and tore through the front line of ships. The Var Krelecz fleet broke formation. With all the movement and glare from the unleashed firepower, Ivanova could not be certain, but she thought she saw H'Lan's ship being torn in half by the particle beam.

Even operating at less than the full energy output of two million terawatts, the particle beam scythed through the ships. The fleet seemed to explode from the inside out. As the beam carved the fleet neatly through the middle, pulse cannon batteries directed their fire right and left.

'Switch 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, three sizes of red circles illustrated the different classes of ships in the Var Krelecz fleet. Spread out, they formed a large crescent that advanced on the *Titans* like a pincer.

'Starfuries, take out the ships trying to flank us,' Ivanova said as she felt the ship tremor, buffeted by return fire.

'Beta Squadron, you are free to engage the enemy,' Berensen announced over the intercom. 'Alpha Squadron, provide cover.'

The larger Thunderbolts broke from the cover of the *Titans*, splitting into two seperate flights as they rocketed toward the Var Krelecz cruisers. Flying in close formation, their small gatling pulse cannon were already firing as they moved upon the designated targets. Bolts arced across the blackness of space as the bombers 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. The enemy ships were trying to force them within range of the guns on the larger ships.

A Var Krelecz fighter on his tail, Commander 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 and over the approaching alien vessel. His cockpit faced down at the alien fighter as it passed underneath him, and once it filled his targeting computer, he fired a burst from the uni-pulse cannon 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.

Getting close was obviously the Var Krelecz's sole remaining tactic.

Further away from the *Titans*, particle beams and multi-megaton missiles were blowing them apart. Up close, where the larger weapons were less effective or entirely unusable, the enemy had a better chance of inflicting more damage on the *Titans*.

'Back us up,' Ivanova ordered. 'Don't let them get within an effective range.

As the *Titans* put distance between it and the armada, the Var Krelecz ships pushed closer, coming from the sides to keep out of the forward-firing weapons.

A vibration shuddered through the deck, and Ivanova gripped the arms of the chair. 'We've lost a 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 bow 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 low over the *Titans*. Its heavy lasers fired as soon as it appeared from hyperspace, targeting the first Var Krelecz cruiser that came into its targeting display.

Behind it were a trio of smaller T'Loth assault 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. With their capital ships decimated by the Centauri, the Narn were forced to cannibalise what remained, returning to the simpler, more modular design in an effort to rebuild their fleet.

The three ships held formation, plasma cannon firing into the Var Krelecz 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 replaced their need for revenge with a death wish. The Frazi fighters all but rammed the Var Krelecz ships, skimming over their hulls and blasting away as enemy guns desperately tried to get a lock on them.

The manoeuvre did not work for all the Narn. The Var Krelecz fighters rallied and blew many out of the stars. A damaged Frazi fighter spiralled down and crashed into a Var Krelecz 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 T'Loth cruisers was going down in flames. A large hole had been gouged out of the rear of the vessel's main fuselage, close to the fusion reactor. Manoeuvring on thrusters alone, the ship still fired a steady stream of plasma into the Var Krelecz fleet, stopping one side of the armada from outflanking the *Titans*.

'Incoming breaching pods,' Graydon called out.

'How many?' Ivanova asked.

'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 flight.'

'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 as they enter your firing line.'

Turrets on the hull of the *Titans* swivelled around as their sensors locked on the heat signatures from the breaching pod's thrusters. Continuous bursts of fire from cannon lanced through the blackness of space. The two pods closest to the *Titans* were torn apart before they could manoeuvre, exploding in tiny balls of fire. The remaining pods punched their attitude thrusters, spiralling around as they shot forward to evade the deadly fire from one particle emplacement, only to be targeted by another.
The six Starfuries kept in reserve to protect the *Titans* 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 centre. Starboard is angling for Engineering and the hangar bays. And here to the bridge.'

'Major 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, thundering down the corridors to the side of the landing bays. 'Compartment F-43,' he heard in his headset. Rifles raised, they took their 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 a dull echo as the breaching pods, having navigated 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, now locked out, pounding on the door. Before he could respond, a loud explosion blew out the hatch to the compartment. His ears rang, and he ducked 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.

Private 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 leaned 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 scrabbled for a weapon as one of the shock troopers walked toward him. The Var Krelecz stood over Garland, the dark eyeslits in the helmet staring down, 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 groove on the disc as a high-pitched whine grew louder and louder. From compartment F-43, he heard what sounded like a loud cough. Suddenly the dead Var Krelecz shock troopers lifted from 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 Krelecz had detached the breaching pod from its landing site. Before he was flung into the compartment and out into space, Garlan 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. Private Broom had listened to the PPG fire as it grew in strength before eventually tailing off. 'Get this bulkhead open,' he 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 hangar 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 four life signs,' Berensen replied

'On each?'

'In total,' Berensen announced ashen-faced.

'Starfury flight, 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 warheads it'll break the back of the ship.'

'Missiles away,' Graydon said. 'The Armoury has discontinued re-arming.'

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 cannon turrets took out the breaching pods. With 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.

'Another wave of breaching pods,' Berensen said. 'Life signs confirmed. They've got troops onboard.'
'Where are they targeting?'

Berensen looked up. 'Here. They're heading for the bridge.'

THIRTY-ONE

March 24th 2262, EAS Titans, *Mitoc System*

Alexi Kutzov angled his Starfury toward the breaching pod as it approached the *Titans*. Before he could fire, a Frazi fighter flashed past his cockpit. As it banked hard, plasma bursts from a Var Krelecz fighter tore through the craft, blasting it apart.

Kutzov spun the Starfury, raking the enemy ship with his uni-pulse cannon, destroying it. Debris rained against his ship, 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 as, instead of being shot out into space, he was hurled toward the side of the *Titans*.

Ivanova stared intently at the tactical display. With the last of the Var Krelecz suicide pods dealt with, it flashed back to an overview of the whole battle. Fewer red dots infected the display, but the *Titans* had taken many hits. The hull had been compromised more times than she would have liked, but the damage control teams managed to contain the atmosphere loss and extinguished the fires quickly and effectively. No long term structural damage was expected. The hours of simulated drills appeared to have paid off.

Dorland's marines were holding their own against the shock troopers that boarded the ship. Two of the breaching pods heading for the bridge had made it through the curtain of fire from the anti-fighter network 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 for the dull thump, which came earlier than she expected. The nearest hatch 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 warheads,' 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.

Ivanova watched as a sustained burst of plasma fire from the Var Krelecz cruisers sliced through the leading edge of the *N'Tek*. 'Lieutenant Maddison, take us in close to give the Narn ship cover.'

'How close?' Graydon asked her.

'Try not to scrape the paintwork,' Ivanova said.

Ivanova felt a vibration shudder through the deckplates as the *Titans* advanced into what remained of the Var Krelecz armada. Space around them was littered with debris from the Var Krelecz cruisers and fighters. She saw the broken remains of Starfuries wheel past the external cameras. 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 its cannon sparked, leaving a glowing trail that curled around like a cat's tail. Behind it one of the T'Loth 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 before this battle was decided. On the screens, the emptiness of space was a barely visible backdrop to the fiery criss-crossing of plasma weapon bursts. A Var Krelecz cruiser rose up into view, firing directly at the Earth ship as the *Titans*' particle beam sliced through its 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 echoing 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 withdrawal and put enough space between the *Titans* and the enemy fleet so that the port missile launchers could be brought back online, Ivanova realised. All they could do was stand their ground and fight.

On the screen she saw the Var Krelecz 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 beam, retargeting,' Berensen said. 'Firing!'

The monitor flared white as the full force of the beams ripped through the enemy ships just as 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 Krelecz armada. In that moment Ivanova admitted to herself that they had been overconfident, trusting in the superior weaponry 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 to whatever 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 gracefully contoured hulls as they sped to engage the enemy.

'I think we're going to be okay,' Ivanova said, as she watched the ships sweep down over the Var Krelecz cruisers, neatly carving through their hulls with the forward-mounted discharge beams. At least two dozen ships swept down over the alien fleet and flashed past the *Titans*, braking hard and then spinning back around for another pass. As they finished their second attack run, red lights disappeared from the screen in rapid succession.

'What are they?' Graydon coughed.

'It's the White Star fleet,' Ivanova said. 'Rangers!'

The dead were laid out on the deck of the landing bay. Most were marines who 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 toward him.

'Twenty-seven dead. Thirty-one injured,' he said.

Ivanova bowed her head. 'They fought well,' she 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 looked dazed. Four other pilots had ejected and been picked up. Two of them, including Rowland, had broken bones and were getting treatment in the MedLab.

Eleven general crewmembers had been killed. Among 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 counterattack. 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; his neck was burnt, and a blackened depression marred 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, 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 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 activate her link, cursing as 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 angry. 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 crewmembers. 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 Krelecz 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.

Several hatches were open, and she looked in at the rows of empty bunks fitted 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: the ideal place to hide a stowaway.

A hatch opened ahead of her. She could see the light, first spilling into the corridor, suddenly blocked by a silhouette. Ivanova ran forward, and with fist raised she lashed out, catching someone square on the chin. The figure fell backward, and Ivanova tumbled in after him.

THIRTY-TWO

March 24th 2262, EAS Titans, *Mitoc System*

The room smelled of stale sweat, of someone locked up for too long. The tiny cubicle contained a small cot and minimal washing facilities. Wrappers from basic rations littered the floor. Wynant had come on board, and this is where he had hidden, sealed up inside, waiting for inter-ship communications to be relayed to him so he could dutifully passed them on through Gold Channels.

She tried to make the connection between the shy young man who had talked about the simple pleasure of standing in the sunshine and being the pride of his parents. That had been an act. It reminded her of Talia Winters on Babylon 5, the station's resident commercial telepath, whose whole life was revealed to be a lie when she was exposed as a sleeper agent. It was the personal betrayal more than anything that sickened Ivanova.

'Wynant was your man,' Ivanova said. Her hands squeezed the throat of the man sprawled on the floor, her 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, smacking 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? The look on your face must have been something, believing your new crew thought so little of you they sent a Junior Grade as escort.'

There was not enough room to throw a proper punch, but Ivanova managed to crack him across the chin before pushing herself away and standing.

'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 dribbled 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. There's EarthGov. And Psi Corps.' 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 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 me 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 grasp, Ivanova grabbed it like a stone in her palm 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 backward, head rolling from side to side.

'And the Var Krelecz?'

'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.'

'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, their force obviously wasn't 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 among 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 Krelecz 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 Krelecz 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. She gestured to Berensen. 'Have you ever seen the look of someone whose plans have come to naught?'

Berensen screamed with rage, a deep, guttural howl that filled the room as he lunged at Ivanova. A second shot smothered his cry. A silence descended on the barracks as he fell face down on the deck, his broken, outstretched hand landing on the tip of Ivanova'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 your 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 don't doubt it,' Graydon said.

'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 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 said. '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.' Then 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 point 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 toward her. One or two smiles answered her.

'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 the crew's 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 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 stood at her side and fought. What had stopped her, quite simply, was the pain of past relationships that had ended badly. She did not want to repeat the mistakes.

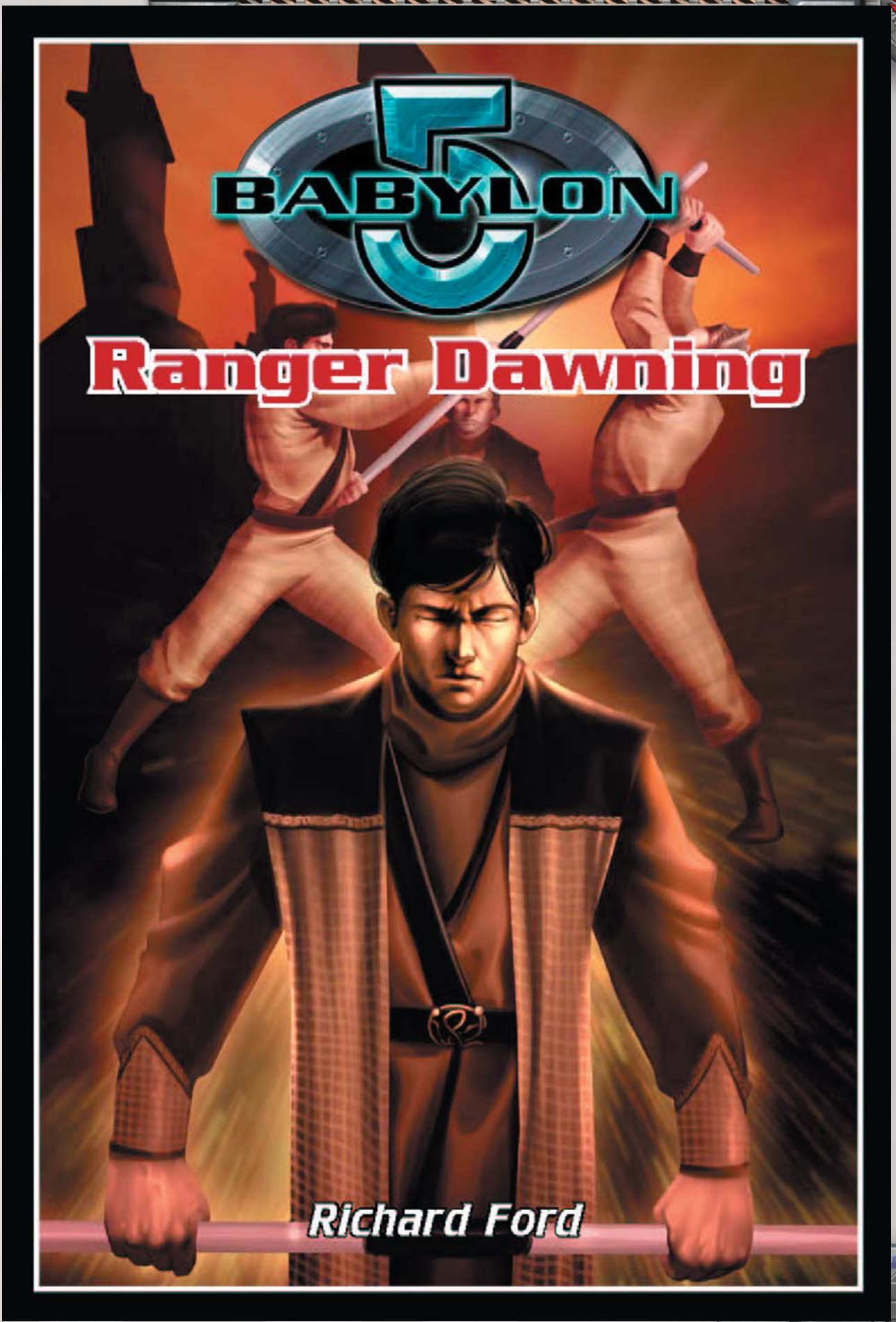
She mulled over Lorien's words. For the first time, Ivanova realised that, in his wisdom, what Lorien had suggested was that she had to love herself first before she could love anyone else. She wondered how much to tell Sheridan. The Alliance was still new and fragile. She wondered whether to wait until 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 saddened her after leaving Babylon 5 once the Shadowtech had been purged from her ship: she had not got to see G'Kar while she was aboard.

She would have liked to tell him that in the end, being among the humans was not so bad after all.

DIARY

I believe that people can judge you on your intellect, your humanity and even your soul. I do not believe they can judge you on your experience, for it is the one thing none of us can control, alter or plan. Destiny decides what this life brings for you, and you can only react in the way you are able to at the time. I believe that God has set some unusual traps for me in this life, causing me to build this ominous wall I have visualized growing higher and thicker throughout my life. After the experience of this journey and the feelings that have awoken my being, I believe I am beginning to see that my wall is not as well made as I thought it to be. The mortar is of an inferior quality and the bricks are beginning to crack and even crumble in places. I can foresee a day when I may be able to peer out from behind this wall and maybe even step over it and walk on, leaving it behind me. I have been blessed to know an outstanding group of people, and I have been pained to see them disappear back to the stars from where we came. I have felt anger and abandonment, confusion and rejection. I am beginning to feel only grace and love and divine forgiveness, words I could scarcely write before. My new command has given me the gift of a second chance, a clean slate and the luxury of a new personal challenge. I feel confident in my crew, and I can even say with all of my heart that I will try my best to become not only their ally, leader and Comrade, but also their trusting friend… if they give me the chance. I am tired of hiding, and I yearn to be able to honor Marcus' life, and the lives of all the others who have passed, by learning how to love again. I know I did once upon a time; I have to believe that I was once human. This journey has just begun, yet I feel it is the most important one I will ever undertake in my entire time in this universe. All I can do is keep chipping away at that wall… brick by brick. I will see the day it falls, for God wants it so and I am God. We are all God.


BABYLON 5
Ranger Dawning
Richard Ford

BEST OF THE BEST

The first shockstick hummed past Vance's ear. As he ducked he anticipated the second one. Randell wielded a weapon in each hand, and he damned sure knew how to use them. Vance was convinced his opponent had gotten faster since they last faced one another.

As expected, the second shockstick flashed forward, forcing Vance backward and slightly off balance. Randell pressed his advantage, moving in tight, giving Vance little room to manoeuvre. He raised both shocksticks, preparing a double blow for his smaller opponent. Vance ducked low and spun, twisting his body behind Randell, whose weapons hit nothing but air.

Vance was now behind his opponent with the time he needed to strike. First a right, then a left pounded into Randell's kidneys. The force of those punches would have been enough to bring down anyone, but Randell had two huge advantages. Built like a Sharlin warcruiser, big and graceful and tough as hell, he was also heavily padded, headgear and all. The fast and powerful blows knocked Randell forward, almost forcing him to drop one of his weapons, but the large man managed to keep his footing. He spun to face Vance, lashing out with one of the stinging shocksticks. Vance jumped back a safe distance, a sly grin crossing his face.

He hopped from one leg to the other, locking eyes with his opponent and allowing him time to recover. Randell breathed heavily, trying to regain both his strength and his composure. Vance moved forward, taking the initiative. Randell braced himself, waiting for the attack. The strike came in low, Vance feinting left then sidestepping to the right, easily avoiding Randell's clumsy block. His right came forward, hitting Randell just below the ribs. It would have been a staggering blow if not for the body armour. Randell might have dropped with all the wind blown out of him, but the force of Vance's fist just knocked him two steps back. 'Tai sing kyun,' thought Vance. His unarmed combat tutor had made him speak the names of each martial arts move as he performed it – a habit Vance had long ago tried to drop, but old habits died hard. He always enjoyed wing chun though.

As Randell's counterstrike swept down, Vance dropped to one knee and rolled away. In a single fluid motion he regained his feet, again hopping from one leg to the other. Randell shook his head, provoking another smile from Vance, as though surprised at his own agility.

Vance closed before Randell could regain his breath. Randell adopted a defensive posture, keeping his knees bent and both shocksticks in front of him. Vance was low, all the time keeping his eyes on the stinging weapons. When Vance was close enough, Randell stepped toward him, this time thrusting forward with the shockstick in his right hand. Vance easily deflected it and moved close to his opponent. Grabbing Randell's body armour at the collar, Vance flipped him.

The bulky padding made the already hulking Randell even less manoeuvrable, an easy victim for Vance's throw. The words 'koshi nage' flashed through Vance's mind as Randell landed on his back. He suddenly remembered aikido was less of a favourite discipline.

Randell struggled to his feet. Vance leapt clear in case his opponent tried any dirty moves. Experience taught him that Randell was not opposed to attacking his adversaries unawares. As he once again hopped from the ball of one foot to the other, Vance revelled in the spongy security of the mat beneath him. It felt comfortable and familiar. He felt truly at home here.

After giving Randell the time to stand and retrieve his weapons, Vance prepared for another attack, quickly deciding his moves. Just before advancing, he glanced up at the wall behind his opponent. The glowing clock read 11.45, nearly chow time. Smiling at Randell, Vance decided they'd had enough for one day. Somehow Randell sensed what was coming and, determined not to be embarrassed further, he screwed up his face in anger and charged. Vance had little opportunity to react to the unexpected attack. Weeks of daily beatings must have left Randell pretty sore, in more ways than one. It now appeared he'd reached his limit.

The first blow came in high. Vance could hear the hum of the shockstick, like a pesky insect. Driving the flat of his palm upwards, he hit Randell in the forearm before the attack struck true. The shockstick flew from Randell's grip. Instantly, Randell's other weapon came flying in at head height. Vance ducked, forced to bend backward as Randell quickly reversed his strike. Randell's fury fuelled his exertions beyond anything Vance had seen from the big man. Another swipe, then another thrust, was followed by a backhand attack. Each time Vance found himself straining to avoid the humming baton. The attacks, driven by Randell's anger and frustration, were ultimately predictable. As Randell came in with his final swipe, Vance caught his wrist. With his other hand, he plucked the shockstick from Randell's grip and, using his left leg as a solid brace, kicked out with his right. Randell sailed backwards and, even before he hit the ground, Vance shut off the shockstick and the annoying sound it emitted. Randell hit the crash mat with a sickening thud, his padded armour accentuating the noise. He bounced almost a foot into the air, then finally came to rest. 'Kesa geri,' Vance thought. Now, karate he loved!

Randell lay still for several seconds. Vance knew he wasn't hurt physically, but the humiliation was probably worse than ever. He approached gingerly, holding out a hand of friendship to his sparring partner. Randell was staring at the ceiling of the gym, not blinking, his face expressionless. 'I'm glad we do this when the training hall's empty,' he said.

'Let's eat, big guy,' replied Vance as he heaved his hulking friend to his feet. 'We've just got time to hit the showers.'

'Good idea. Only you haven't even broken a sweat. Again.'

Vance didn't answer, not wanting to add any further damage to the pride of his already wounded buddy. They stepped off the raised combat area and headed for the shower room, Randell struggling to extricate himself from the bulky body armour. As Vance started to help him, the main entrance to the gym crashed open. A stern figure entered, wearing the severe green of EarthForce military. The swooping eagle on his arm, along with the crisp envelope in his hand, alerted Vance that the man was part of the courier corps. Despite his lack of military rank, the man's serious demeanour brought a certain tension to the relaxed atmosphere of the gym.

Vance and Randell stiffened as he approached, standing to attention as was required in formal military situations. The courier marched up and stopped before them, saluting curtly. Vance reciprocated with a salute of his own; Randell's was a little slower as he fumbled with the headgear and shocksticks in his padded mittens.

'Corporal James Vance?' asked the courier, unsure which was the correct recipient of his envelope.

'I'm Corporal Vance.' The courier wasted no time in thrusting the envelope forward. Before Vance could thank him, he turned on his heel and headed for the door.

Vance stared at the manila envelope. For several days he had waited for this envelope – with the stamp in the corner picturing a black silhouette of a wolf's head staring at a crescent moon. Randell could see it too, and Vance heard his friend breathing in his ear. He glared at his red-faced and greasy-skinned sparring partner.

'Well, are you going to open it, or do I have to take it off you?' asked Randell.

'You could try,' replied Vance, inserting his thumb beneath the lip and tearing the envelope's crisp brown edge. The white paper within bore the same wolf and moon insignia. Vance took in every detail as his eyes scanned the page. Then he hesitated before reading. This wasn't like him, but the weeks of pent up frustration, of waiting for this one communiqué, made him hesitate.

'To Corporal James Vance,' whispered Randell slowly, craning his neck to read the letter over Vance's shoulder. Vance turned and stared at him, making his annoyance clear. 'Sorry,' said Randell, stepping back.

'Since you're so interested.' Vance held the letter up like an ancient herald about to announce an edict from the king. 'To Corporal James Vance. In response to your application for membership to the Razvedchik Regiment, we are pleased to announce that after reviewing your recommendations, you have been accepted for a probationary period of no less than three months.' Vance paused, soaking up the news. As he read further, a smile crossed his face. 'We are also pleased to note that your physical and mental test results were classed as "exemplary", and you are the youngest officer ever to be accepted to the regiment.' At this, Randell gave Vance a dig in his arm. 'Your official commencement as a member of the regiment will take place on the 14 March 2259. If you have any remaining leave with your current EarthForce unit, we suggest you take it before your training begins. You will most certainly need it! Yours, Major Kyle Winchester, EarthForce Special Operations Command.'

'Well, what do you know,' said Randell. Vance looked up to see him beaming with pride, as though Randell had just gained the promotion. 'Standards at the Razvedchiks must be dropping if you're an "exemplary" candidate.'

'They just know quality when they see it, my old friend.' With that he landed a punch on Randell's arm. The thick padding absorbed most of the blow, but the look on Randell's face suggested it was still painful. Vance ducked away as Randell made a wild swing. He backed off, beckoning his friend forward. Randell flung his padded helmet, but Vance easily avoided it as he ran toward the showers, grinning all the way.

At the packed dining hall, an endless procession of khaki uniforms queued, ate and chatted beneath the room's high ceiling. The smell of freshly hydrated freeze-dried rations wafted across the crowd, and Vance breathed deeply as he entered. Never one for gastronomy, he saw the food purely as a functional necessity, the more nutritious the better. The smell still excited him though, meaning so much more than just a healthy meal. To Vance the smell meant he was among his people. In a way, the mess hall was the boiler room of the army, the engine that drove EarthForce, and one of the reasons they were the best in the galaxy. Vance felt proud to be a part of it.

He picked up a tray and joined the end of the dinner line, noting that several faces looked up from their meals, nodding to him in congratulations. Good news travelled fast. You couldn't keep a secret in this kind of environment, and despite occasional rivalries, the success of one soldier was the success of the entire company.

Vance picked a meal of rubbery chicken, corn and boiled potatoes, then sat down at a vacant table. Within seconds Chavez and Weekes, fellow corporals who had been with him since the beginning of his basic training, slid into the plastic seats opposite him.

'So Vance moves into the big time,' said Chavez, his sarcasm barely masking his envy.

'Yeah, I'm surprised you're eating here,' added Weekes. 'Shouldn't you be getting some practice at eating your corn covertly?' Vance stuffed his mouth with a huge pile of potatoes, smiling as he chewed. Gracing them with an answer was not even a consideration. Besides, he knew they were both jealous as hell.

'Make the most of those portions, Jimmy boy. In the Razvedchiks you'll have to survive on half a canteen and a tube of toothpaste,' Weekes continued. Vance tried to increase the size of his smile, chewing all the while.

'And poor old Randell. What's he gonna do without you to look after him? Guy struggles to dress himself without his buddy Vance. How's he gonna cope?' mewled Chavez.

Vance swallowed hard and looked straight into Chavez's eyes. 'Why don't you ask him?' he said, glancing over the man's shoulder. Chavez seemed to pale visibly, then he slowly turned. Weekes followed his gaze. Randell stood directly behind them, clutching his tray, piled high with an assortment of starters, mains and desserts. His look showed none of its usual jovial demeanour.

'Any room?' he asked quietly. Chavez and Weekes almost leapt apart as Randell squeezed between them. 'Take no notice, Vance. These guys could never make it; that's why they're goading you. Besides, they probably don't know about your "exemplary" test results.'

Weekes whistled a low trill that made Randell glance at him, eyebrow raised. Weekes kept his eyes firmly on his food tray, and Randell shook his head. 'I reckon they'd love to apply too. They just don't have the stones.'

'Hey,' said Chavez, 'we was only kidding. Congratulations, buddy. I'm sure you'll do great.'

'Yeah,' agreed Weekes, 'well done. When's the party?'

'Well, they did suggest I use my leave before training begins. How about a trip to Mars? Some R&R with a long-legged Martian lovely might be just the celebration I need.' Vance beamed at the thought.

Chavez stared open-mouthed. 'Er, I don't know if you've been keeping up with news. Riots? Terrorists? Mars ain't exactly a holiday camp these days.'

'Yeah,' said Weekes, 'and apparently the recycled air makes your skin go funny.'

Vance laid down his fork, looking seriously at Chavez and Weekes. 'Are you sure you're both EarthForce officers and not spies for the Little Girl's Brigade? Where's your sense of adventure?'

'Adventure's one thing,' replied Chavez, 'but EarthForce ain't real popular on Mars right now. We'd be walking targets as soon as we landed. How about Wyoming Rec Dome? I hear it's wild this time of year.'

Vance began to dig into his meal once again. 'You ladies go to Wyoming if you feel like you deserve a week of sewing with your grandmas. Randell and me are going to Mars. Right, Randell?'

His question was met with silence. When Vance looked up, Randell was digging into what looked like reconstituted trifle. He was conspicuously silent. 'Just me then, I guess,' said Vance, as much to himself as to the trio sitting in front of him.

The four of them ate quickly in silence for several minutes. If you didn't finish by the time the mess officer shouted the dismissal order, that was just tough. A voice suddenly drifted across the canteen. To Vance it was like a zephyr of fragrant air wafted past the stale-smelling food and tickled him in a sensitive spot. 'James Vance, I want a word with you.'

Randell looked up and reddened noticeably. Vance girded himself, taking a quick mouthful of water to ensure no stray corn skins covered his teeth, then he turned smoothly. Jeany had a tall athletic build, but her face was sweeter than a baby's doll. Her yellow hair was tied back in a tight ponytail that bounced as she walked. Despite her cute appearance, Vance knew she was as tough as shoe leather when it came to close-combat fighting, and she fought dirty to boot.

'You were planning to leave all this time, and you never told me?' Jeany sounded hurt, but Vance knew she was only feigning. Nothing had ever happened between them – indeed, there was nothing between Jeany and any guy in the platoon, but it didn't stop them all from wishing.

'Jeany,' said Vance, trying his best not to look flustered, 'do you think I'd leave without saying goodbye to my favourite girl?'

Jeany replied with a playful dig into Vance's shoulder. 'Few drinks in the mess hall tonight? I promise I'll wear that khaki number you go wild for.'

'Wouldn't miss it,' said Vance.

'Me neither,' agreed Chavez, almost inaudibly.

'See you then,' smiled Jeany. Four sets of eyes watched her walk away, ponytail bobbing jauntily against the back of her head.

'Corporal Vance.' A harsh male voice interrupted whatever lascivious thoughts reeled through the soldiers' heads. Vance turned, still wearing his doe-eyed expression. His grin melted at the sight of Sergeant Decker's battle-scarred face staring down at him. 'Major wants to see you in his office. Stat. Hop to it.'

Vance didn't finish his meal or ask the Sergeant the reason. You never questioned Sergeant Decker. He quickly emptied the remains of his meal into the swill bin and headed for Major Cleaver's office.

The solid oak door to Cleaver's office stood in stark contrast to the rest of the EarthForce base's harsh steel plating and rivets. Cleaver imported the door and hired an authentic carpenter to hang it the old fashioned way. Its unique design announced Cleaver's individuality in relation to the one-size-fits-all style of the rest of the complex. Rumour said Cleaver had the door put in just to give his office a real air of authority, and to make entering it a more intimidating experience. As Vance waited in front of the finely marbled wood, he had to agree.

'Enter,' a deep voice, as solid as the oak door, bellowed from within the Major's office. Taking a deep breath, Vance opened the intimidating door. The interior of the Major's office was as impressive as the entrance. Certificates of of-

fice decorated the walls alongside trophies awarded for the regiment's achievements, both socially and militarily. Various reprographs of the Major shaking hands with assorted dignitaries lined one side: one with President Santiago, another with a Centauri that Vance didn't recognise, several more with representatives of races he'd never seen before. On either side of a huge oak desk stood two standards: one representing the Earth Alliance, the other EarthForce itself. The green EarthForce standard bore several campaign insignias, but the one that stood out the most was at the bottom. It simply read: "Minbari".

The most impressive sight of all sat behind the desk. Major Cleaver's shock of grey hair was all Vance could see as he stood to attention. He waited for several seconds as the Major finished reading a blue-tinged letter. Vance couldn't make out the symbol at the top of the paper, but it looked alien.

'Sit down, Corporal Vance,' said the Major without looking up. Vance hesitated slightly at the totally unexpected invitation, wondering if it was a trick. After sliding carefully into the seat, he sat straight and rigid, uncomfortable with the entire situation. He took some comfort in the knowledge that this would be over soon. The Major obviously wanted to congratulate him on his recruitment to a Special Forces unit and send him on his way.

'You're probably wondering why I sent for you.' This was not the start Vance had expected. When he didn't answer, Major Cleaver continued. 'This is a little awkward for me, but I have a communiqué from Colonel Vance, and he's asked me to give you a message, James. It's very important that you meet him on Babylon 5 immediately.'

Colonel Vance? His father? Vance's head began to spin; this whole situation was totally unexpected. Not only was the Major acting as a go between for Vance and his father, but he'd just used his first name!

'I know you and your father aren't exactly on speaking terms, but he wants to see you nonetheless. I know you have leave coming up, so I'd see it as a personal favour to me if you could use that time to visit him.'

Vance couldn't believe his ears. Major Cleaver, the most feared man on the base, was acting like a kindly old uncle trying to reconcile a father and son. It made no sense.

'Did the Colonel tell you what this was about, sir?' asked Vance.

'Well son, I know you two have never seen eye to eye. I can only think that he wants to get to know you again.'

'I never really knew him to begin with, sir. I don't see any real reason to start now.'

'The Colonel and I have known each other for a long time. I fought under him in the Minbari War, and I owe him. Again, I'd see it as a personal favour to me if you'd go and see your father.' Major Cleaver suddenly transformed back into the stern leader Vance knew so well.

'I understand, sir, but I'm under no obligation to the Colonel. I've never relied on the Colonel's reputation to further my own career, and I don't feel I owe him anything.'

'I respect you wanting to make your own way, son. I can even understand why you refused to join the Officer's Academy and enlisted as a grunt. What I don't get is why you wouldn't want to get to know your father. He's a fine soldier and a great man.'

'With all due respect, Major, my father might have been a great soldier, but he was a lousy father and a worse husband to my mother. The last time I saw him was at my mother's funeral, and I don't care to see him again.'

'Understood.' The Major glanced down, a frown crossing his already wrinkled forehead. 'I didn't want to have to take this route, but you've left me no choice. As of tomorrow morning, your leave is cancelled. You are ordered to board the next available transport to the Babylon 5 Diplomatic Station, where you will meet Colonel Vance. You will be given further orders at that meeting.'

Vance sat motionless as Major Cleaver recited his orders. There was a pause, as though Cleaver was allowing him the chance to speak. 'Will that be all, Major Cleaver?' asked Vance.

'Yes, Corporal Vance. Dismissed.' Cleaver sounded disappointed, not with Vance, but with himself and what he'd been forced to do. Vance didn't resent the old man. He knew he acted out of loyalty to the Colonel. Vance knew from experience that his father always got what he wanted.

Vance stood, saluted, turned on his heel and marched towards the door. 'Oh, and Vance,' said the Major suddenly. Vance turned as he reached the door. 'Congratulations on your promotion. I'm sure you'll do well.'

'Thank you, Major,' replied Vance. 'I'll try not to let you down.' With that he opened the door and marched back to his quarters.

A hundred questions ran through his mind on the long walk from Major Cleaver's office. Surely his father wasn't simply interested in a reunion after all this time. Vance had made his feelings clear to his father years before. As far as he was concerned, his parental relationships died with his mother. He would neither ask nor expect anything from his father. So why the sudden interest?

Randell was waiting when Vance got back. As Vance entered, Randell's face brightened. 'Look,' he said, standing suddenly and shrugging his large shoulders, 'I've been thinking. Maybe Mars isn't such a bad idea. We could go together, just the two of us. The more I think about it, the more I think you're right. We'll have a–'

'We won't be going at all,' said Vance. Quashing Randell's enthusiasm angered him more than the cancelled leave and heavy-handed tactics of his father. 'The only place I'm heading to is Babylon 5. I'm under orders to meet Colonel Vance there.'

'Your old man?' asked Randell. 'Boy, that sucks!'

'I have no choice. Orders from Major Cleaver.'

'Well, at least we can have one last night in the mess. Jeany will be there.' Randell raised an eyebrow suggestively, and Vance smiled at his persistence.

'I don't think so. I've got to be on the early transport, and a night out with you guys never ends the same night.'

'Fair enough, but if you change your mind…' Randell patted Vance on the shoulder and left the room. Vance was quite surprised at how easily Randell had conceded, but he put it down to an uncharacteristic burst of sympathy. Still wondering what his father wanted with him, he packed for his journey to Babylon 5.

That evening Vance decided to skip dinner. He didn't think he could handle all the questions from his comrades, especially when he didn't have the answers himself.

He stood on the viewing platform of Hangar Bay 07, watching the supply shuttles leaving for their various destinations. Seeing the beauty of the steel birds taking off as the sun set on the desolate horizon never failed to cheer him. The ships criss-crossed the galaxy, linking with a hundred different platoons, stationed on an uncountable number of worlds. The sight made him feel part of something huge. Acknowledging this link to men he would never meet, but whom he knew had received the same training and followed the same ideals, made Vance proud. Proud to be part of EarthForce and proud to be human. On the landing platform, technicians busied themselves with refuelling, checking landing gear, stabilisers, cockpits, life support and a host of other things Vance didn't understand. He only knew how to fight, but his lack of knowledge made him feel neither inadequate nor superior. EarthForce was a living, breathing entity to him, and he was its strong right hand.

The first transport to Babylon 5 didn't leave until 0730, so he had plenty of time. Time he didn't want. Departure couldn't come soon enough. The thing he hated most was the waiting.

Growling turbines shook the viewing platform as one of the transports fired its engines. A group of technicians scuttled to safety as the thrusters began to wind up. Steadily the transport lifted off, its hull engines blackening the plascrete landing pad. It hovered for a few seconds, steadying itself, then the landing gear flipped up into the main bulk of the craft. Banking slightly, the transport lurched forward as its rear thrusters engaged, and it finally sailed off into the sky. At a safe distance, the auxiliary thrusters kicked in, and the ship was propelled skyward toward its destination.

Vance never took his eyes from the craft until it disappeared into the pale red sky. The digital readout told him it was 1847 hours. Best thing would be to get some shuteye before the difficult day ahead. One of the most important lessons EarthForce training taught was to take every opportunity for sleep, especially if your mission was uncertain; you never knew when you'd next get the chance to rest.

The deserted, spartan corridors echoed as Vance made his way back to his quarters. Rounding a corner near the gymnasium, he found a familiar figure blocking his way. There stood Randell, fully decked out in the red, padded bodysuit he'd worn that morning. Vance could barely stop himself from laughing. 'You must be kidding,' he said.

Randell bore a stern look. 'You can't leave without giving me one last chance to give you the hiding you deserve.'

'OK. You asked for it.'

He marched past Randell, straight toward the gym. As he flung the doors wide, a sudden cheer erupted. Vance's jaw dropped as what looked like his entire platoon applauded and hooted in the brightly lit gymnasium. Jeany stood front and centre, holding a bottle of champagne. Vance had no idea how she got her hands on genuine Dom Perignon so far from civilisation, but she always acquired things others could only dream of. Weekes and Chavez were also there, both holding paper cups which, by their wide-eyed expressions, surely contained substances of a dubious and highly alcoholic nature.

As the crowd surrounded him, clapping and patting him on the back, he turned to see Randell's beaming face. He smiled back, hiding his sadness, as he wondered if he would ever see this bunch of comrades again.

Randell slept heavily as Vance sneaked out of their shared quarters. It was 0712 and he'd slept for less than two hours. His mouth felt like he'd been chewing on a pair of Randall's sweaty socks all night, and his head was filled with a thick, wiry soup.

He gently closed the door as he left, shutting out the sound of Randell's snoring. The big man would probably be disappointed he hadn't had the opportunity to say goodbye, but Vance wasn't one for drawn-out farewells.

The docking bay was deserted, his transport designed for supplies rather than passengers. Vance presented his orders to the shuttle's captain and was told to board. He didn't look back as he entered the ship that would take him to Babylon 5, to the meeting he'd been avoiding for all these years.

AN UNREASONABLE REQUEST

Although he would never admit it to anyone, Vance hated space travel. He could pilot a Starfury well enough, but whenever he was a passenger on a transport, he grew uneasy. The pit of his stomach churned whenever he knew he had to fly. A man in his position could not avoid the inevitable long space journey, but nobody said he had to like it. The journey itself was never

that bad – just tedious – but the taking off and docking were unpleasant. Vance long ago came to terms with the certain "control-freakiness" of his personality. If he wasn't piloting, riding, driving or otherwise physically controlling his entire situation, he became unnerved. Of course, he showed no outward symptoms of this: he didn't sweat, wring his hands or mumble fearfully. To an observer, Vance seemed his usual calm and steady self, even in turbulence. Only Vance knew of these feelings, and that was the way he wanted it to stay.

The sight of the magnificent station did little to allay his fears. Beyond the massive, spinning construction, the sun was shining, a bright semicircle peering over the top of the station. Vance knew only ten inches of reinforced plexiglass separated him from total irradiation. This unbidden thought sawed at his rapidly fraying nerves.

'Docking sequence initiated,' sang a recorded voice. 'Docking will be complete in two minutes.' Vance always did his research, meticulously planning every eventuality. More ships crashed during docking than take-off and flight put together. Statistically, you were 6.4 times more likely to die during a docking sequence than at any other time in the journey.

With a shudder, the ship's rear thrusters cut. Vance heard the reverse thrusters kick in – one sharp hiss, then another, as the pilot began stabilising the vessel for entry. This relatively smooth approach reminded Vance that a military pilot was transporting him. Had this been a civilian transport, he would have felt much less secure.

The seating area suddenly darkened as the ship slid into the docking bay. A sharp clang echoed as magnetic stabilising arms grasped the shuttle. Neon lights winked on in the bay area, bathing the cabin in a weird infrared glow. Vance sighed; the worst part was over. Within seconds, the shuttle came to rest and the bustle began, the crew busying themselves with unloading supplies.

Vance wasted no time unbuckling himself, and then he grabbed his bag from a secured locker behind his seat. All he received was a curt nod of acknowledgment from the captain, who was busy directing his crew, and Vance made his way down the shuttle's gantryway.

Two grey-suited security guards waited by the exit, and Vance produced his orders and identicard, emblazoned with the EarthForce insignia. One of the security guards scanned it with a handheld reader. After a brief wait, he handed the card back and dismissed Vance with a satisfied wave. 'Enjoy your visit, Corporal Vance. Quarters have been made ready for you, courtesy of the Colonel. If you make your way to Green 3, a security officer will show you to your room.'

Vance nodded in acknowledgment and hustled past the guards. His position as an EarthForce corporal did come with its privileges, but being given such preferential treatment made him uncomfortable.

He made his way along a corridor and followed a sign reading "All Sectors". After finding the main transport tube, he climbed aboard and read the coloured map on the wall. Green Sector was two stops away, and it couldn't come soon enough.

The shuttle slowed to a halt after one stop, and a large figure boarded. Vance recognised him as a Narn, although he had never encountered one in the flesh before. The mottle-skinned alien smiled at Vance as it entered, and he smiled back. He learned in basic training how the Narn could go from a state of quiet contemplation to open hostility at the slightest rebuff. Vance wasn't worried about the imminent and unpredictable danger; he had been taught how to deal with them when they got aggressive. Trying to match a Narn blow-for-blow would be futile, as their dense bone structure and thick skins made it almost impossible for a human to do much damage with fists or feet. A piercing weapon or chokehold was the only way to bring a Narn down effectively. Vance's standard issue combat knife was tucked away in the duffle bag under his seat. As he began to reflect on the variety of chokeholds he knew, mostly from ju-jitsu, the shuttle slowed to a stop once more. With another smile the Narn exited. Again, Vance smiled back, feeling slightly foolish for his over-cautious attitude.

One stop later, the shuttle arrived at his stop in Green Sector. The girl from security waiting to greet him chatted politely as she guided him through Green 3 to his quarters. She smiled all the way, recommending a few eateries in the Zocalo, and then she handed him a passkey for his room. Vance returned the smile, having neither the opportunity nor the inclination to answer her in anything other than a polite grunt.

His quarters were small but functional, with what looked like a comfortable bed and even a shower, a luxury he hadn't expected on a ship where fresh running water must be a scarce commodity. The air, on the other hand, was thick and stale, and Vance could almost taste the recycled bodily odours of a thousand fellow passengers. Nevertheless, he had far more space than in his EarthForce bunk – and best of all, Randell wasn't here to keep him up all night with his snoring.

Vance dumped his bag on the bed. The winking of the BabCom unit in the corner of the room caught his eye, and 'Saved Message' flashed at him with an annoying persistence. 'Play message,' ordered Vance, already knowing whose face would appear on the screen.

Sure enough, the pinched cheeks and high forehead of his father stared at him severely from the screen. There was a pause, as though the Colonel waited for someone to tell him to begin. Then he spoke. 'Jimmy, it's your father.'

I know that, thought Vance. I can see you on screen.

'I'd like to thank you for coming at such short notice.' Like he had a choice. 'We'll meet later to talk. I've booked us for dinner at the Fresh Air Restaurant in the hydroponics area

of Green Sector. Be there at 1900. In the meantime, I have some business to attend, but I'm sure you can busy yourself productively. Colonel Vance out.'

The Colonel's face disappeared, replaced by the Babylon 5 insignia. Vance's ears rang from his father's grating tone, a voice that had commanded hundreds, maybe thousands, of men in its time. Now it commanded him. Again. Vance wasn't averse to taking orders, but he spent years trying to disassociate himself from the Colonel. Unfortunately, just like his journey here, he had no control over this. The Colonel piloted the ship this time.

His unpacking took very little time, as he'd only brought one change of clothes: casual civilian trousers and a shirt. Vance hoped the Fresh Air Restaurant wasn't a jacket and tie affair or he would be turned away at the door. He could imagine the look on his father's face if that happened.

It was only 1630, plenty of time to look around and take in the station. He had heard a lot about it: the cautionary tales about it being a den of iniquity, the superstitious stories of the jinx hanging over it, the undeniable fact that its four predecessors had all come to untimely ends. Despite all this, Vance was never one to believe rumours; he always liked to experience things before forming an opinion. Donning his civilian clothing, he headed for the door but then paused. His combat knife was still tucked in his duffle bag. If the station was half as bad as some of the stories suggested, he might need it. He almost turned around, almost opened the bag and took out his only real weapon, when he remembered the Narn in the shuttle, how he offered a friendly smile and completely surprised Vance with his affable nature. Smiling to himself, Vance left the knife and headed toward Red Sector.

True to its reputation, the Zocalo was a hive of activity. Along with the stories of the station's tragedy and woe, Vance had also heard about the Zocalo. Apparently you could find anything here, as long as you were willing to pay the right price. Vance guessed that was most likely an exaggeration, but as long as he could get a strong drink, all was well. His hangover had faded on the shuttle from Earth, and he usually did not drink two days in a row unless he was forced – Chavez and Weekes could be very persuasive. But if he was going to meet his father, some chemically induced courage might be necessary.

Like any bar on any planet, the Zocalo had an eclectic mix of patrons, with many more aliens than Vance was used to. He had travelled his share of alien planets, had taken leave on many more, but rarely had he seen a Brakiri standing shoulder to shoulder with a Drazi and a Llort.

It didn't take the barman long to serve him, and Vance handed over his credit chip, asking for a Rubbles. Vance had grown accustomed to the Martian beer when he was last posted there. The barman handed him the red bottle, and Vance took a long draught. Happy memories accompanied the bitter-tasting brew as it washed down his throat. Not quite as cold as he liked, but you couldn't have everything. The last time he sank a bottle of Rubbles, he'd been surrounded by his men. Now he was stuck on a station in the back of beyond, waiting to dine with the great Colonel Vance. It made him feel like a condemned man.

'Cheer up, my friend,' chirped a voice from his right. Vance didn't recognise the accent, but as he looked up the face seemed very familiar. 'Anyone would think the Great Maker himself were hunting your soul.'

A Centauri sporting a hooked nose and pronounced paunch regarded Vance with a stare both amused and concerned. He had never actually met a Centauri before, and Vance was stunned at the forceful personality of this one. He sat and watched the mane-haired alien, fearing some kind of telepathic con trick.

'Surely it cannot be that bad,' the Centauri continued. 'Although I see you have turned to drink, and so early in the day. What is your tipple?' The Centauri leaned forward and, upon spying the Rubbles bottle in Vance's grip, stuck out his tongue. 'Ach, disgusting! It amazes me how you humans can stomach such a thing. Beer! Now tell me, have you ever tried Brevari?' The Centauri said that final word like he was speaking the name of a favourite lover.

Vance could only shake his head. The Centauri had caught him completely off guard. 'Well,' he continued, 'the supply they have here is a little substandard but palatable nonetheless. Barkeep!' The Centauri banged on the bar.

Vance looked around, certain that by now a crowd would have gathered to see why the Centauri was making such a fuss. Strangely, the entire bar seemed completely apathetic, some even looking as though they were purposefully ignoring the Centauri. The bartender glanced over his shoulder, barely acknowledging his brash customer who was even now wagging his finger at a bottle on one of the shelves. The bartender nodded and placed the bottle in front of the Centauri.

'Two glasses please. I am about to introduce my new friend to a fresh experience.' The Centauri looked up suddenly. 'My apologies, I have neglected to introduce myself. I am Londo Mollari, ambassador for the Centauri Republic.' He held out his hand. Vance grasped it warily.

'Vance. They just call me Vance.'

Londo shook Vance's hand vigorously then wasted no time pouring two generous draughts from the decanter-shaped bottle. 'Please, please. Put down that gaudy looking bottle of beer. Trust me, when you have tried this, you will never look back.' He handed one of the glasses to Vance. The liquid resembled brandy, but as Vance raised it to his lips he could smell a sweet, pungent aroma. Londo flicked back the glass, allowing the Brevari to slip down his throat. A smile crossed his face, and he slammed the glass down on the bar. Vance, thinking it the proper way, followed suit. He had tasted an array of alcoholic beverages in his time, but this was entirely different. As the liquid slipped down his throat, it burned with a strange

cold sensation and seemed to cling to his insides. The aftertaste was slightly aniseedy.

'Good, yes?' shouted Londo, slapping Vance's back and nodding so vigorously the enormous tuft of hair atop his head wagged like a happy dog's tail. Vance was lost for words. 'Excellent! Another! Then we will discuss why you have come to this hive of villainy in the, how do you humans say… "ass end of nowhere".'

Vance desperately wanted to answer, but the Brevari coated his larynx like a quick-setting adhesive. Londo filled both glasses once again and swigged his down immediately. Vance picked up his own glass and, with a half-hearted smile, drank deeply. Strangely, the second glass seemed to counteract some of the side effects of the first, and his throat cleared once again.

'Anyway,' began the Ambassador, 'I was in the Emperor's Palace on Centauri Prime as a young man, when I saw one of the courtiers, a beautiful specimen, staring at me rather suggestively…'

Vance glanced at his watch, noting through a Brevari-induced fog that it read 1857. He had no idea how much he had drunk, but the room slid around him in a manner that suggested it might have been a drop or three too much. Londo had regaled him with tales of the Centauri Empire for almost two-and-a-half hours. Vance wasn't sure if he'd actually managed to speak a single word in that time, but he didn't mind. The bombastic Centauri had certainly taken his mind off his concerns.

'My apologies, Ambassador, but I must leave. I have a rather important dinner appointment.' Londo stopped halfway through a rendition of a particularly bawdy Centauri drinking song. He smiled and clapped Vance on the shoulder. Vance realised the shoulder ached and wondered how many times this Centauri had struck him there. He imagined he was getting a taste of what Randell felt like after a sparring match.

'Nice talking to you, my friend,' Londo said.

I bet it was, thought Vance as he stepped away from the bar. The room began to tilt slightly, and Vance steadied himself before continuing. He could only guess what the Colonel would say when he turned up in this state, but what the hell. A grown man could do whatever he wanted. A corporal in EarthForce, about to be promoted into the best covert operations unit in the galaxy, answered to no one. Nobody could intimidate him, not even his father.

The journey to the Fresh Air Restaurant proved a wholly unpleasant experience. The Brevari left a sickly sensation in the pit of his stomach, and Vance now understood why Londo advised him to keep drinking the stuff. He couldn't wait for the hangover. The shuttle stopped in Green Sector, and Vance stepped off. The Fresh Air Restaurant waited at the end of a trail of well-dressed couples and exotic-looking aliens. The restaurant itself rested next to the hydroponic area, and the resulting smell was the most refreshing Vance had experienced since boarding the station.

Vance glanced down at his watch once more: 1907. The Colonel wouldn't like that one bit; he hated tardiness. Taking a deep breath in the vain hope it would clear his head, Vance marched up to a man with greasy hair and an expensive-looking tuxedo. 'Excuse me,' said Vance, trying his best to sound sober. 'I have an appointment to see Colonel Vance. We have a table booked for seven.'

The man stared at Vance nonplussed. Vance raised an eyebrow. 'What are you telling me for,' said the man. 'Who do you think I am, the maitre'd?' With that the man walked past Vance and left the restaurant.

The sudden ominous sound of someone clearing his throat made Vance turn slowly. The frowning face of his father glared at him from a table not ten feet away. Vance smiled and nodded. The Colonel continued to frown. 'Are you going to sit,' he asked, 'or continue to harass the other customers?'

Vance marched forward, trying his best to appear sober. So far it seemed to be working. He sat opposite his father and leaned on the table. 'Elbows,' said the Colonel. 'You're not in the mess hall now.'

Childhood memories flooded back as Vance re-lived a thousand dinner table scoldings. As much as he tried to resist obeying his father, he sat up straight, almost to attention. 'I've taken the liberty of ordering for you. I hope you don't mind.' Vance remained silent, trying to look anywhere but directly at his father. The journey from the Zocalo had done some good in clearing his head a little. Being in the presence of the Colonel was sobering enough on its own.

'Your promotion was well deserved, I hear. Congratulations. You must be proud of yourself.'

'Did we really come hear to discuss my promotion, Colonel? Or is there something specific? I hardly believe you summoned me halfway across the galaxy so you could congratulate me in person.'

The Colonel looked awkward, as though he were a schoolboy caught stealing. Vance had never seen his father look that way before. Something was definitely wrong. 'You're right. This was never intended as a social meeting. I have a very important request. Consider it… an assignment.'

'I'm not under your command, Colonel. You hold ranking seniority, but I answer to my superiors on Earth, not to you.'

'I'm well aware of that.' The Colonel's jaw was locked. Although Vance had him at an advantage, he felt no satisfaction. 'The mission I need you to carry out is of the utmost importance. However, it will be outside the remit of EarthForce.'

'Whatever it is, Colonel, I can't. In addition to the fact that I don't take my orders from you, I'm due to enlist in the Razvedchiks in two weeks. I can't plan and execute a mission in that time.'

'I understand,' said the Colonel. 'That's why I need you to turn down your promotion.'

Vance felt like he'd been slapped in the face. This must be some kind of joke. He laughed, a forced chuckle accentuated by his light-headedness. When the Colonel's face didn't crack, Vance knew he was in trouble. 'You can't be serious. After everything I've been through to get this promotion. It's all I've wanted for the past five years, and you want me to just turn it down?' Vance's voice rose to an embarrassing level. The Colonel looked fleetingly from side to side, fielding the awkward glances being fired in their direction.

A waiter suddenly appeared at Vance's shoulder bearing two plates. 'Calamari marinara,' he said, lovingly laying the plates in front of the two men. Vance didn't have much of an opinion on fine dining, but seafood he hated. He didn't complain, but neither did he eat. The Colonel didn't pick up his starter fork either, and both men simply glared at each other for several seconds.

'I wouldn't ask you to do this unless it was crucial to EarthForce. Even more than that, it's crucial to the future of the entire galaxy.' The Colonel whispered this, but every word was clear and precise.

Vance shook his head, a bitter smile on his lips. 'Would mom think so?' He spat the words with a venom that shocked even himself.

The Colonel leaned back in his chair. 'Do we need to bring this up every time–'

'Every time what, Colonel? Every time we see each other? Which has been what, once in the past five years?' Vance's voice grew louder once more. 'Do you remember that day? Mother's funeral? You only missed her by a couple of days. She died thinking you'd been killed on one of your missions. It wasn't bad enough that you disappeared through the whole of the Minbari War, but you had to volunteer afterward, taking on missions to God knows where.'

'You applied to join the Razvedchiks yourself. Don't you think they'll send you on dangerous missions?'

'I don't have a family!' Vance shouted. The restaurant went silent, all eyes turning their way. This time the Colonel didn't look around apologetically. He and Vance stared at one another again. Vance heard footsteps behind him, probably the maitre'd or owner. The Colonel looked past him, at whoever was approaching. He didn't say a word, nor did he have to; the look on his face could have dissuaded a charging bull. The footsteps stopped and then retreated in the opposite direction. Vance never took his eyes off his father.

'Despite what you think of me, this mission is too important for you to turn down.' The Colonel's voice was quiet and controlled once more.

'Why me?' asked Vance.

'Because you're young, you're the best and not least of all, because you're my son.'

Vance almost reeled. Many years had passed since he'd heard his father utter that rare admittance.

'I'm sorry, Colonel, but it's out of the question. I intend to join up with the Razvedchiks, and nothing will stop me.'

'Don't you even want to hear the details? I guarantee you'll be intrigued at the very least.'

'Can't hurt, I suppose,' said Vance, picking up his fork and girding himself enough to pierce one of the undercooked squid carcasses on his oversized plate.

'Good,' said the Colonel. 'Obviously everything I'm about to tell you is deemed confidential under the Earth-Force Military Secrets Act.' He paused, waiting for Vance to acknowledge what he had just said. Vance nodded. 'I was recently contacted by an old colleague of mine, Commander Jeffrey Sinclair. I don't know if you've heard of him?'

Vance swallowed a half-chewed piece of the rubbery invertebrate. 'Pilot in the Minbari War. Highly decorated. Used to run this place until he took a position as Earth Ambassador to Minbar. We learned about him in Military History.'

'Well, Sinclair and I were at the Academy together. We went our separate ways when he signed on as an Ensign in the EarthForce Fleet and I joined Ground Forces. We saw each other from time to time and kept in touch, but I hadn't heard from him in years. Until two weeks ago. I received a communiqué from Minbar. To my surprise, Jeff asked for an urgent meeting. Naturally I agreed – Jeff's an old war buddy, so I checked out his recent history to make sure nothing serious was going on.' Vance resisted the temptation to smile at his father's typical caution, strong enough to check up on an old friend he hadn't seen for a while, just in case there was a chance of getting caught in a compromising position.

'The Minbari seemed to trust Jeff, which is strange, because they don't trust anyone, least of all humans.' The Colonel wiped his mouth with his napkin and continued. 'I went along, as I had some leave. So I met up with Jeff in the Minbari capital, Yedor. We talked about old times for a while, but I could tell there was something on his mind. Like he was making small talk but all the while trying to size me up. Then he asked if I wanted to see where he was staying. I agreed, thinking he maybe wanted to show me how well he was doing. So, we left and boarded a Minbari flyer. I didn't think anything of it, since Yedor is a massive metropolitan centre, and flyers are common, but when I saw we were leaving the city, I started to get a little worried.'

Vance could only imagine what his father's version of 'worried' was. This was a man who had spent years keeping himself alive behind enemy lines, surviving inhospitable

environments where any second some hostile could try to cut him limb from limb.

'We flew to a different city about a thousand klicks away. I'd never seen anything like it, and when I asked Jeff, he told me it was called Tuzanor, the City of Sorrows. When we landed, we were met by what I suppose was an honour guard of elite Minbari warriors. To top it all off, it turned out Jeff was one of their leaders. Don't ask me how or why, but suddenly Sinclair, one of the best pilots in the fleet that held the Line against the Minbari, had gone from ambassador to a leader of one of their military regiments.'

The Colonel went silent at the sound of approaching feet. The waiter arrived with their main dishes, and the smell of fresh veal washed over them. Vance was almost blown away by the aroma. Certainly an improvement on squid. As the waiter glided away, the Colonel began once more.

'They are known as the Anla'shok, or Rangers, if you want a literal English translation. Their order is thousands of years old, dating back to the days of Valen.' Vance recognised the name of the ancient Minbari warrior who had supposedly turned the tide of a legendary Minbari conflict. 'They exist solely to patrol the galaxy in secret, waiting for the return of an ancient evil.' Vance frowned at the ridiculous turn this conversation was taking, made worse by the fact that his father was spewing this nonsense. 'Jeff told me that this ancient evil was returning, and the Anla'shok were the only ones who could stop it.'

'Wait a minute.' Vance had heard enough. 'You brought me all this way to tell me some hocus-pocus story an old war buddy of yours fed you? I think you were on Minbar a little too long. Are you sure it's not something they put in the water, Colonel–'

Vance was cut off by the Colonel's fist slamming into the table. By this time the rest of the restaurant's patrons had learned to mind their business.

'Dammit boy, you listen to me.' Vance had been spoken to harshly by his father for much of his childhood, but he had never seen him like this. 'This is serious. I've been there and I've seen it. I've seen what they can do. Sinclair showed me evidence of what's to come, and I'll tell you James, it scared me.' More than anything, that last statement grabbed Vance's attention. His father had been on more covert missions than Vance could comprehend, faced death hundreds of times, and survived situations in which anyone else would have been killed. If something scared the Colonel, it must be worth fearing. 'The Anla'shok have been preparing for a thousand years for a war that will soon begin. They need recruits, Minbari and human, if they have any chance of beating this enemy. Sinclair told me they need more men, capable warriors who can fight covertly, move without being seen and kill without being heard. They need more recruits, but Minbar simply does not have the warriors to spare. Sinclair approached me to find men from Earth to join their number, but they need to be men I know I can trust. Who better to send him than my own son.'

'Wait a minute–'

'We don't have a minute, James. Shadows are coming. I need to find recruits who can pass their training methods and prove their worth to the Anla'shok. I need you to become one of the first human Rangers!'

THE FLAMING CRUCIBLE

Had the Colonel completely lost his mind? Maybe the Minbari messed with his mind or tortured him in vengeance for his contribution to the war effort against them. Maybe this Sinclair had been indoctrinated into some Minbari sect and was now trying to turn his father too. Vance simply had no response to the Colonel's outrageous request. They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, with nothing to break the silence but the lilting hum of idle chatter drifting across the restaurant. Any minute, Vance expected the Colonel's face to crack into a smile and admit he was joking. But the thought of his father joking was an even more ridiculous idea than the Minbari wanting him to join a secret sect of warriors to fight some ancient, mythical evil.

'I know it's difficult to believe, James, but this is real. Sinclair and the Anla'shok showed me their archives, what they are preparing for. They are desperate for fresh blood, and their only hope is to enlist humans and members of their Worker and Religious Castes. The Warrior Caste has mostly refused to allow any of its members to join the Rangers due to Sinclair's appointment as their leader. It's up to the human recruits to show the way. If they can pass the Anla'shok training, it will show they are worthy to join. I need the best, James. You're the best.'

'So you just volunteered me?' asked Vance, the weight of what his father was saying slowly sinking in.

'You're my son. As a show of faith, I had to make this gesture. Besides, you're top of your class in tactics, armed and unarmed combat, reconnaissance. Your test results for the Razvedchik application were unparalleled.'

Vance wasn't surprised by his father's inside knowledge. His contacts in every regiment of EarthForce kept him well informed, and Vance imagined the Colonel knew about his transfer before anyone. 'But now that has to wait. From here, you'll fly directly to Minbar and begin your training. I need you to decline your acceptance to the Razvedchiks, but it doesn't have to be permanent. If… when you graduate as Anla'shok and other humans have been accepted, you can leave and return to EarthForce.'

'You have all this planned, don't you? Do you know how long it's taken me to crawl from beneath your shadow? To prove myself? That I'm not just the son of some war hero colonel? I've earned my stripes, and I made it on my own. Now you just want to destroy all that and plan my future for me.'

'James, listen to me. I understand why you didn't want to follow me and go into a Military Academy, but this is

bigger than our… disagreement. You need to rise above it. You are smart enough to know that I wouldn't ask this of you unless it was important. I need you, James. Please… help me.'

Vance could not believe his ears. Despite the tall story his father had been telling him since he arrived at the restaurant, to hear him utter the word "please" was the most shocking thing of all. He had waited his entire 23 years to hear those words. Now that he had, it just made him feel sad. This had to be true. He refused to believe his father was under some kind of Minbari influence. The man had fought them for years, had forgotten more about counter-interrogation and torture techniques than most men could ever learn. For him to sound so desperate, this had to be true and so serious that he had no choice but to offer his only son.

'Alright,' said Vance, unable to meet his father's gaze. 'We'll go to Minbar and meet with Sinclair and these… Anla'shok, but on my terms. If I start to get a bad feeling, if they even look at me wrong, I'm out of there.'

'I won't be going, James. This one you'll have to do alone. One of them is already here waiting to transport you to Minbar. I have to go to Earth and prepare further recruits. And trust me, they will look at you wrong. That's the point. You need to make them look at you right.'

'This just keeps getting better. What do I do if I run into trouble? Who's my point of contact?'

'Sinclair knows who you are. He'll take care of you. No harm will come to you – except the rigors of Anla'shok training. It'll be a challenge, James. Embrace it.'

Vance fell silent once more. Too many things could go wrong. Unfortunately for him, he felt he had little choice. Between his father, Sinclair and the Minbari, he was well and truly outclassed. And he was certainly not in control of the situation. Someone else was flying, yet again.

'Fine. I'll need to contact EarthForce to let them know–'

'Let me handle that,' said the Colonel. 'The less they know about the reasons for your absence, the better. I can smooth things over with Major Cleaver and handle the Razvedchiks. I know a few people. Now, eat up. That veal is a much better meal than you'll be given by the Anla'shok.'

The Colonel was suddenly smiling. Vance never appreciated his idea of humour. Without another word the two men ate.

Vance stood outside the Colonel's quarters, his bag already packed. Under the circumstances, he'd thought it best if he kept his civvies on. The crisp EarthForce uniform was neatly folded in his bag.

No sooner had he raised his hand to touch the comm unit than the door slid open. In the dimly lit room, two candles shone on a side table, but Vance could not see anyone. He entered and the door shut behind him, blocking out the faint illumination from the corridor.

Vance recognised the rigid silhouette of his father in the darkness. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, the unmistakeable outline of a Minbari became visible. Neither spoke, and Vance wondered if this was some kind of test.

'Is this cloak-and-dagger stuff necessary? We're on an Earth Alliance vessel after all.' Vance waited several seconds for his answer.

'Our enemy's agents are everywhere. But you will learn that soon enough.'

The voice was thickly accented but powerful. Vance felt compelled to listen and heed the words.

Slowly the lights became brighter, and Vance could see the Minbari better. He looked old, a wisdom showing within the watery blue of his eyes. Despite his demeanour, Vance could also see a certain kindness within the face, as though a long time ago it had known much laughter.

'Vance,' said the Colonel, 'this is Sech Turval, from the Eighth Fane of Tredomo, former leader of the Anla'shok. He'll be one of your mentors.'

The Minbari placed his thumbs together, fingers pointing downwards, and bowed his head, all the while keeping his eyes locked onto Vance. Vance nodded his reply but did not attempt the foreign hand gesture. 'I am pleased you have decided to join us,' said Turval. 'I have heard of your skill. You will need it over the coming months.'

Vance frowned, but he didn't reply, looking instead to his father.

'Turval's transport is waiting. You have clearance to leave.'

'How long will I be gone?' asked Vance.

'For as long as Shadows fall across the galaxy,' replied Turval before the Colonel could speak. The tall Minbari took a step forward, and Vance saw him more clearly. He was dressed in black robes, which framed his slender figure. The only adornment was a single brooch on his left breast. Vance couldn't quite see what it depicted, only that it bore a large, smooth jewel at its centre.

'I will wait outside while you bid farewell to your father.' With that, Turval bowed once more and left the room. Vance noticed that as he moved, the Minbari made no sound, despite the long robes.

The room became uncomfortably silent as soon as Turval left. The Minbari obviously overestimated the affection that Vance and his father felt towards one another. The Colonel made to speak, but before he could Vance gave him a curt nod and turned on his heel. The door opened as he approached it, and Vance left without looking back. Turval was waiting for him outside but did not seem surprised by Vance's quick arrival. The Minbari gave a knowing nod and led the way to the hangar.

Vance had never seen a ship like it. He had seen schematics of Minbari vessels, studied their propulsion and weapons systems, and even entered a simulation of a Minbari cockpit, but none of it did justice to the real thing.

This flyer was a basic model, not really designed for combat, yet it outclassed anything EarthForce had available. As Vance followed Turval down the sloping walkway to the hangar, his jaw dropped in awe.

Turval approached the ship, and its side hatch opened. The Minbari made no move, spoke no command word nor signalled in any way. He didn't break step as he approached and entered the ship. Vance, excitement overcoming trepidation, eagerly followed.

The inside of the Minbari Flyer was more impressive than the outside. Vance studied the vessel but saw no conventional controls. The front of the cockpit held a collection of light pads but lacked instrument panels. Turval sat in the pilot seat and cast his hands over a number of the flashing panels. Although he had not been invited, Vance stood near the Minbari, fascinated to see the ship in action.

The voice of Babylon 5 command and control resonated through an invisible speaker, and Turval confirmed his take-off plan. In seconds, the hangar hatch opened and the flyer glided out of the huge station, headed straight for the nearby jumpgate. The inaudible engines and the smooth flight made it seem as though the ship were stationary. Vance could not stop a smile from spreading across his face.

Spinning blue light enveloped them as they neared the jumpgate, and within seconds they slipped through. As they sailed effortlessly through the grey mist of hyperspace, Turval reclined in his seat, once again pressing his thumbs together and crossing his hands in that strange Minbari gesture. Vance realised he had been involved in a take-off that he himself had not piloted, but it was without the usual discomfort. It seemed that in the presence of Turval there was nothing to fear.

Leaning forward slightly, he opened his mouth, eager to question Turval on the ship's propulsion system and the lack of turbulence. Then he noticed Turval's eyes were closed. Thinking the Minbari asleep, he settled back into his seat.

'Ask your question. It is obvious you are curious about something.'

Vance hadn't spoken or made a sound. 'Er, it doesn't matter,' he replied.

'Very well.'

For the rest of their journey through hyperspace, both remained silent.

Leaving hyperspace was as smooth as entering it. As soon as the flyer hit realspace, Vance could see Minbar. The small, unremarkable planet was home to the most advanced and dangerous race outside the Vorlon Empire. Vance thought back to the devastation of the war – his father's war. Now he entered the nest of the enemy his father had sworn to defeat. And he had been sent by the Colonel.

As they drew closer, a Sharlin warship sailed toward them like some huge aquatic beast floating in an invisible sea. Turval's hand flashed over one of the panels and the Sharlin changed course, moving away from the flyer. Vance guessed they were passing a security check by a planetary defence ship. Not a word was spoken, and both ships communicated to one another without either pilot having to interact. If this had been EarthForce protocol, the security process would still be happening. Vance couldn't help but admire the Minbari's efficiency.

Within minutes, the flyer entered Minbar's atmosphere, dropping through the heavy cloud cover. Vance could see little through the cockpit window as heavy drops of rain splashed silently against it. For several tense minutes the flyer was shrouded in blackness, then Vance could see the coruscating lights of a city. 'Tuzanor,' Turval said, his first words in several hours. 'The City of Sorrows.'

Vance could see majestic spires rising into the night. The closer they got, the more he could see of the illuminated towers, linked by a maze-like system of walkways. 'It looks amazing. Why the depressing name?' he asked.

'Our order has not always been well received by the Grey Council or the Warrior Caste. Over the centuries, many conflicts took place between the Anla'shok and those we wished to protect. The greatest of these was fought centuries ago, and millions died within Tuzanor's boundaries.'

They were within a kilometre of the city now, flying over a ridge that encircled the entire metropolis. Hundreds of thousands of glowing crystals dotted the ridge, forming a dimly illuminated ring around Tuzanor.

'We call the ring of crystals the Se'en Voltayn: The Veil of Bright Dreams,' said Turval.

'I've never seen anything like it. It's beautiful.'

'I am pleased you like my city. Of all the places on Minbar, it is said that this was Valen's favourite. Much has changed since then, but it still bears the same atmosphere. When I walk Tuzanor's streets, I imagine I get much the same feeling as Valen did a thousand years ago.'

Vance could see a faint smile spread across Turval's face as the Minbari reflected. The flyer navigated between the sparkling minarets. Despite the sodden, miserable night, Vance could not deny the city's splendour. Few humans had ever seen this humbling view.

Turval guided the flyer toward a wide landing pad, his hands flashing over the multicoloured panels. The flyer responded by easing itself down, coming to a smooth and gentle landing.

'Come,' said Turval. The Minbari made his way to the exit hatch, which opened of its own accord. Vance grabbed his kit bag and followed.

Rain pounded the wide landing pad. Vance had to squint against the stinging drops. 'It is likely we have missed the welcoming ceremony,' shouted Turval above the sound of the splashing rain. 'But we should hurry nonetheless.' The tall Minbari did not run, but his stride was unbelievably long. Vance struggled to match his pace without breaking into a jog. They walked across the landing pad towards a tall, striking building. Vance noticed three large weapon mounts on the side of it that occasionally swivelled, their barrels covering several directions. The building itself seemed carved from a single piece of obsidian, randomly interspersed with glowing crystals.

As they approached, a set of double doors slowly swung open. Two Minbari, wearing garb identical to Turval's, appeared and bowed ceremoniously. Turval bowed his head as he passed but said nothing.

Vance was spellbound at the sight of the massive hall they entered. From the outside, the building had not seemed nearly as grandiose. He stopped in his tracks and simply admired his surroundings. Dark marble columns swept upward toward the shadowy ceiling, and multicoloured stained-glass windows loomed on every side. Vance even thought he could see birds roosting in the high beams.

'The welcoming ceremony has ended,' said Turval. Vance noticed the two Minbari who had opened the doors for them standing at his shoulders. 'We must enter the Crucible Chamber.'

Turval turned and headed off into the darkness. Vance glanced over both shoulders at the Minbari staring straight ahead. He gripped his kit bag tightly and followed Turval.

Darkness suddenly enveloped him, flooding Vance with a sudden panic. Maybe his premonition of this being a Minbari trick was true. Maybe this was no initiation but an exercise in brain washing. Maybe they meant only to kill him and use their Minbari science to create a doppelganger, infiltrating EarthForce with an exact copy of James Vance.

Turval opened a door up ahead, allowing a flickering yellow light to spill through onto Vance and the Minbari. Vance could see the light came from a fire, lit within a huge metal bowl, mounted on a short column of crystal. Vance entered the room, his face stung by the intensity of the heat from the raging flames. Turval stood next to it but seemed unaffected. The other two Minbari also entered, one closing the door behind him, and then they took up positions around the brazier.

The circular room's low oval roof contained neither flue nor anywhere else for excess smoke or flames to escape. Nevertheless, despite the heat, the room did not seem uncomfortable or lacking in oxygen.

'This is the Crucible Chamber,' said Turval. 'To begin the path of the Anla'shok, you must first pass the test of the Burning Time. It is the first of many tests to become a Ranger, but for most it is the most difficult of all.'

A knot formed in Vance's gut. Several visions flashed in his head, the most horrific showing him needing to thrust an arm, or another even more important appendage, into the flames and holding it there until he was told to do otherwise. He remembered an old holo-vid he'd watched with Randell. Vance couldn't remember the name, but in the opening credits a guy lifted a burning hot brazier with his forearms, searing pictures of animals into his skin. Glancing down, Vance could see that all three of the Minbari had long-sleeved robes on. Did they sport wicked brands marking them as true Anla'shok?

'Cast all your worldly belongings into the flames,' said Turval simply and quietly. Vance gave an almost audible sigh of relief. 'By burning everything precious to you, you show dedication to your training and a willingness to begin anew as Anla'shok. Only by doing this now can you proceed.'

Vance struggled to remember what he had brought with him. His dress uniform. No great shakes. He could get another later. A spare set of civvies. No problem either. Wash bag with a razor, comb and various assorted smellies. The Minbari would certainly have equipment that could replace all that. Then again, they obviously weren't into hair care. What the hell, he was here to train, not win a beauty contest. Standard issue combat knife. That could be replaced, but he had grown quite attached to it over the years. On manoeuvres it had often been the only thing that kept him alive. Nevertheless, he had to focus. If these guys wanted to test him, he would show them true steel. Vance lifted the bag to chest height and thrust it into the centre of the flames.

A sudden hissing preceded the eruption of several sparks, and then his gear was gone – not a burning scrap or shrivelled cinder remained. Vance smiled, almost relieved to have the burden of his worldly goods incinerated.

'Is that the sum of your possessions?' asked Turval, unmoving, as though he knew that Vance had forgotten something. For a second Vance wondered if Turval expected him to strip down to his jockeys, then he realised the one thing he had forgotten. Slowly he reached into his pocket and pulled out the acceptance letter from the Razvedchik regiment.

The crisp white paper shone against the dancing flames. Vance ached to unfold it and read again the words he had waited so long for. Even if it burned, he could still join the Special Forces. What the paper symbolised was much more valuable: all the hard work he undertook to free himself from the shadow of his father's name and to be his own man.

Some things are more important, he told himself, looking up at Turval. The Minbari's eyes shone with understanding, as though he had gone through exactly the same anguish in his own past. Vance held out his hand and let his fingers fall open. The letter fluttered for a second before falling directly into the flames, instantly disintegrating in the intense heat.

The Crucible Chamber fell into sudden darkness as the flames extinguished. Vance barely had time to wonder what was happening before light shone through a door at the opposite end of the chamber. 'This way,' said Turval. Vance crossed the chamber and followed Turval, noticing that the other two Minbari had disappeared altogether. He entered another room, this one was square and half the size of the Crucible Chamber. On a plinth at its centre, neatly laid out as though delivered by the quartermaster himself, was a uniform.

'Please don the uniform, and then you may rest. Your journey has been a long one. Perhaps longer than you know.' Turval motioned towards the plinth. Vance approached and, without hesitation, dressed in the strange new uniform: plain black; leggings, tunic and boots (along with unexpectedly comfortable underwear); and the fit was perfect. Vance ran his hand across the coarse material and noticed that despite the rough texture, it did not make a sound.

When he turned, Turval held the door open to yet another area of the academy. Vance followed him down a long corridor, passing several open rooms containing meditating Minbari, until they eventually came to an open dormitory. While the room had no door, it looked fairly comfortable.

Silently, Turval motioned to an empty bed, gave his customary curt nod, hands placed together in the usual manner, and quickly left. Vance saw that all the dorm's other occupants were asleep, fully clothed. Even their boots were still on. He also noticed that every bed was slanted at a forty-five-degree angle. This particular legend of Minbari culture had been bandied around for some time amongst the guys at EarthForce, but Vance had always put it down to idle speculation and exaggeration. Now it appeared true.

Carefully, Vance climbed onto one of the beds and lay flat on his back. At first he was comfortable enough, considering he was fully clothed and didn't even have so much as a sheet to keep the draft out. Then, as he began to lapse into an exhausted slumber, his body relaxed and his legs gave way. The sudden jolt panicked him, and he sat bolt upright.

Straight ahead of him, through the dimness of the room, he saw one of his fellow recruits, a Minbari, staring at him. Vance nodded curtly, a smile of embarrassment on his face. Slowly the Minbari stood and approached. Vance kept the smile on his face, imagining that the Minbari would impart some knack to staying on the infuriatingly angled bed and getting a decent night's sleep.

The Minbari leaned in, his face a stone mask. 'You will fail,' he said in a low monotone. Vance frowned, and for several seconds they stared at one another until the Minbari retreated back to his bed as slowly and purposefully as he had left it. The pair stared at one another for minutes more, Vance unsure whether this was another test or just a taste of things to come. At some point during the night he managed to fall asleep, with the Minbari still watching him through the gloom.

THE DULA'SHOK NA

Tuzanor's minarets loomed around him, bending in threateningly. Something was after him but, as was usual in his dreams, he couldn't quite seem to run fast enough. His legs felt like they moved in a vat of sloppy field rations, and every time he tried to glance over his shoulder at the nightmare creature chasing him, his head would not turn.

A sudden ringing sound of sweet timbre instantly dispersed his fears. The towers seemed less imposing and his pursuer was forgotten. No longer did he try to run; he simply stood and listened to the melodic chime. Vance opened his eyes and saw the lights of the Ranger dormitory brighten. His fellow recruits were already sitting or standing. Through the centre of the room walked a venerable-looking Minbari in plain white robes. He carried a strange cylindrical object, which he occasionally struck with a wooden block. Depending on where he struck the instrument, a different note emerged.

The rest of the Ranger recruits fell into line behind the robed figure. Obviously they knew something that Vance didn't, so he followed them. A brief twinge of relief passed through Vance when he noticed some of the recruits looking as bewildered as he felt, equally confused by this weird waking ceremony. Vance looked around and confirmed that the Minbari who threatened him the night before was not present.

The line of recruits followed the sound of the chime down a long corridor. Vance noticed several more dorms set off from the corridor, all empty. He also realised his fellow Rangers were an equal mix of humans and Minbari, and some of them looked distinctly non-military. Four or five of the faces yawned widely as though unused to being deprived of sleep and rising early. Others trudged along, slump-shouldered and shambling. Never in a million years would such a slovenly gait be tolerated in EarthForce.

They finally entered an open area. A huge statue of a noble-looking Minbari, dressed in Ranger attire, dominated the centre. The white-robed figure stopped in front of the statue, still ringing his bell, which was now beginning to annoy Vance ever so slightly. The Minbari recruits instinctively spread out into two rows behind the figure and dropped to one knee, right hand placed over the left side of their chest. Most of the human recruits, Vance included, gingerly followed suit, assuming this was expected of them. When they all assumed the proper position, the robed figure began to chant. Vance couldn't understand all the words, since they were in what seemed an archaic form of Adrenato, the Religious Caste language, but the gist was to give thanks to Valen and take strength for the coming day's trials. Vance could only assume the statue depicted the mysterious Valen he had heard about in Minbari history.

The robed figure's chanting was brisk and, before Vance knew it, he stood and led the procession into another room. Vance recognised immediately the sight and smell of a mess hall. It didn't compare to an EarthForce canteen;

no banter or laughing greetings rang out across the space. The recruits solemnly filed in and took their seats. Vance sat in the closest available seat at a table with three other humans and two Minbari. One of the humans looked up and smiled at Vance, and he duly reciprocated. The two Minbari stared at their knees like scolded children, and the remaining two humans looked too groggy for conversation.

Before long a second group filed in, led by another white-robed figure, and these recruits took their seats in an equally ceremonious manner. The mess hall was not even half full. Vance did a quick head count. Including him, roughly twenty Minbari and thirty-five humans occupied the hall. He also noticed the Minbari who threatened him the night before sat brooding at the far end of the hall. Just as in the dorm, the Minbari stared as though Vance wronged him in some way.

Suddenly, more robed figures, these dressed in light brown, entered. They gracefully glided around the tables at great speeds in a well-practiced dance. Some distributed plates and spoons, while others dished out a thin gruel. They vanished through several doorways just as quickly as they appeared.

'Sinclair says the food should improve when he's had time to sort things out.' The recruit who smiled at Vance earlier spoke quietly. He still bore a grin on his face, obviously keen to strike up a decent conversation in these staid and rigid surroundings. One of the Minbari at their table looked up, throwing a disapproving glance in the man's direction.

Before Vance could reply, all the Minbari in the canteen, and a few of the humans, spoke in unison. 'Ellah'tre,' they said. Vance managed to translate it as a word of thanks as the entire group dug into their slop.

'William Cole,' said the young human, offering his hand. He looked a little sheepish, obviously embarrassed by his faux pas at almost interrupting the giving of thanks.

Vance reached out and brusquely shook William's hand. 'James Vance,' he said in reply, finding it hard to resist the temptation of using his full rank and title. Corporal James Vance just wouldn't have sounded right in a place like this.

'We were told to expect another initiate,' said William. 'Ex-military, aren't you?'

The words struck Vance head on. He hadn't yet considered the fact he was no longer a member of EarthForce. It didn't sit well with his breakfast gruel. 'You make it sound like this isn't a military installation. We're all in the army now, right? Just on Minbar. Surely you have some military training. Hasn't everyone here?'

'Well, no,' answered William. 'Obviously I know how to look after myself,' he feebly feigned a one-two combination with his fists, 'but mainly I was a traveller before I came here. I suppose I've just been looking for a sense of purpose. Most of the humans here are the same.'

'The new Anla'shok Na has invited all Castes to the Rangers,' said a female voice. Vance saw it was one of the Minbari sitting at their table. Even though she joined in their conversation, she kept her eyes fixed on her food. 'Both Worker and Religious Caste have been invited to join. Sinclair believes the Anla'shok should no longer be exclusive to the Warrior Caste, or the Minbari for that matter.'

Vance felt like burying his head in his hands. What had he joined in with? 'So nobody here has had any military training?' he asked.

'All Minbari are trained in the martial arts, but only for personal safety,' said the Minbari. 'Unfortunately, when Sinclair was appointed as Anla'shok Na, most of the Warrior Caste refused to join.'

'Great,' breathed Vance. 'OK, so you're all Religious or Worker Caste… or "travellers". Where are the guys from the Warrior Caste?' Vance looked around. Maybe he would be lucky, and perhaps the Warrior Caste would accept him as a kindred spirit.

'Only Merreck is of the Warrior Caste.'

'Alright, where is he?' said Vance looking around eagerly. Vance followed the female Minbari's gesture to the opposite side of the dining hall. There, staring directly at him with a familiar malice, was the Minbari who threatened him the previous night.

Vance turned back to his breakfast. Maybe training with civilians and religious types wouldn't be so bad after all.

Meditation was the first lesson. Vance only experienced it as part of martial arts training, and even then he never took it that seriously. After a heavy bout of fighting, trainees were told to sit and reflect on the lesson, but Vance used it as a ready excuse to get his breath back. Now he was expected to meditate for meditation's sake. This seemed crazy, and his focus was constantly interrupted by the itch for some real training.

Sech Turval taught the lesson, instructing them on the proper posture, which turned out to be relatively lax. Hands could be placed on knees, held across the chest or, as adopted by most of the Minbari, with the typical fingers-pressed-together pose. Despite Vance's initial disdain, he found himself quite relaxed by the end of the first hour. No sudden epiphany or revelation struck him, and he certainly didn't feel he could move mountains with a thought, but after the lesson ended he was in a good frame of mind to accomplish the rest of the day's tasks.

Next was Minbari language instruction. A rather portly and studious-looking Minbari name Sech Nelier taught this lesson. Vance initially thought he would struggle – after all, he only knew Fik, the Warrior Caste

dialect, and almost forty percent of the other students were Minbari. As it turned out, many of the Minbari from the Religious and Worker Caste were almost as ignorant about the nuances of the Warrior Caste dialect as Vance.

Throughout the lesson, Vance couldn't help glancing over at Merreck. The stern Minbari, who obviously knew all there was to know about his own Caste's dialect, sat stony-faced and completely silent. Vance quickly averted his eyes when he glanced over to catch Merreck staring in his direction. Anywhere else, he would have stood to confront Merreck, to demand what his problem was, but Vance didn't feel that tactic wise in the current situation. The Minbari would have to wait.

Piloting proved to be the lesson where Vance's interest was truly piqued. The lesson took place on the hangar platform where Vance arrived the previous day. The strange gun ports still swivelled in a seemingly random dance, occasionally targeting the students as they stood listening to their tutor.

Sech Mishal was almost laid back for a Minbari. He didn't adopt the usual aloof manner, even smiling on occasion. It wasn't the tutor that interested Vance, though; it was the flyer, the same model that brought him to Tuzanor. At the time Vance thought his transport was a standard flyer model. However, Mishal explained the main differences. The Fan'ir Ranger flyer was a combat version of the standard model: stealthier, more heavily reinforced, and sporting an advanced weapons array. Vance drank in the explanation of the control and weapons systems. He listened avidly to Mishal's safety code and, after several minutes, was practically itching to start the test flight. Then before any of them had a chance to sit in the pilot's seat, the lesson ended. Vance could barely hide his disappointment.

At lunch he sat with the same five trainees as at breakfast. William seemed almost bewildered by the brevity and pace of their lessons. The other two humans just looked tired. 'All this after just five hours sleep? How do they expect us to cope?' William seemed a wholly different person to the ebullient acolyte at breakfast.

The female Minbari leaned forward. 'Today is simply to introduce us to the main disciplines. I am sure the pace will slow.

'I didn't catch your name,' said Vance.

'Jerklenn,' she replied.

'Well, Jerklenn. This is William, and I'm Vance. Pleased to meet you.' He held out his hand. Jerklenn looked at it as though Vance had just visited the latrine and not washed up afterward. Slowly, she extended her own hand and grasped his. The gesture was awkward, with Jerklenn obviously unaccustomed to handshaking, and she attempted an awkward smile that looked as hesitant and out of place as the handshake.

'Tell me,' he said, motioning toward the rigid figure of Merreck, who was even now frowning in Vance's direction. 'What is that guy's problem? I know he's Warrior Caste and probably has to put on an air of superiority, but he seems to be singling me out for special attention.'

Jerklenn didn't have to look to know whom Vance was speaking of. 'I believe his father was killed in the war with the humans. Since you are the person here who most closely represents the military of Earth, Merreck has taken it on himself to prove he can best you. That way he believes he can regain the honour lost through the death of his father.'

'Great,' breathed Vance. 'I don't suppose explaining to him that I was only a teenager when the war ended will help any.'

'It matters not to Merreck. Only that you are defeated.'

'Oh well,' William cut in. 'Could be worse.'

'How?' asked Vance.

'Well, you've me to watch your back,' William smiled.

'Great,' said Vance. 'A wandering minstrel as my backup. What are you going to do, philosophise him away from me? Thanks for the offer, but this one I think I can handle.'

'I would advise caution,' said Jerklenn. 'Merreck is the nephew of Neroon himself. After Merreck's father died, Neroon took it upon himself to teach the boy as much as he could of the Warrior Caste's traditions and martial skills. Despite his youth, Merreck is a deadly combatant. No matter how skilled a warrior you are, Merreck could certainly best you in any form of martial combat.'

'I'd like to see him in action,' said William.

Vance looked at him in disbelief. William realised his jovial remark did not help matters. 'Just stick around,' said Vance, glancing over to Merreck's table. 'You might get a chance sooner than you think.'

After eating, the trainees moved straight to a large open hall that contained various simulated corridors, ladders, ropes and other obstacles. After everyone filed in, the lights dimmed.

'Here you will learn the Code of Tuvor.' The deep and echoing voice emanated from more than one of the shadowy recesses secreted across the hall. 'There are several lessons I will teach you, but the most important is this: do not be seen.'

With that the lights went back up. Several gasps behind Vance cause him to turn. There, standing in the midst of the packed crowd of trainees was a tall, old Minbari. Although he looked like he could barely walk, let alone creep around in the shadows, he somehow managed to stand amidst the trainees without being seen.

'I am Kattak,' he said, his booming voice outpacing his venerable years. 'Please sit.'

They learned no stealth techniques during that particular lesson, but Kattak imparted some of his wisdom. He

spoke of the Code of Tuvor and how it would be their most powerful weapon over the coming months and years. The ability to not be seen was more valuable than any combat training or piloting skill.

Vance was fascinated and uplifted. Not only did Kattak talk to them gently and like equals, he actually listened to questions, some of them pretty stupid to a soldier as experienced as Vance, and answered each in an even, measured manner. Vance left the lesson and, for the first time since his arrival on Minbar, felt good about what he was doing.

That was all due to change in the next lesson. The recruits moved to a room that Vance immediately recognised as a gymnasium of some sort. An area at the front of the room reminded him of the place where he and Randell sparred on his last day before embarking on this trek at his father's behest. A stout Minbari awaited the recruits.

'I am Durhan.' The Minbari's stout tone matched his physique. 'You have just received your first instruction in the Code of Tuvor from Sech Kattak. During his tuition, I have no doubt he informed you his discipline was the most important an initiate of the Anla'shok can learn.' Durhan leaned in close to the recruits, who were standing to attention in two rigid ranks. 'As wise as Sech Kattak is, on this point he is sadly mistaken.'

Durhan paced in front of the initiates, looking to the combat arena like it was a holy temple. 'The importance of what you will learn in this place is without measure. The very nature of the Anla'shok means we face great dangers and powerful enemies, and without the knowledge I will give you in this arena, you will die on your first mission.' He paused to let that thought linger in the room.

'For most of you, these lessons will be difficult. For some, impossible.' He made a point of staring along a line of human trainees. 'And for those of you who are worthy enough…' Durhan lifted his hand, allowing a shaft of metal to spring from his palm. In the blink of an eye he was holding a five-foot-long fighting pike. Vance recognised the fabled denn'bok immediately. His stomach churned at the thought of using the legendary weapon of the Minbari elite.

'But this is for another day.' As quickly as it had appeared, the denn'bok vanished into Durhan's palm. 'Pair up. We will see what you are capable of.'

Obediently, the trainees began to gather in twos. Vance looked to his left and right, but his neighbours had both already picked their partners. He quickly looked around for William, or even Jerklenn, but they too had partners of their own. Vance turned, about to announce to Durhan that he had no one to pair with, when the leering figure of Merreck stepped up to him.

Vance was silent, not even nodding his acknowledgment of Merreck's unspoken challenge. If this was what the Minbari wanted, then he would get it. He'd show this alien what EarthForce was made of.

'One pair at a time will enter the combat area.' Durhan gestured to the circular area at the front of the hall. The crash mats back at his EarthForce base seemed much softer. 'I believe the Earth term is "freestyle combat". Remember, this is simply to gauge your rudimentary skills at unarmed combat. I want no accidents. Now, who is first?'

Merreck stepped forward instantly. Vance, not wanting to look hesitant, stepped up beside him.

'Good,' said Durhan. 'Step into the combat area.' He led the two trainees into the marked circle. An intricate pattern that wound in and out of itself decorated the floor. 'Remember,' continued Durhan, 'no grudges remain beyond the limits of the circle. Combat between Anla'shok is here and here alone.'

Vance stared back at Merreck, trying to match the Minbari's intensity. It wasn't easy. 'Begin!' snapped Durhan, stepping back and out of the circle.

Merreck was several feet away, so Vance didn't think it necessary to raise his guard until he knew what attack the Minbari might make. He had little knowledge of Warrior Caste combat styles, and the Minbari had never been generous enough to share their combat knowledge with EarthForce. First-hand accounts from soldiers in the Minbari War identified the Warrior Caste as being fast, deadly and almost unnaturally strong.

For several seconds they faced each other down. Many of the trainees shuffled uncomfortably, but Durhan looked on, fascinated by the match.

Vance grew impatient. After all, how quick could the Minbari be? He decided a low attack would be best under the circumstances. A quick combination of kicks and punches should allow him to test Merreck's defences. Before he could move six inches, Merreck covered the space between them. His right hand snaked forward, quicker than Vance could see it, let alone stop it. The jab to Vance's solar plexus stopped him dead. A swinging, flat-palmed blow to his jaw forced him to one knee.

Vance's training took over and allowed him to roll away. He dropped to his left shoulder, kicking out with his right foot. As he sprang to his feet, Merreck waited for him. The roll took less than a second, but the Minbari had anticipated the move and repositioned himself accordingly.

Vance lifted both arms, fists clenched, covering the sides of his head against any potential blows. He brought his right leg up as a guard against kicks. Two quick and painful jabs to the abdomen breached what Vance thought were his impenetrable defences. He lashed out blindly, but Merreck had moved behind him. Vance only realised it after he was struck in the back of the knee. He went down, trying to turn as he fell. At least if he could see where Merreck was, he might be able to put up a better defence. By the time he turned, Merreck was on him, one leg pinning his right arm. Vance tried to strike with his free hand but Merreck blocked him, grasping his wrist with impossible and

certainly inhuman strength, forcing his one remaining free limb back behind his head. The Minbari leaned in close, his free hand raised, palm flat. He struck at Vance's gut, but his blow stopped millimetres from the target. With a quick flick, he twisted his hand ninety degrees. Vance guessed he was signifying the twist of a knife.

'No human has ever defeated a Minbari in hand-to-hand combat,' spat Merreck, making no attempt to mask his disdain. Vance had never felt so helpless in his years since entering EarthForce. He was accustomed to being the victor.

'Enough,' shouted Durhan. At the order of the Anla'shok master, Merreck obediently released Vance, finding his feet in an instant. Vance slowly rose, flexing his leg as it began to ache from Merreck's blow.

'Next two,' said Durhan, motioning towards another pair.

Vance limped back toward the crowd of trainees and found himself standing next to William, who wore a wide smile plastered across his face. 'Well,' he said, still beaming, 'that wasn't so bad, was it?'

Vance looked over at Merreck, who stared forward, impassively. Somehow, Vance knew his defeat in a sparring bout would not be enough to pacify the Minbari. Did all Warrior Caste hate humans this much? Or was this Merreck a special case?

The next – and thankfully final – class of the day was philosophy. Vance didn't hear much of what was taught, failing to remember even the name of the philosophy tutor. He was too busy consoling himself at his defeat. It wasn't the fact that he'd been beaten, as even Vance could not win every bout. But Merreck had beaten his defences so quickly, cutting off his every chance to even attempt a counterstrike.

Vance went over the bout in his head again and again, trying to think of what went wrong. Obviously his impatience was one major factor, but even so he hadn't been able to implement his first sequence of attacks, nor mount any successful counters to Merreck's attacks. Further evaluation would have to wait. Merreck would certainly not be satisfied with Vance's humiliation, so there would be more opportunities to face off against the Minbari.

By the time he stopped dwelling on the combat, the philosophy session was well under way. Vance expected to see a list of great Minbari prophets and their teachings, but this class seemed to keep focusing on three simple tenets: delight, respect and compassion. After combat training, the last thing Vance expected was this. Would there be much room for compassion after learning to stalk in the shadows and kill without being seen? Were they supposed to delight in their victories? Respect he could understand, as he already had an uncompromising and painfully learned respect for Minbari martial prowess, but the place of the other tenets in the life of a Ranger seemed to be a mystery.

At the end of the session, Vance felt none the wiser. Never the most academically inclined recruit, he believed in working hard to gain knowledge as needed. Philosophy was a whole new experience for him, but he could see from the avid looks on the other trainees' faces that this was their bread and butter.

When the tutor excused them from their lesson, several recruits looked ready to pass out. Before they reached their quarters, the biggest Minbari Vance had ever seen approached. He was obviously Anla'shok, and he did not bow or give any sign of greeting; he simply barred Vance's way.

'Initiate Vance,' said the Ranger, his voice a deep rumble. 'The Anla'shok Na wishes to speak with you.' Just what he needed: beaten, confused and now about to be grilled by the top dog.

Jeff Sinclair's office was bereft of any trinkets, memorabilia or anything that could be described as home comforts. He sat behind a simple desk in a bare room, poring over a number of files. Vance could see these contained background information on current and potential recruits.

'Please, take a seat,' said Sinclair, smiling warmly at Vance. From everything he had heard of the legend that was Commander Sinclair, Vance expected a much different man. 'We never got to talk before your entry into the Anla'shok. Now that you're here, I think this is as good a time as any for us to get acquainted.'

Vance sat down in the chair opposite Sinclair. 'So, how have you found your first day? Was it what you expected?' Sinclair asked, seeming genuinely interested.

There was silence, as Vance thought of the best answer. After some deliberation, he felt the truth would be the best policy in this strange and awkward situation. 'I didn't really have time to expect anything, sir. I was more or less press-ganged by my father into joining. As for my first day, it's been an experience I think I'll never forget.'

Sinclair gave a curious frown. Vance instantly regretted his rather ambiguous answer. 'Well, I'm afraid the nature of your arrival is mostly my fault. I asked for a favour from your father, and your presence is the result. I know this will be hard for you, but you've got to believe me when I say this is probably the most important thing you'll ever do, for Earth and for the galaxy itself.'

'With all due respect, sir, I've already heard this from my father. If it's so important that I do this, why does it feel like I'm not welcome?'

'Yes,' said Sinclair, looking a little sheepish. Vance couldn't imagine him adopting this demeanour very often. 'The incident in the combat training hall. Certain Minbari aren't receptive to human involvement in the Anla'shok, particularly Durhan. You may need to work very hard to convince him you are worthy to wear that uniform.'

'I never asked–' began Vance. Sinclair held up his hand, smiling.

'I know. And if it's any consolation, neither did I. Some things we simply have to do, no matter how unappreciated they make us feel.' Sinclair stood and crossed his office to look out of the single stained glass window. The light that shone in bathed his face in a soft radiant glow, making him seem somewhat otherworldly.

'You have the potential to be one of the best recruits we have. Your military training far outstrips the other trainees, even the other Minbari.' Vance thought about Merreck for a moment, doubting Sinclair's claim. 'Even if they can best you in hand-to-hand,' said Sinclair turning, as though reading Vance's mind, 'your skills are valuable, but they alone will not qualify you to be a Ranger. I hope before long you will develop the rest of the skills you'll need to succeed.'

'And what might they be?' asked Vance, unsure of what Sinclair was getting at.

'You'll find out soon enough.' He walked back to his seat. Again, a silence filled the room, this time somewhat uncomfortably, for Vance at least. 'Is there anything you need while you're here? I've been trying to address human dietary requirements, but the Minbari tend to be a little slow in acquiescing to any demands they don't classify as crucial.'

'No, sir. Although the sleeping arrangements are going to be a little tough to get used to.'

'Now that I understand,' said Sinclair. 'Unfortunately all the trainees have to be treated the same in this regard. I have already broken Anla'shok tradition by having the audacity to be human. If I tried to cast aside any more of their customs, I'd have more trouble than I could handle.'

He laughed, and so did Vance, for the first time since he'd left EarthForce. In the cloistered confines of the Minbari building, it felt odd. Vance liked the sound and the feeling.

'Is there anything else?' asked Sinclair

'No, sir. I think that covers it.'

'Good. If there's anything you need, you know where I am.' Sinclair stood and offered his hand. Vance stood and shook it, feeling a little strange. He had just shaken hands with the legendary Commander Sinclair, on the Minbari homeworld, dressed in a Minbari uniform as a recruit for their elite forces.

It had been one hell of a day, and Vance could only imagine what the morning would bring.

THE MARK OF DARKNESS

By the next morning Vance had already adjusted to the shorter days on Minbar. A hundred different exercises on a hundred different planets with EarthForce made it easy for him to acclimatise. Most of the other human recruits weren't finding it quite as easy. A Minbari day lasted only twenty hours and forty-seven minutes, which meant on average the Minbari needed only five hours of sleep to perform for the rest of the day. Most of the humans appeared to enjoy around eight hours on average – many of them exhibiting the profound desire to indulge in much more. Over the next few days, Vance predicted, five hours would be a luxury.

As the day before, morning found the robed figure slowly proceeding through their dorm, ringing his bell. Vance's night on the forty-five-degree bed proved slightly more peaceful. He rose and, with his fellow trainees, gave praise to Valen in the usual way. This time, though, they did not proceed straight to breakfast. Instead, Turval waited for them in the hall of meditation.

Instinctively the Minbari recruits took positions in front of the senior Ranger, with the human recruits following suit. When all was silent, Turval gave a fatherly smile, surveying the initiates before him. 'You have now experienced a small taste of the rigors and breadth of Anla'shok training. The Anla'shok Na deems this knowledge very important. You need to know what will be required of you in the coming weeks.'

Vance found the title "Anla'shok Na" strange when used to describe a man like Sinclair. Meeting the man had opened his eyes to how down-to-earth he was. Such an alien and reverential title didn't seem to fit.

'Now your training will truly begin,' continued Turval. 'You will be required to reflect, for a time, on the life you leave behind and the life you are about to begin. During this period, some of you may decide the Anla'shok is not part of your future. For those of you who choose that path, there is no shame. You can leave freely and find safe passage to anywhere you wish. Whether you go now or later during your training, however, we cannot allow you to leave with the knowledge you now have of the Anla'shok and our academy. If any of you leave, the memory of what you have experienced so far will be taken from your mind.'

A long pause followed. Nobody moved, as though all the initiates needed to prove their steadfast resolve. Turval's pause seemed to go on and on. All Vance could think about was a memory wipe. The only mind wipes he knew were performed on criminals who suffered Death of Personality. He'd never heard of it being used so precisely and couldn't imagine how the Minbari could erase a specific time period from someone's head.

'Good,' said Turval, as though he expected some of the trainees to bow out then and there. 'Your meditation will now begin.'

One by one, every recruit in the room adopted the meditative posture learned the day before. Vance found it easier to fall into a reflective state today. He let his mind calm itself, filling with well-being and positive energy. He would have never believed mediation could come this easily to him.

An hour passed, then two. None of the recruits had eaten, and stomachs began to rumble. They hadn't exactly feasted the day before either. Although the Minbari gruel was undoubtedly nutritious, it did little to satisfy any kind of appetite. The hours crawled by, and the longer Vance adopted his position without food or water, the longer the day seemed to take.

By mid-afternoon, a robed figure – probably the Minbari who woke them in the morning – entered bearing a large crystal urn. One by one he approached each recruit, ladling a measure of water into their thirsty mouths. When Vance tasted his, he found the tepid water still managed to quench his raging thirst.

They meditated for four more hours by Vance's reckoning. Various methods of keeping time without a watch had been part of his training in EarthForce and, even when meditating, he assumed he was pretty close with his calculations.

'Enough,' said Turval. An audible sigh of relief escaped from several recruits, all of them human. 'Please return to your quarters,' he said, motioning towards the door. The recruits filed out, some of them walking rather stiffly. Vance was one of them.

When they reached the dorm, the robed water bearer was there once more. He quietly padded out of the room after ensuring everyone received a sip. Vance lay down straight away, as did most of the Minbari. Once again he took the opportunity to rest, since future opportunities might be scarce. He closed his eyes, hoping that sleep would wash over him when he heard a voice in his ear.

'Minbari mind wipe?' He recognised William's voice immediately. Despite his annoyance at being disturbed, he was relieved it wasn't Merreck spouting his threats again.

'What about it?' said Vance, his eyes still closed.

'Well, do you think it'll be safe?'

'Why, are you expecting to fail?' asked Vance, opening one eye.

William tried to look casual, but failed miserably. 'No, but… well, you never know.'

'Don't sweat it. You'll do just fine.'

There was a pause as though William was considering his chances. 'But what if…' he began.

'William! Get some rest.'

Vance closed his eyes. Before long the sound of shuffling feet diminished until everyone was on a slanting bed. Vance never imagined a day of meditation could be so tiring.

He woke to the sound of his stomach growling and the now-regular chiming of the robed Minbari's instrument. Once again they bypassed the mess hall and headed straight for the meditation chamber. Turval waited placidly, and he told them to sit when they entered. Just as the day before, they were given no food and little water as they meditated. By the end of the session, most of the other human trainees looked ready to drop. Strangely the Minbari looked hardly affected, their stern, proud demeanours unruffled by the fasting and meditating.

That night as they returned to the dorm, nobody spoke. The short-sharp-shock element of their training actually pleased Vance, whose military training left him accustomed to such harsh tactics in dealing with new recruits. It would certainly show the non-military trainees what they were letting themselves in for. Maybe weed out the weak. Torturous conditions to test the mental resolve of recruits was something he could understand.

The rumbling in Vance's stomach had subsided, leaving just a dull ache. Sometimes he hadn't eaten for a week while out on manoeuvres, so the sensation wasn't new, but that didn't help. As he drifted off to sleep, he knew this training was far from complete.

Day three brought the same story: no breakfast and straight to the meditation chamber. Turval was there once more, and this time he didn't need to beckon the trainees to their places.

This time, before they sat, one of the human recruits approached Turval. They spoke in hushed tones for several seconds and Turval nodded solemnly. Vance didn't recognise the recruit – he hadn't yet had a chance to speak with him – but he saw in the young man's eyes that the fasting and meditation had gotten to him already. Turval motioned towards the exit, where an Anla'shok waited to lead the recruit away.

Vance had seen this same seen many times during his time in EarthForce. Raw, undisciplined young men and women came to EarthForce thinking they were invincible, and the rigorous training and psychological tactics they encountered broke them. This was the point, of course. Break them down and build them up again. Sometimes, however, the breaking was too much. It was the spirit that broke instead of the wilfulness. The irony, realised Vance as he slipped into his meditative state, was that in EarthForce they broke you with unending physical rigors and the fear of what was coming next. Here they were breaking the humans by making them face themselves in meditation. But why weren't the Minbari being affected?

By now Vance had grown quite adept at meditation. He attained his relaxed state within seconds, slowing his heartbeat to conserve energy, remaining aware of his surroundings but zoning them out at the same time, ignoring his body's need for food and water despite the pain in his gut and burning in his throat.

As the day wore on, his trance only seemed to get deeper and easier, the pain of his hunger almost subsiding completely. By the afternoon Vance was totally at peace; he could have sat in his meditative state for hours more. As the light shining through the stained glass began to dim, he heard movement at the back of the hall. A whispering and the faint sounds of movement tugged at his conscious. Over

the next few minutes the sound continued and seemed to be drawing closer. Vance resisted the temptation to open his eyes and look around, guessing this might be part of some test. Before long the whispering was right in his ear. 'Follow me,' commanded the calming voice of Turval. Vance stood and followed his tutor out of the meditation hall. He noticed that half the trainees were no longer present.

They walked to a section of the academy Vance had never seen, through several doors that, had Turval not revealed, would have been completely hidden. The passageway dipped suddenly, taking them into the depths beneath the black-walled building. Gradually the smooth walls became rougher, the light from the wall braziers growing dim until they were walking along a dark subterranean tunnel. Soon they came to a wide-open cave, where two Anla'shok stood as stern sentinels. As they saw Turval approach, both bowed reverentially and opened a door in the cave wall. Vance could see nothing but darkness beyond. Turval stopped and turned, fixing Vance with a harsh glare, very uncharacteristic for the soft-featured Minbari.

'The Mark of Darkness is one of the most dangerous tests you will face during your training. It offers no special accolades, no medals or rewards. Should you fail, you will not be dismissed from the Anla'shok. If you succeed, though, you will join those who have succeeded, and you will earn the right to try for the other Marks.' Vance glanced over Turval's shoulder. The darkness seemed oppressive, taunting him, drawing him in, daring him to approach. 'All you need do is find the way out,' said Turval.

'How long do I have?' asked Vance, his dry throat croaking slightly.

'As long as it takes,' answered Turval, turning to one side and motioning toward the door. Vance strode forward as confidently as he could. He passed through the open doorway and stopped a few feet inside. The light that shone in failed to illuminate the cave. He turned. Turval watched as the two Anla'shok swung the door closed. The dull shaft of light thinned gradually until, with a clang, the door closed and the light winked out. Vance could not help imagine that the look on Turval's face was something akin to worry. Or fear.

The total darkness. Vance had experienced the subterranean dark before, not like moonlight where you could at least define shapes. This was complete and dizzying blackness. Instinctively he put out his hands, feeling for some sign of a wall or passageway. As he moved, his foot knocked against an outcropping, causing him to stumble. Blind panic surged through him until he regained his footing.

Vance crouched low. That way, if he fell, it wouldn't hurt as much. As he moved, he began to feel a little stupid. Anyone watching with infrared nightvision equipment would laugh as Vance squatted in the dark, arms flailing. He tried to find anything solid to lean against.

After several precarious seconds he managed to reach a wall. Relief washed over him as he felt the cold rock against his palm. He stood, bracing himself against the moist rock. His eyes had been dealing with the complete dark for several seconds now, and it was obvious there was no source of light – he could make out nothing, no dim grey silhouettes, no shadowy shapes, not a thing.

Steadily, he slid along the wall, keeping his feet close together, moving slowly in case they met an outcropping. His free hand stretched in front of his face so that he would not hurt himself by walking into a low stalactite or other rocky obstacle.

Vance slid around the edge of what must have been an expansive cave, gently caressing the wall as he passed. Suddenly his hand touched something hard and metallic. He felt a metal ring screwed into the wall, rusted by the perpetual damp. Perhaps a torch bracket missing the torch? Vance dropped to his knees, searching the ground in case the illuminating brand had dropped from its housing. Nothing rested on the floor immediately around the bracket, and Vance didn't feel confident enough to leave the wall to start scrabbling around for a torch that might be long gone.

He pulled himself upright, using the bracket as support. Unable to hold his weight, it jerked from the wall. One of the pins holding it fell to the ground, the sound echoing around the cave. Vance left the rest of the bracket dangling from its remaining pin and carried on.

Soon, the cave narrowed enough that Vance could reach out and feel both sides of a tunnel with his hands. The passageway sloped downward. For the next hour he followed it. Sometimes it levelled out, but more often it continued down into the constant black. At intervals he would stop and simply listen, feeling for any sign of a breeze or draft. If he was to make his way out of here, he needed to maintain his wits. Even the smallest clue could point to an exit. A shaft of light or a slight change in air pressure could mean a tunnel exit or secret door. Running water, or even the sound of wildlife, might also indicate freedom.

After another hour, the tunnel sloped up. Sometimes the steepness forced Vance to use his hands to pull himself along. He had grown accustomed to being blind in the darkness. So far he avoided stumbling or banging into a wall, but he knew it was only a matter of time before a misstep led to a serious accident.

The tunnel soon levelled out, and as Vance moved along he found it widened until he could no longer touch both sides at the same time. He decided to bear left for no particular reason, and he kept his left hand on the wall as he continued. He did not know how far he'd travelled into the darkness or how long he had been stumbling around. Hours had certainly passed, but night and day obviously mattered little down here, so he decided to rest when he got tired rather than guessing when rest would be most appropriate.

Hunger was not currently a problem, but thirst was beginning to nag at him. The walls were damp to the touch, but not enough moisture trickled there to gain any real sustenance. If he didn't find a water source soon, he would be in danger of dehydration.

As he moved through the cave, he noticed the rock wall becoming smoother. As his palm slid across the wall's surface, the cracks and crannies disappeared. The uneven ground also flattened, making movement much easier. The Minbari must have carved out this flat surface from bare rock. If this was a room, there might be something useful within, left behind from aeons ago. With little else to do, other than continuing to travel, Vance searched the area for anything that might provide aid in his escape.

Dropping to his hands and knees, he moved away from the comfort of the wall, reaching out so as not to bump into something hidden in the dark. For several minutes he searched the open cave but found nothing. The barren cave must have been recently swept, for no small stones, piles of dust or puddles were apparent – just the simple, flattened rock floor.

Vance sat in the centre of the chamber for several more minutes, trying to imagine and plan his next move. Pausing like this showed Vance just how tired he was. He must have been travelling for most of the day. Or was it night? Nevertheless, despite the relative comfort of the room, he decided to make one final search for water before resting.

After finding the wall once more, he continued. Again, the walls slowly closed in around him, revealing another narrow passageway. Vance travelled for a mile or more, often regretting his decision to leave the smooth room and nearly turning back several times. He stopped to reconsider his actions when he saw something ahead that made his heart almost stop. Through the complete blackness a faint, blue light shone.

He quickened his pace. The illumination didn't give off enough light to see by, but a definite patch of colour ahead provided hope. After seeing nothing but black for hours, this colour was like an oasis in the desert. When he realized the blue light emanated from around a corner at the end of the passage, Vance sped toward it, elated at finally being able to make out part of his surroundings. Moving forward, he entered a small circular cave, in which strange blue lichen, the source of the glow, adorned the walls.

Not a little disappointed, Vance examined the room, looking at the lichen as it climbed the walls on every side. Relieved at having a light source, Vance mused that an exit would have been much better. Then he saw a tunnel running from the other side of the cave where the lichen continued to grow. He studied the walls, curious to know why the algae did not grow throughout the entire complex of caves. The edges of the lichen looked stripped and torn, as though someone had ripped it up like an unwanted weed. It seemed obvious the Anla'shok had specifically designed the first part of their tunnel system to remain completely dark. If it was intended to spook him, Vance had to admit it was working. He hadn't realised how close he'd come to abject panic. The relief he felt at being in the light, no matter how dim, was close to euphoric.

Vance laid his hand on the glowing blue lichen. It was spongy and, even better, it was moist. Without hesitating, he wrenched a handful of the fluorescent flora from the wall, held it above his open mouth and squeezed. Drops of metallic-tinged water dropped into his mouth. The mouldy taste did not put him off and, when he had squeezed one piece dry, he quickly tore up another. Vance spent almost thirty minutes squeezing enough moisture out of the lichen to slake his thirst. Afterwards, his mouth tasted a little odd, almost spicy, but the dusty feeling in his throat subsided. Once his thirst had been sated, Vance sank to the ground. Curling up in one corner of the cave, he fell into a sound sleep amidst the glowing plant life.

There was no way of telling how long he'd been asleep. The weakness in his limbs as he stood made it seem he weighed three times his true weight. Vance struggled to his feet and licked his parched lips.

Tearing off more algae, he drank to relieve the dehydration. After he had squeezed the last piece dry, he stared at the dull blue lichen. Holding it up to his nose, he sniffed. The odour wasn't particularly bad, which was usually a good measure of whether something was edible or not. He took a bite. The shred of lichen balled up like an old bootlace in his mouth as he chewed. Grimacing, Vance swallowed the masticated vegetation. It sank down his gullet and seemed to sit in his stomach. Vance could feel the fluffy blue stuff tickling his insides. He was about to take another bite when he suddenly lurched forward, retching for all his might. The chewed piece of lichen popped up and into his throat, and then with a string of bright blue bile, fell from his mouth. He coughed up the vile vomit still in his throat, some of it running from his nostrils. Vance could taste the tang of metal, as though he'd licked the bulkhead of a freighter. After spluttering for nearly a minute, he managed to clear his clogged pipes.

Vance looked up at the wall of algae, silently cursing it for its toxicity, then tore some more for its moisture, hoping to wash any trace of the lichen out of his throat and replace the precious fluids he had just lost. When he felt he could walk without gagging, he moved towards the far tunnel, exiting the cave.

His way was lit for a couple of miles, then the algae began to grow thinner on the walls, the pale blue light dimming with every step. Before the lichen grew too thin, Vance tore some off the walls and squeezed it over his mouth, letting the juice run down his throat. There was no knowing how long it would be before he drank again.

Girding himself against the perpetual darkness, Vance continued onward. Before long, he was faced with his first real choice. The narrow tunnel obviously split in two branches. He could feel in the blackness that one tunnel headed upward a little whilst the other was more or less level. Vance considered that he had already come some distance downward, so heading up would offer the best chance of finding an exit.

He followed this tunnel for another mile or more when he came to yet another crossroad. 'Maybe you should go back,' he said to himself aloud. 'The other way might be better. Then again, there's no real way of knowing. Unless, maybe there was a clue back there you didn't see. And stop talking to yourself!' Vance suddenly felt foolish. Talking to oneself was a sure sign of panic, or at least losing your edge.

Going back was not really an option. His training taught him to press onward no matter the odds. Never look back. Make a decision and stick with it, right or wrong. Both tunnels felt fairly even with nothing to distinguish them. He decided to explore left, and if another fork appeared, he would then take the right path. If there was any logic to this test, then he should at least be able to progress using this method.

He proceeded, straining every sense other than sight, occasionally stopping to ascertain if anything new had entered his environment. During one of these stops he first heard the noise: a faint sound, barely audible in the eerie subterranean silence. Footsteps. Undeniably the sound of footsteps.

The sound came from behind him in the tunnel, and Vance considered backtracking to locate the source. No sooner had he made his mind to go back than the sound changed direction and seemed to be coming from ahead. Then it stopped altogether. Vance quickened his pace, considering the sounds may have been coming from a parallel tunnel. The source of the sound might pass him by and leave him behind. In the complete darkness, rapid movement was difficult and dangerous, but in his desperation Vance felt the potential benefits outweighed the risk.

Minutes passed and Vance seemed to be making no progress. He stopped several times but could not make out any further noise. Not wanting to risk injury, he slowed his pace once more.

Over the next few hours, he faced several more forks in the passage. After taking one left he would then take the next one right, blindly hoping this would reward him with some progress through the maze. As he considering lying down to sleep, the tunnel opened before him. He still couldn't see, but the echo of his footsteps revealed he had reached an open area. Keeping his left hand to the wall, he tried to circumnavigate the cave. His hand touched something hard and metallic. Reaching out with his other hand, Vance grasped something riveted to the wall. Something circular. Made from rusted metal. One pin protruded from it, and his hand located a hole designed for a second pin.

Vance ached to cry out or punch the wall. Wrenching the remaining pin from the wall, he flung the bracket across the entrance cave, towards where he imagined the door to be. This was impossible. How had he managed to come back to the same cave? There had been no forks in the first cave. Unless he had missed one, missed a branch of the tunnel before he had reached the lichen-filled cave.

It was no use anyhow. He was too tired to set off again. Turval said he would have as long as it took. Rest now, worry about finding the way out when he was feeling better. A night's sleep would help clear his head…

Vance woke up on the cold floor, the sound of footsteps echoing from the dream he had been having. He sat up when he realised the sound was not from his dream. He could hear the sound emanating ever so faintly from a tunnel. In the blackness he couldn't see the tunnel entrance, but he knew one must be there. Maybe several exits went forth from this cave.

Stumbling slightly, he stood. He hadn't realised just how fatigued he was. Dizzy, dehydrated and half starved, Vance headed toward the tunnel. He didn't care anymore if he stumbled or knocked into some piece of masonry. Whether it killed him or not, he would find the source of those footsteps.

For hours he stumbled through the tunnel. This time, when presented with a branch he did not hesitate – whichever he stumbled down first was fine with him. It didn't seem to matter anyhow; the sound of the footsteps was always just ahead, whichever route he took. Several times his heels buckled on the uneven surface, but he continued with haste. A twisted ankle was the least of his problems. At this rate he'd be dead before long anyway. Maybe that was the Minbari plan. Maybe this underground catacomb housed the bones of other humans from centuries back. Then again, maybe they were just waiting for him to fail. Perhaps they were all around him; he just couldn't see them. All they wanted was for him to fail.

'You won't beat me!' The feral cry hurt his lungs and throat. He stood panting for several seconds, and then realised the footsteps had stopped. Rubbing his rough chin, he looked both ways down the tunnel, considering which way to go. It mattered little; he couldn't see a damn thing. What kind of test was this?

Leaning against the tunnel wall, he laughed. At first quietly, and then a raucous guffaw, like a rowdy night in the mess hall. The maniacal laughter echoed down the corridor. Then a growl, like a wild dog but far more alien, echoed back at him. Vance stopped laughing. This was no longer funny. Even though he was starting to lose it, the growl was sobering. Again the sound emanated from one end of the tunnel, this time louder. Vance didn't need any more persuasion. He set off running.

To hell with walking at a safe pace, the owner of that growl sounded big and deadly. Who knew what alien beasts the Minbari kept down here? Arms held out in front of him, Vance raced down the tunnel, bumping against the walls in the pitch blackness but not daring to stop. As his breathing became more laboured and his feet slowed, another guttural snarl urged him on. Each growl indicated the creature was gaining on him, but he still couldn't hear its claws on the ground or smell its fetid breath blowing down his neck.

Then the tunnel ended, leaving Vance in the open once more. How would he find an exit before the beast was on him? He turned, ready to face the baleful eyes as they rushed from the tunnel, but nothing attacked. The growling stopped. Slowly he stepped backward, his hand held out to find something to brace himself against. As he moved his foot, something crunched beneath it, something metallic. Vance reached down and picked up the rusted metal bracket he had flung so many hours ago.

Vance's first inclination was to throw himself against the wall where he imagined the door was, screaming for Turval to let him out. He'd spent too many hours, or possibly days, trapped down in this forsaken tunnel system with himself and his own nightmares. Things that he couldn't escape. Like the human who had quit earlier. Broken not by a physical activity, but by the stress of being alone with himself. Unable to take the pressure of sitting still with his own thoughts. One's own mind often proved to be a bigger threat than anything an enemy could confront you with.

Everything suddenly became clear to Vance. This was no test of spelunking or orienteering. At best it was a test of endurance, maybe even wisdom. He sat on the uneven rock floor of the cave and closed his eyes, adopting his meditative position. Everything around him disappeared: the hunger, the thirst, the footsteps, the growling, the nagging panic, the beating of his own heart in his ears. Everything went away. Within seconds he heard the telltale grating of the cave door opening.

'Well done,' said Turval. 'The Mark of Darkness is yours.'

HARSH LESSONS

Despite the dimness of the light spilling into the underground tunnel, several seconds passed before Vance's eyes adjusted. When he could eventually open his eyes fully and without pain, the smiling face of Turval greeted him. A tall Minbari Ranger draped a black blanket across his shoulders, and Vance pulled it tighter when he realised he was shivering. 'You have done well,' said Turval in a fatherly manner. Vance was grateful for the comment; congratulations and commendations were something he never received from his own father as a child. 'I am sorry your trial had to be so much harder than the rest. But you will come to understand why in due course.'

Vance had no idea what Turval meant by this comment, but he was too fatigued to ask right now. Turval held out an ornate crystal flask, and Vance eagerly grasped it and pressed it to his lips. Cool water ran down his throat without a trace of the sickly metallic taste he had endured for God knew how long. When the flask was emptied, Turval led him out of the tunnel. Vance followed like a sheep, unable to do anything else. 'So what was the point in that?' he asked, surprising himself with the candid nature of his question.

Turval paused as he carefully weighed an answer. 'What do you think the point was?' he said finally.

Vance hadn't expected that. Surely Turval was supposed to be the teacher. 'I don't know. At first I thought it might be endurance, survival, sensory and physical depravation. They're both used in all kinds of military training. But what was the point of the test? There didn't seem to be any kind of test to it. Survive or die, until you work out that there is no exit? Then give up. I don't know – you're the expert.'

'There is no way out of the maze, yet you did not cry out for help or beg for mercy,' said Turval, stopping. The tall Minbari turned to face Vance, who still shivered uncontrollably in the chill tunnel. 'Even when you knew there was some kind of creature in there with you, and possibly a hostile one at that, you still did not break. And when you finally realised there was nothing to be done, you sought strength through meditation. The Anla'shok could not ask for more from an initiate.' With another smile, Turval turned to continue along the tunnel.

'So that's the answer? Sit down in the entryway and meditate? That would have got me out at the beginning?'

'Not necessarily,' said Turval, stopping once more. His back turned, he stood silently as though awaiting Vance's next round of questions. Vance could tell Turval was growing impatient, but he felt anger rising within him at the thought of suffering for what seemed like days, just for some kind of philosophical lesson. He thought better of questioning Turval further on the reasons for the test. Something else now bothered him though.

'So what kind of beast did you set on me down there?'

Turval turned once more, revealing a smirk on his usually serious face. The grin looked out of place, as though mischievousness was something the Minbari was ill suited to. 'At no point were you in any danger. Trust me.'

'It didn't sound like it,' said Vance, growing annoyed again. The more he thought about the test, the more foolish he felt. EarthForce used humiliation as part of their training as well, but he had already gone through basic, already been broken down and built back up again. He already knew he was a capable, disciplined soldier, and he was not about to go through it again.

'How did you know your creature wouldn't attack?' A sudden low rumble rose from behind Vance's back. He recognised it immediately, the low resonant sound making the hairs on his neck stand up. Vance turned quickly, raising his arms defensively, half expecting to see the slavering jaws of some alien creature bearing down on him. All he could see was shadow. Slowly, a black-swathed figure peeled itself from the dark. It moved enough into the light that Vance could see the grim face of his tutor, Kattak.

'As I said, you were never in danger. Sech Kattak was shadowing you the whole time. Quite literally at certain points. Had you succumbed, he would have ensured you came to no harm.'

Stunned, Vance turned, his eyes low to the ground, waiting for Turval to lead him out of the tunnels. He was beaten.

He thought himself a good soldier, but these Minbari proved at every turn he was wholly inadequate. At no time had he sensed Kattak, and the old Minbari had been with him every step of the way.

Turval led them through the darkness. As they went, a conciliatory hand patted Vance's shoulder. Glancing back, no one was there. He told himself that from now on he would make it his mission to learn everything about the Code of Tuvor.

Back at the dorm, he collapsed on his bunk, which was still at the forty-five-degree angle. The other faces wore a bewildered sense of relief, and Vance wondered if he bore the same look.

As he drifted off to sleep, Merreck entered, his head held high as though he was returning from a gentle evening stroll. He lay on his bed and regarded Vance, a smile slowly crossing his face. Another victory for the Minbari, thought Vance, irritated at how unaffected his rival looked.

In his fitful dreams, something was coming after him in the dark, something fast and silent that stank like hell. Every time he turned, he expected to see Kattak, but he saw only the terrible darkness. As he turned back, he was pursued again, but his legs failed to carry him away from the danger.

The morning chimes woke him once more. The prospect of food allowed him to drag his still-fatigued body into what resembled a standing position. The other recruits took several seconds to rouse themselves – all but Merreck, who stood proud and to attention, regarding the other recruits with self-satisfied disdain.

As Vance stood in line, he felt someone behind him stumble and press hands into his back. 'Apologies,' said a female voice.

'It's OK,' he replied. Jerklenn stood bleary eyed, attempting a smile, but Vance could tell it took all her strength. 'Tough few days we've had.' Vance smiled. 'Feel free to lean on me.'

Jerklenn stiffened at the suggestion. Vance realised he had overstepped the mark. Seems the rumours about the Minbari's sense of humour, or lack of it, were more than myth. Without the energy to make an apology or explain the intricacies of Earth sarcasm, he turned and followed the long line of recruits.

Vance mouthed a silent prayer that they would skip their morning praise of Valen and head straight for the canteen. He had almost forgotten what it was like to eat. Unfortunately he was disappointed, his stomach grumbling as they knelt before the ancient statue. Then panic rippled through his gut when he realised his tutors could just as easily demand more meditation rather than provide a meal.

His nerves calmed when they eventually entered the food hall, and the hearty breakfast of gruel could not come quick enough. Vance began to trough it down, finding his spoon far too small to hold a satisfactory amount for each mouthful. He thought it was the best breakfast he'd had in a long time, then stifled a laugh when he realised it was the only breakfast he'd had in a long time. The gruel went down like honey down a starving bear's throat, refreshing his aching body. He came up for air after several seconds to find the rest of his table staring at him as though he were a zoo exhibit. 'Er, a little hungry are we, Vance?' asked William.

Vance returned their looks, gruel dripping from the side of his mouth. A couple of the male recruits were smiling, and Vance noticed Jerklenn was still eating, obviously trying to ignore him. 'Don't tell me you guys aren't starving,' said Vance.

'We're a little hungry, sure, but anyone would think you hadn't eaten for days.'

Vance frowned. Was this some kind of joke? 'I haven't eaten for days. Did you guys not go through the same thing I did? The tunnel, the darkness, the wild growly monster thing?'

'Dark and definitely subterranean, sure, but we all got fed. Only once a day though. And what growly thing?' Vance could tell from his tone that William was not kidding.

'You guys don't mean the blue lichen stuff do you?' It was a tentative question, but deep down Vance already knew the answer.

'No. Dry Minbari bread, water and some kind of meat sausage type stuff.'

'Kaer'vas,' said Jerklenn, as if suddenly intrigued by their conversation.

'Yes, that's it,' William looked suddenly enthused, 'kaer'vas. It was quite nice actually. Don't tell me you actually ate the lichen. That stuff smelled disgusting. Didn't you find the rations?'

Vance began to think back, unsure of whether to be angry or flattered. He remembered Turval's words that the trial was much harder for him than for the rest. Well, it would appear it was. Then it made sense. Vance had more military training than any of the other recruits, with the possible exception of Merreck, and three days underground with food and water would not be much of a trial for him. To raw recruits, however, he could imagine how disconcerting it could be, especially when surrounded by the unknown and the darkness.

Without a word he finished his breakfast gruel, now feeling no embarrassment at the gusto with which he wolfed it down. He then looked at other half-eaten bowls with a hungry, expectant look. To Vance's surprise, William spooned a little of his own watery gloop into the bowl. One by one, the other recruits at his table did the same until finally Jerklenn spooned in her portion.

Vance watched them all, at first unsure of what to say. 'Well, I don't know about you guys, but I'm starting to feel a little misty,' he said, reaching up and wiping away an imaginary tear. Jerklenn's expression changed to one of sympathy but quickly became stern once more as Vance laughed. The other humans at the table chuckled as Jerklenn frowned into her bowl.

One by one, the recruits finished their breakfasts and exited until Jerklenn and Vance were the only two left at the table. People milled around the exits like lost sheep, as they had no instruction as to what was on the agenda for today. Vance became aware of Jerklenn's eyes burrowing into him. 'Why must you always make fun?' she asked. Vance was sure he could sense a slight trembling in her voice.

'It's just what we're like,' he replied.

'By "we", I assume you mean humans. Because if that is the case, then your statement is not true. I have met many humans who do not make fun in the same way. In such a deceiving manner.'

Vance wasn't sure if he was quite ready for this yet. 'Look, it's just an icebreaker. It alleviates the tension from stressful situations. Are you telling me the Minbari don't do that?'

'If we have such a situation, then we confront it. We deal with the problems in a sensible way.'

Vance let out a long sigh. A dialogue on manners with a woman from a humourless alien culture might prove to be more difficult than the test of the Mark of Darkness. It would be a while before she could appreciate the subtle nuances of Earth, and more particularly military, humour and horseplay.

'Look,' Vance stood, picking up his bowl, 'we'll talk about this later. Thanks for the breakfast.' He walked away from the table and tried to ignore the hurt look on her face.

No classes took place during the day, so Vance spent his time familiarising himself with the academy.

The building itself seemed a hub of circular corridors, organised around the central temple to Valen, which the human recruits had begun to call "the Chapel". Everything seemed to radiate inward – or outward, Vance wasn't really sure – from this central sanctum.

Several training locations housed areas for instruction in most forms of armed and unarmed combat. Vance found it curious none of the Anla'shok he'd encountered carried a weapon. They either felt very safe here, or their weapons were cunningly concealed.

A library, housing its fair share of dusty tomes, rolled parchments and data crystals, dominated the southern side of the academy. The entire building seemed a perfect combination of aesthetics and functionality. Furniture – with the strangely angled beds as an exception – was functional yet beautiful to look at. The walls, windows and ceilings seemed dour and unremarkable at first glance, but on closer inspection they were made of carved obsidian, each piece carefully cut and shaped to fill its space and fulfil its ultimate purpose. Vance noted the striking difference from his usual barracks. The rigid uniformity of the EarthForce architecture seemed dull and somewhat primitive in comparison. Despite Vance's loyalty to EarthForce, the Minbari style seemed much better.

At midday Vance found himself in the Chapel. The sun shone directly into the high, spacious room, an eerie light illuminating the statue of Valen and imbuing it with a semblance of life. As Vance studied it, he couldn't help think the statue looked familiar, but he couldn't quite identify whom it reminded him of.

'Vance.' The words echoed around the chamber. The stern face of Durhan made Vance wonder if he had done something wrong.

'Yes, Sech Durhan,' said Vance, bowing respectfully. He wanted to do nothing to get on Durhan's bad side, and by complying with all the required airs and graces, Vance hoped he might ingratiate himself.

'I have selected several of you to begin denn'bok training. It begins now, in the training circle.' He began to walk out of the Chapel. 'You are already late,' he said over one shoulder. 'Do not elevate my displeasure by tarrying.'

Vance hustled after the bulky form of the combat tutor, at once nervous and excited at the prospect of handling a Minbari fighting pike. When they reached the hall of combat, five other initiates waited patiently. All were Minbari. He wasn't surprised to see Merreck standing amongst them.

Durhan strode to the centre of the fighting circle, and Vance joined the row of initiates. Vance recognised one of them as a regular at his table at mealtimes, but he did not acknowledge him, instantly feeling the seriousness and solemnity of this particular class. He had been singled out for denn'bok training, deemed worthy over several other Minbari candidates. If it was the last thing he ever did, he had to show Durhan he was worthy.

'You are all here because, for one reason or another, you have been deemed skilful enough to begin learning the ways of the denn'bok.' Durhan's voice echoed within the combat hall. 'This session will give me an opportunity to assess your potential. I doubt all of you will still be considered good enough by the time this session ends.' As Durhan finished his sentence, Vance met the Minbari's levelled gaze. His expression was still neutral, but Vance was sure he knew Durhan's subtext. The odds were against him; he was fatigued and he had never handled a fighting pike before, but this just made him even more determined to prove his mettle.

The past few days showed him the Minbari used many enigmatic, and ultimately challenging, methods of weeding out the weak and unsuitable. Vance had to keep his wits about him if he was to stay in this seemingly exclusive class.

'Some of you may already be familiar with the denn'bok.' At that he moved his wrist. The subtle gesture was noticeable only to those focusing their full attention. Five feet of metallic alloy suddenly appeared in Durhan's palm. 'It is a rare and ancient weapon. Though I will teach you how to use the denn'bok, you will not be guaranteed ownership of one until you prove yourselves in combat.'

A door at the side of the combat hall opened and a white-robed figure entered bearing a wooden tray. As he drew closer, Vance could see the tray bore small metal tubes, around six inches long.

'These are training pikes,' said Durhan, 'not as heavy or lethal as the real thing but weighted similarly, and they will suffice for training purposes.'

For the first time Vance noticed a change in the expression on Merreck's face. He looked suddenly annoyed and could not hide his displeasure. 'As long as you are being trained in the denn'bok, you will wield these weapons and keep them with you at all times.'

One by one the trainees were offered the tray. Once they all held their training pikes, the white-robed figure left. Durhan flicked his wrist once more and his denn'bok collapsed back into his palm. He stood to attention before the row of trainees, and they stiffened in unison.

Once again, a point of Minbari tradition presented itself that Vance did not understand. Would he always be the last to show the proper respect? Despite this, Durhan carried on. Gripping the fist containing the denn'bok, he bowed before his students.

'Vakash'tuli,' he said in the guttural Warrior Caste dialect.

The rest of the students bowed before him and repeated the Minbari phrase. Vance remained silent to avoid any possible embarrassment from mispronunciation. He could always find out the correct meaning and inflection later.

'I know most of you have little experience, so we will begin with the basics. Grip the pike firmly.' Durhan held out his hand, showing the denn'bok resting against his palm. Vance gripped the training staff in the same way. 'Some fighting pikes are button activated. The ones you will use are from an antique batch and thus require a sharp vibration.' Durhan shook his hand once more, and the denn'bok extended. 'Repeat!' he ordered.

Vance heard the hiss of minuscule hydraulics as three of the six training pikes extended. He shook his own but nothing happened. Durhan fought back a smile. 'There is a technique to it. Practice is all that's required.'

Vance shook his hand again and again, each time trying to make the motion smoother and more purposeful. The pike finally responded, shooting forth. The weapon's grace surprised Vance, and no inertia jerked his hand as the pike extended. Vance knew from his experience with weapons that this one was perfectly balanced.

'Good. Now, spread yourselves around and I will give you a demonstration of what the fighting pike can achieve against several attackers.' Vance didn't like the sound of this. Durhan was obviously going to take them all on. Usually he would have liked those odds, but recent experience taught him the Minbari weren't to be trifled with. If Durhan didn't think he could defeat them all, he would certainly not have planned the demonstration.

Reluctantly Vance moved across the fighting circle to position himself behind Durhan, as the rest of the trainees also moved to find a good position from which to attack or, more likely, defend. His mind flashed back to the dark tunnel, where a Minbari who was not there had patted him on the back. What was he getting himself into?

'Denn'tak!' The words echoed across the combat hall. At first Vance thought it was Durhan who spoke, possibly giving a salute to his trainees before he embarrassed them, but as he looked he saw the smiling face of Merreck. Slowly Vance looked down to find himself standing within the fighting circle.

Durhan frowned. The martial tutor seemed unsure of what to do, and panic gripped Vance. 'The challenge has been made,' said Durhan. Then, as though he felt obliged to explain. 'Anyone entering the circle of combat is open to a challenge. Do you accept?'

Not again, thought Vance, glancing from Durhan to the eager face of Merreck. Merreck obviously knew what he was doing with a denn'bok, and it didn't take a genius to envision how this would end. Nevertheless, Vance was trained in bojutsu, and he doubted the training pike was a vastly different weapon. 'I accept,' he replied, never taking his eyes off Merreck. The Minbari could not hide his look of satisfaction as he strode into the intricate circle.

Durhan retracted his weapon, as did the other four recruits. 'Begin when ready,' he said, watching solemnly.

Merreck crouched into a fighting stance Vance did not recognise. He held his fighting pike low and parallel to the ground. Vance's assumed a low stance as well, one tip of his pike pointing towards his opponent. As the pair circled one another it was obvious Merreck was reading him, trying to surmise whether Vance knew how to handle the denn'bok. Twice he flipped one end of his pike, clattering the end of Vance's weapon. Vance ignored his tentative strikes, waiting, knowing that Merreck could not resist taking the initiative and attempting to cause him much pain as quickly as possible.

As expected, Merreck made his move, flicking his pike upward to deflect Vance's weapon and moving in close. Anticipating the move, Vance spun sideways and away from his opponent. He knew the Minbari was fast and would have a contingency for at least four or five possible counters. Vance anticipated one of them, swinging his pike around to guard his rear. The fortuitous move blocked the weight of Merreck's pike, which slammed down on his

own. Vance's shoulder blades would have taken the brunt of the attack had he not blocked.

The two faced each other once more, this time standing where, seconds ago, the other had been. Merreck smiled. 'Remember what I told you, human,' he said. Vance remembered the Minbari's jibe that no human had ever bested a Minbari in combat.

'Talk is cheap,' Vance bit back, rushing in.

The tip of his pike almost struck Merreck's face, but the Minbari leaned out of range. In one fluid motion, Vance brought the other end of his weapon around to strike Merreck on the side of the head. The Minbari's pike flashed upward to deflect the blow, just as Vance's foot whipped forward to take out Merreck's leg. With a simple sidestep, Merreck avoided the blow and hopped out of range of Vance's flailing pike.

Merreck's skill infuriated Vance. The Minbari had parried or avoided every blow, and Vance was rapidly running out of ideas. Even now the Minbari simply stood and waited, not even panting, whereas a hot trickle of sweat ran down Vance's face.

The rest of the trainees were staring at them expectantly. Vance could feel Durhan's gaze burning into him. His tutor was watching, evaluating. He had to show these Minbari what he was made of. With blinding speed he shot in and feinted low, blurring his move into a fluid headshot. Merreck did not move until the pike was almost against his face, but then he ducked.

Vance never actually felt the blow – the pain of the strike against his abdomen had no time to register before every ounce of air was driven from his body. He didn't hear the clatter of his pike on the ground or feel the cold floor against his face as he dropped. He was simply lying in the fighting circle, gasping for air. When squirming did no good, Vance tried kneeling on all fours. It did little to help, and he felt like he was going to suffocate. Suddenly, strong hands gripped his waist and lifted his pelvis backward. A little air filtered into his lungs, and Vance gratefully sucked in the oxygen. With each breath the hands pulled him upward, opening his airways and allowing more and more breath into his lungs. Soon he was breathing properly and able to stand.

'Let us continue with the lesson,' said Durhan, stepping back, and Vance realised his tutor had helped him breathe. He found his feet and steeled himself to face the mocking faces of his fellow trainees. Merreck, to his surprise, bore no sneer or self-righteous grin. His look was impassive. The rest of the trainees were similarly unconcerned, and Vance thought it best not to worsen the situation by speaking.

For the next two hours Durhan espoused the basics of the denn'bok. He mainly showed blocking moves, explaining the need for good defence before a student could even begin to think about attack. Vance listened carefully, but he couldn't shake the feeling he had disappointed his teacher. As he expected, when the lesson was over and the trainees had been dismissed, Durhan ordered him to remain behind.

'It has not escaped my notice that Merreck bears you ill will,' said Durhan, pacing thoughtfully. Vance did not answer. He had never ratted on a fellow recruit, and he would not start now. When Vance did not speak, Durhan continued. 'Whatever the case, incidents like today will continue. Possibly until you leave, or he kills you. You are both training to be Anla'shok, and this animosity cannot continue. You will therefore have to show him you are as worthy as he is.'

Vance didn't know what to say. He had done his best since his first day, but Merreck was simply too fast, too strong and too well trained. 'I have therefore decided that you will receive extra schooling in the discipline of the denn'bok. It is obvious Merreck has an advantage where this is concerned, possible due to his uncle's teachings, but I will endeavour to balance that. Then, when Merreck considers you his equal, your differences can be solved.'

'With respect, Sech Durhan, I think it will take more than beating him in combat to make him accept me.'

'I never said anything about beating him. Nor did I speak of acceptance. Satisfy yourself that if you give a good account in the combat circle, Merreck must treat you with the respect that your skills demand.'

'Thank you, Sech Durhan.' Vance didn't know what else to say.

'You will meet me here for one hour each evening. And before you enter the combat hall again, you will learn the proper pronunciation of "vakash'tuli". Repeat!'

'Vakash'tuli,' said Vance, his inflection perfect.

'Good,' replied Durhan. 'It is important you know this. In the human tongue it means "I accept defeat". It is how we prepare before any combat. By accepting defeat before we fight, there is no way we can be beaten.' In a strange way, this lesson made more sense to Vance than any other the Minbari had so far taught him. 'I will see you tomorrow,' said Durhan, bowing and gripping his fist.

Vance gripped his fist likewise and returned the bow. Without speaking, he turned and left the hall. As he headed back to the dorm, even with the pain in his throbbing abdomen, he could not stop a smile spreading across his face.

MARK OF THE STAR

For many, flying through an asteroid field at several thousand miles per hour never lost its appeal, but for Vance the experience held no particular thrill. He knew pilots that lived for the rush of knowing they were a split second from death, but Vance always approached piloting with a measured lack of emotion. Its one virtue was that it beat being a passenger. Piloting did not make Vance anxious or fearful, for it was as much a discipline borne of action and reaction as any of the martial arts.

He trained for several days on interfacing with the Nial's systems. A work of pure genius, the controls worked symbiotically with his body, anticipating his every need. Simulation training had lasted only a few hours before those with piloting experience were sent out in the real thing. And then, after only a short training course, they introduced the students to the real fun.

Sech Mishal initially spoke to them in his usual relaxed and casual manner, but he seemed to become more serious and almost aggressive as they came closer to taking the helm of their own vessels. As the minutes passed, Mishal drilled them harder and harder, making each manoeuvre more difficult and pushing them as far as possible.

Now Vance found himself facing his most difficult test as a pilot, including even his EarthForce training. This trial was necessary to attain the second Mark of the Anla'shok: the Mark of the Star. Three at a time, the trainees entered an asteroid field with orders to destroy as many automated drones as they could. Only a finite number floated among the asteroids, and Vance had no intention of finishing last. Relaxation and concentration, Vance reminded himself, would prevent panic and mistakes. He could not afford to miss even one drone, or worse, hit an asteroid. Undoubtedly his meditation training was helping. Vance breathed steadily, allowing the flow of oxygen to the brain to remain constant and regulated, allowing him to think clearly despite the twenty different things he had to consider at the same time.

Already he had destroyed four of the seven drones needed to earn the Mark. With only twenty drones available as targets, and all three pilots gunning for the same targets, only two of them would have the opportunity to destroy at least seven drones and thus take the Mark. The third would be disqualified. Vance had no idea who his opponents were, but he trusted Sech Mishal to make a fair decision and put pilots into equal groups. Besides, failing to attain the Mark did not mean you had failed in your journey to become Anla'shok. While failure brought no shame, for Vance success meant everything. More than anything, success meant he belonged, that he deserved to be here beside the Minbari. Success showed he was as good as their Warrior Caste. Failure was not an outcome Vance was prepared to accept.

A green icon flashed briefly on the left side of his main viewing panel. Letters flashed beside it in the Minbari Warrior Caste dialect. They represented another drone coming into range. With a tiny movement of one hand, Vance guided the Nial toward it, at the same time bringing his tri-linked fusion cannon to bear. The three frontal prongs of the Nial flashed and unleashed a stream of green light. Through his viewing port, Vance saw the drone explode and wink out as the vacuum of space quickly extinguished the fire. Simultaneously the drone symbol on his panel disappeared.

Vance guided the Nial around the imposing girth of an asteroid and suddenly two more drone symbols appeared on screen. Altering his trajectory, Vance put himself on a direct course for both. He would easily be able take both out, one after the other. Excitement bubbled up within him as he realised he would soon gain the Mark of the Star. Quelling the distraction caused by his elation, Vance concentrated on targeting the drones.

Again, he engaged the fusion beams of his Nial, destroying the first slow-moving drone. Adjusting his trajectory, he had only to maintain his current course and he would have the second, and the Mark of the Star, in his sights. Suddenly a sound like the startled cry of a sparrow rang out, and a light winked at him from the small systems panel. Minbari script told him something was wrong with the main guidance system. Moving his hand briefly, Vance tried to get the ship to give him more details, but no answers presented themselves. Checking the main viewing screen, Vance could see he was scant seconds away from the last drone. If he could maintain his course for just a few moments longer he would have attained his goal. Then he could worry about his guidance system.

His hand hovered over the weapon systems interface, but he never got the chance to use it. The Nial lurched to one side, the artificial gravity malfunctioning for a split second, sending Vance bouncing around inside the compact cockpit. Checking his instruments, he could see the target was lost, although a quick damage report showed he had not collided with anything. The guidance system was giving erratic readings, telling him he was nowhere near where his viewing port showed he actually was.

Vance was torn. If he left now, he would lose the Mark of the Star. If he persevered, his malfunctioning ship might guide him straight into the side of an enormous mound of spinning rock. Survival ultimately won out over success. Flicking his hand over the control panel, Vance instructed the Nial to take him to safety, as far away from the asteroid field as possible. The ship obeyed, and for a moment Vance thought the systems had simply been the victim of a temporary glitch.

The Nial passed beyond the boundary of the asteroid field, and Vance considered returning and finishing the last of his drones, when the entire light array of his control panel failed. The auxiliary power came on immediately, bathing the cramped cockpit in a soothing red light.

Vance fought the panic. After all, Sech Mishal could not be far away, and he must have been watching. Even if he could not bring the ship's systems online, he would soon be picked up. Through the viewing port, Vance could see the asteroid field retreating further and further away. Within its rocky depths, a sudden flash of light indicated one of the other trainees had destroyed a drone. Vance felt a pang of jealousy as he thought how it should be him in there, proving his worth. He quickly put the thought to the back of his mind; there would be plenty more opportunities for him to prove himself.

As he continued to watch, Vance realised the Nial was drifting aimlessly, leaving the asteroids far behind. Neither Sech Mishal nor any other Minbari craft appeared in his field of vision. Vance passed his hand over the systems panel, but there was still no response. The auxiliary power controlled life support but nothing more. His motion became more frantic as he realised he could not even send a distress beacon.

Everything was fine, he told himself. Although he could not think of a particular time, Vance was sure he had been in worse situations. The asteroid field was almost out of sight. He would drift further until he was caught in the gravitational pull of some floating satellite or solar mass. Then the trajectory of his ship could be diverted anywhere. The only consolation was his life support would probably expire long before that happened. Vance didn't know exactly where the training session was taking place, but the final orbital ring of the Minbari system was the last point of reference he recalled seeing. That meant he could drift for years before floating into any inhabited part of space.

He refused to let that happen. Vance quickly examined the panel edgings. The Nial's cockpit offered zero room for manoeuvrability, as he was basically encased within a plasteel cocoon. Everything around him was designed for utilisation at close quarters. He could not reach the engines to perform a manual override, but maybe he could decipher the Minbari wiring beneath the control panels. While he was no engineer, he had been competent enough at basic electronics to know how to wire and rewire a control panel on an EarthForce ship. This would be different, of course, but his only alternative was not a pleasant one.

He ran his finger down the side of one panel. Nothing. No discernible gap, no screws that he could undo. Every panel fit flush to the next. If not for the unique lighting patterns on each panel, he wouldn't have known they served a separate purpose. And everything was red now, which made it even more difficult to see the difference.

This would be a great way to go, he thought. Trapped in the claustrophobic confines of some miniature call girl's boudoir. In the past, Vance had the opportunity to consider his own death on numerous occasions, and this was certainly not the end he envisioned for himself. As he ran his fingers down the edge of one of the other panels he heard a soft click. The panel gave slightly under the pressure of his fingers, and he dug his nails beneath one edge. Gently he forced the panel back, and it twisted on an invisible hinge to reveal wires. Had they been different-coloured wires, Vance might have been infused with some hope. Even if he could not decipher what each one did, he could have experimented with them. Unfortunately the wires were all an identical pale blue. Each one was a simple neon strip with coruscating light flowing through it.

At first the situation seemed hopeless, but then Vance realised the flowing light meant there had to be some power left. Perhaps the shutdown of systems was allowing the Nial to repair itself of whatever problem afflicted it. Maybe there was hope yet. With no other course of action open to him, Vance decided to fall back on his lessons, which had not let him down yet. Crossing his hands over his chest, he closed his eyes and began to control his breathing. In the shortest time it had ever taken him, Vance found himself in a meditative state, achieving total calmness of body and mind.

In no time at all, Vance opened his eyes to see the huge silhouette of a Morshin carrier gliding into view. He couldn't help but allow a smile of satisfaction to cross his face. His system panel suddenly flashed on, the dim red lights of the cockpit replaced by the usual rainbow of colours. When he checked the time gauge, he had been drifting for over four hours. Checking life support, Vance saw barely enough oxygen remained in the Nial's systems to last until the Morshin picked him up.

As the firm grip of the Morshin's tractor beam closed around the Nial, the pall of calmness Vance achieved through meditation slowly faded. Once again someone else controlled his destiny. Not until the Nial was safely within the Morshin's hangar did he feel secure once more.

When he exited his fighter, Sech Mishal was there to greet him, one eyebrow raised and a cockeyed grin adorning his face. Vance could not believe how uncharacteristically wry he was for a Minbari. He nodded in greeting, but he could not muster any enthusiasm, despite the mirth on Mishal's face. Vance had failed to gain the Mark of the Star, and that would be damaging to his cause. 'Why so glum, Vance? You are a very… fortunate individual.'

'That I can appreciate, Sech Mishal. But the malfunction on my ship means I've failed the mission. No matter how lucky I'm feeling, it doesn't change the fact I was one drone short.'

'Understood.' The smile dropped away from Mishal's face. 'And just where do you think your failure lies?' Vance frowned, trying his best to decipher yet another strange Minbari question. Was it the ship? Did he do something wrong? Was there any way he cold have avoided failure? Thinking back to the events that led up to the Nial's malfunction, Vance thought not.

'I'm not sure there was anything I could have done in the circumstances,' said Vance, trying his best not to sound defensive. 'Maybe if I was a little more familiar with Minbari electronics I could have–'

'Maybe, maybe, maybe. Why always look for what you should have done, when what you did was more than good enough.'

'I understand what you mean, but surely I could have done more than just meditate in my cockpit until help arrived. If I had known more about the Nial's guidance system, I could have brought some of the systems back online and completed the mission. Instead, I failed. There is no excuse for that.'

'Your ignorance is good enough for me,' said Mishal, the wry smile returning to his face. 'And besides, who said you failed?'

The frown on Vance's brow grew deeper still. He and Mishal regarded one another for a few seconds, Vance's look of puzzlement contrasting with Mishal's barely contained mirth. It suddenly began to dawn on Vance. 'So you mean destroying the drones was not the point of the mission? Or the way to attain the Mark of the Star?'

'More than anything, the Mark of the Star is a test of courage and patience, in much the same way as the Mark of Darkness. You have proven today that you have learned those lessons well. It is how a Ranger should always conduct himself. When all options are exhausted, and only then, you wait patiently for an opportunity. Then aid will come your way.'

'And if it doesn't?' Vance was becoming slightly annoyed with being duped for a second time.

'Then there is nothing you can do. Panicking will not aid you. Succumbing to anger will not help an impossible situation. Do you disagree?'

Vance could barely keep his frustration at bay. He suddenly realised his fists were clenched tightly by his sides. 'I don't disagree,' he said through a tight jaw. 'But would my time not be better spent learning how to use my equipment,' he gestured over one shoulder towards the Nial, which now sat in the corner of the hangar.

'There is always time to learn how to utilise tools. The lessons of the heart and mind must be mastered first. Once these are second nature to you, the rest will come naturally.' Vance knew the Minbari was making sense in his own way, but as a soldier accustomed to learning tactics rather than ethics, so many years spent learning how to train his body to act and react instinctively, these lessons of the "heart and mind" seemed an aggravating waste of time. He had to will himself to not engage Mishal in a little "philosophical debate", EarthForce-style. Instead, he lowered his head and nodded. Comply for now, he thought, and accept the fact that he was progressing just as the Anla'shok wanted.

Without a word he walked past Mishal toward the main deck area. He could feel the Minbari's gaze follow him as he moved. 'There will come a time, James Vance.' Vance stopped but didn't turn. 'There will come a time when these teachings will make sense. But until that day you would do well to trust us.'

Vance walked onto the main deck. The place seemed so alien, more like a well-lit greenhouse than a military vessel. He couldn't get rid of the feeling he'd made a huge mistake by coming here. Then, as the Morshin carrier headed to Minbar, and as he saw how naturally the Minbari crew worked together in silent discipline, those feelings faded.

A buzz circulated through the Anla'shok academy when Vance returned. Many of the trainees passed the Mark of the Star, more than pleased with their efforts. Vance could feel the electric atmosphere as he entered the main meeting hall.

William was the first to greet Vance in his irrepressible manner. 'Pure genius, don't you think? Mind you, I'm glad the test wasn't passed by hitting drones. I think I only got two before my ship malfunctioned.'

Vance smiled in reply. He was still trying to work out whether being duped was a good thing. 'I'm not so sure. I'm getting a little sick of all these dubious tests of faith. And I'm getting tired of these Minbari tricks.'

Jerklenn, standing not three feet away, spun round. William didn't see the look on her face, but Vance realised she had heard and was offended by the words. Silently she stormed away. Vance nodded at William, who was still struggling for an answer, and followed her from the meeting hall.

It didn't take Vance long to catch up with her as she walked along, head bowed. 'Jerklenn,' he called. At first she didn't stop, and Vance thought she might not have heard him. Then, slowly, she came to a halt and faced him. Vance easily read her expression. 'What can I say?' he said with a grin, trying his best to lighten her obviously dark mood. 'I'm not used to the way your people handle things.'

'If you are so hateful toward the Minbari, then why did you come here?'

'I'm not hateful. You must be able to understand that we have a different way of doing things and expressing ourselves. It takes time for people from different cultures to find common ground.' Vance was surprised at his own powers of diplomacy. 'Once we get used to each other's ways, then–'

No!' Vance's eyes widened at her harsh tone. 'This is the Anla'shok way. Not the Minbari way. Not the Religious Caste way. It was always the Warrior Caste chosen to join the Anla'shok. Now they have changed that, and even I am beginning to question their wisdom.'

She stopped. Vance realised it was not just humans she was having difficulty with. Jerklenn was as much an outsider in this environment as he was. 'I understand,' he said. 'You see, we have common ground already.'

At first she regarded him with suspicion, as if this might be another way to poke fun at her. When she realised his comment was sincere, she returned his smile. Vance held out his hand, hoping that Jerklenn would be a little more comfortable with the human gesture than when they first met. She grasped his hand firmly, a little too firmly for a woman, and shook. Before he could say another word, she glanced over his shoulder and her smile dropped. Vance turned, and there stood Merreck. He levelled a disapproving glance not at Vance, but at the small figure of Jerklenn.

This is going to end in another beating, Vance thought, as he turned and squared up to the powerful Minbari. Merreck ignored him and continued to stare at Jerklenn.

'You need something?' said Vance.

'From you, nothing,' Merreck said, without taking his eyes from Jerklenn. Before Vance could

think of a retort, Merreck spun on his heels and marched away.

'What was all that about?' asked Vance, turning. Jerklenn was nowhere in sight.

They had their evening meal, but Jerklenn never arrived. With the buzz of the day's test, nobody but Vance seemed to miss her. As he finished his meal, Vance realised Merreck was absent too.

For a second Vance considered searching for them. He had visions in his head of Merreck tearing into Jerklenn, chastising her for daring to speak to a human. But before he could begin his search, he remembered his appointment with Durhan in the combat hall. He could not afford to miss this lesson. He only hoped his fears for Jerklenn were unfounded.

The training hall was wreathed in shadow. The only discernible features were the outline of the centre circle and the irrepressible figure of Durhan, waiting patiently for his student. Vance approached as silently as his training would allow him. Before he got within twenty feet, Durhan tilted his head in recognition. Before Vance could speak, Durhan's denn'bok extended and the Minbari rushed toward him.

Vance was momentarily flustered as he tried to ascertain if Durhan was really closing for an attack, but the look on his face left little doubt. As Durhan closed the distance, Vance fumbled in his robes for his training pike. After a split second of panic, his denn'bok was out and extended, his body adopting the defensive stance Durhan had taught him the day before.

Just in time he parried his tutor's blow. Its power rocked him backward, and Vance was hard pressed to retain his footing. He skipped back to avoid Durhan's reach, but the denn'bok master was deceptively quick for his size. Two more blows rained down, and Vance struggled to match them.

Durhan suddenly stopped and gave a curt nod, his fighting pike collapsing into itself. 'Good,' he said. 'You should be ready for combat at all times. A bit of a shaky start, but it will suffice. It would have been disappointing to send you to the healers so early in your instruction.'

Vance was unsure whether to accept Durhan's calm. He kept his own weapon up and ready. 'I thought we only fought in the fighting circle,' he said warily.

'That is for everyday tutelage. Our liaisons are in secret and with the express purpose of, I think the earth phrase is, "raising your game". The normal rules do not apply. Besides, the tricks I need to teach you require that you step outside the bounds of normal training. Another human phrase, I believe, is "think outside the box".' Durhan smiled. 'I am quite fond of that one.'

Seeing Durhan relax a little, Vance did likewise, allowing his guard to drop but still expecting Durhan to launch another attack. It did not come. 'Now, your defence was competent but sloppy. Had I been a lesser opponent, your adequate use of the denn'bok would probably have kept you from harm. However, a stronger opponent could easily beat your guard.'

Within seconds, all thoughts of Merreck, Jerklenn and pointless Minbari tests were gone. Durhan's practicality captivated Vance. As the lesson carried on, he became more and more obsessed with his weapon, and for the first time there seemed to be no surreptitious philosophy surrounding it. Simply warrior and weapon. The first thing about the Minbari that Vance felt he could truly comprehend.

THE MARK OF FIRE

The recruits awoke the next morning to an environment fraught with tension. A tangible malaise hung about the complex, but none of the recruits could identify it. Vance was pleased to see Jerklenn was safe but didn't feel comfortable enough to bring up the subject of her sudden exit when Merreck had interrupted their conversation the day before. Besides, Vance didn't feel he should breach the general lull in the morning conversation at their table.

The oppressive mood, Vance soon realised, sprang from the solemn and serious attitudes of all the Minbari around them. Even their usual morning wake up call seemed particularly glum. How the silent, white-robed figure had managed to be more miserable than usual Vance could not tell, but somehow he infected the entire dormitory.

No breakfast conversation lightened the gloomy mood. Vance noticed one or two recruits at other tables attempting to exchange banter with their fellows, but the Worker Caste Minbari who served their meals quickly stared them down. Those tutors they passed in the corridors regarded their wards with looks of sad seriousness, which Vance likened to those given to the terminally ill or condemned.

By the time breakfast ended, Vance had reached his limit. Donning his thin training pants and vest, he headed off to the small gymnasium. This was all he could think of to try and cheer himself up. Even more importantly, the Minbari rarely used the gym. Apparently Sinclair had it installed just before the new recruits arrived, much to the chagrin of the other Anla'shok. With no sullen Minbari faces around, maybe a workout could lift the dour atmosphere.

Like many things Minbari, the gym was small but perfectly formed. Vance wasted no time: after a quick stretch, he started with some bench press. The weight was light; there weren't enough plates in the gym to make the bar really heavy. Consequently his reps were slow and controlled, squeezing every ounce of effort out of his chest and arms.

Vance sat up after the first set, beginning to feel better. The general disquiet had not penetrated this little room until the door opened. Merreck stood there in his full robes. Vance's stomach turned, though he was more annoyed than scared. The Minbari might be here looking for another fight, but Vance was more bothered that his workout was now ruined.

'We are all summoned to the main hall,' said Merreck without expression. After a curt bow he left. Vance felt cheated. Merreck had the audacity to stalk into the gym, intimidate him, and not even have the decency to provoke a fight. Jumping to his feet, Vance suddenly realised Merreck had actually done him a favour. Now at least he was no longer infected by depression; his anger had seen to that. Why had this sworm enemy done him this service?

Vance flung open the door and marched down the corridor. Merreck was not far ahead, and Vance gained on him quickly. He marched as close as he could, staring at the back of the Minbari's head. Merreck did not turn or adjust his pace. This made Vance even angrier. Surely Merreck knew he was there, surely this must annoy him, having the human he hated most right at his back. The more Merreck ignored him, the more Vance's ire grew. He began to think of Jerklenn. Of the look she had given Merreck when he appeared the day before. Was it fear? Deference? Either was bad enough. All she had done was shake Vance's hand. Why should such a gesture shame her if done in front of Merreck? Were they betrothed? They were of different Castes. Vance wasn't sure if inter-Caste marriages were allowed. Whatever the situation, it was not acceptable for Merreck to treat Jerklenn in such a way. Not by his standards. Human standards.

Vance was about to speak, about to challenge Merreck's back, when the tall Minbari turned. Vance realised they'd arrived at the main hall. Merreck stopped to allow Vance to enter first. He bowed his head and held out an arm, beckoning Vance through. The gesture did not alleviate Vance's mood. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought Merreck was trying to wind him that bit tighter.

Once he entered the main hall, the suddenly solemn atmosphere eclipsed his temper. He realised that this was no time to vent his anger. He was the only person present not in his Ranger robes, adding to the dampening of his mood. Despite his unsuitable attire, nobody so much as glanced his way. The rest of the Ranger recruits, and most of their tutors and the fully qualified Anla'shok, were lined up in ranks, cross-legged on the floor before the statue of Valen. Sinclair stood in front of them, looking somewhat regal in his finery and casting his eye over the men and women before him.

Vance quickly joined one of the rows and sat cross-legged at the end. Merreck took position in front of him, purposely showing his back once more. A sudden pang of guilt overcame Vance as he considered some of his thoughts about Merreck might have been uncalled for. As he sat waiting for the rest of the trainees to file in, he noticed not everyone was here. Those recruits who had not received either of the first Marks were absent. It dawned on Vance that he and his fellows were about to face yet another trial. In the silence of the main hall, Vance's mind tried to fathom what the next pointless test could possibly be. Whatever it was, he planned to show courage and initiative, even if he knew it was an aimless exercise. And then if everything else failed, just meditate. This last thought brought a smile to his face as he imagined using the same strategy during EarthForce training. He would have been blasted into the middle of next month!

The last strays made their way into the hall, and Sinclair stood to attention. The hall, which had been in silence previously, attained a palpable hush, as though the walls of the building were leaning in, keen to hear the Anla'shok Na's words. Sinclair seemed to regard every single recruit sitting before him. Compassion, dignity and pity seemed to play across his face all at once. 'The Mark of Fire.' Sinclair's voice was soft yet commanding as it rang out, echoing up to the high ceiling. 'It is your next test as Anla'shok trainees. It is the final Mark you can earn, and few ever achieve it. There is no disgrace in failing this test. You will not be cast out of the order for failure, but the honour that goes with succeeding will stay with you for the rest of your time as a Ranger.' Here Sinclair paused, as if at a loss for what to say. He almost seemed angry. 'Before you begin, there are two things you have to know. The first is that I am opposed to this test.'

There was a slight murmur around the main hall. If the Anla'shok Na was opposed to this test, then it must be serious indeed. Vance began to think that maybe real peril accompanied this one. This thought made him more eager to begin.

'There are dangers involved in this test that I do not believe all of you are ready for. As such, any of you who do not want to take the Mark of Fire can skip it without fear of shame or reprisal.' None of the recruits said a word. Vance was sure that even those who had come from civilian backgrounds, which was practically all of them, would not want to back out before knowing what the challenge was.

'You do not have to give your answer now. You will each take the Mark of Fire alone. When it is explained, then you can make your decision. The second thing you must at least hear before you take the test is the Creed of the Anla'shok. It is a long litany, and I do not expect you to remember it verbatim after the first hearing. But I feel you should all at least hear it before this test.'

Sinclair's features softened. 'I know you have learned the three basic tenets I wanted you to know: delight, respect and compassion, but for this you may need a little bit more time. Please, bow your heads.'

As one, the trainees obeyed. In the darkness that settled over the room, Vance could hear the quick, harried breathing of some of the recruits. Sinclair's words must have unnerved them. Being a Ranger was no longer a novel exercise in Minbari etiquette and false tests of courage. It was suddenly serious. Vance wasn't worried for them, for they would have their chance to back down once they knew what the Mark of Fire entailed. All he wanted was to get on with it and finally have the chance to prove himself.

'I am a Ranger.' Again Sinclair's words rang out clear as a bell through the great hall. Vance focused on them entirely. Maybe within

this litany, this Creed of the Anla'shok, there would be some clue to passing the Mark of Fire. 'There is a darkness in the universe. I am the light that seeks out every place that the shadow might hide. I burn brightly when there is need for light and I dim when there is cause to remain unseen. The stars have called and I have answered. There are forces moving amongst them that cannot be allowed to rally. I have been called and I have answered. The minions of the darkness can be given no rest and no safe places to hide. I have been called and still I answer. The shadows will consume me if I venture too close but if I do not bring the light to them, none will survive. I am called to my destiny and I will forever answer.'

Vance began to think back to the conversation he'd had with his father back on Babylon 5. The Colonel had spoken about an ancient evil that the Anla'shok prepared for thousands of years to face. This must be what Sinclair was referring to. Vance's interest was piqued. This, along with Sinclair's serious and ritualistic tone, made him take the words much more seriously than he would ever have expected.

'The night is dark, the road is long and the way is filled with danger,' Sinclair continued. 'The path I walk, I walk alone. I will make my way to the end because the road leads to salvation. If I falter, all will falter. If I fail, all hope is lost. I will not fall; surrender is not an option. I am a Ranger. I come together with my brothers and my sisters in the places of light. I come to the place between the candle and the star. I stand in the gate between faith and nightmares. I am the guardian. We are the sentinels. Together we will not rest until no shadow falls. I take my garb from the hand of providence. I take my staff with the oath never to use it in anger. I take the faith of my masters in the hope that they are never given reason to question it. I will remain forever true, forever Anla'shok.'

Above everything else, Vance could tell Sinclair recited the Creed with the utmost respect and devotion. This old warhorse, EarthForce through and through, recited a Minbari litany as though he had been one of them all his life. Vance suddenly felt ashamed of himself, having ridiculed the Minbari training techniques. Sitting amongst human and Minbari alike, his fellow recruits, within the hallowed walls of the Anla'shok temple under the shadow of Valen's statue, Vance was, for the first time since his arrival on Minbar, truly humbled.

EarthForce taught him how to excel, how to look to his comrades for help and to help them when they were in trouble, but no staunch litany told him why. Suddenly the Creed of the Anla'shok more than fascinated – it began to make sense.

'I venture into the stars to seek my fate. I search now for the signs unhallowed. I know in my heart that I may never return but I venture forth without fear. There is nothing to be afraid of in the dark places of the universe. I will serve without question because that is what I do. If death comes I will fight with the strength of the light. The darkness may claim me but I will not fade without resistance. In my final moments my foes will pay a dear price for my life. We are Rangers. We live for the One. We die for the One. We know that every moment we exist is a gift we must earn anew each day. If we must relinquish this life that others may live, we do so without hesitation. We go to the dark places where no one else dares venture. We are explorers that show the way between uncaring stars, charting the course that others may follow when it is their time to pass. We are the guards, the keepers, the seekers and the warders. We never waver in our vigilance and on our watch there is no shadow that can slip beyond our notice. We stand on the bridge between history and the future, allowing no darkness to pass.'

There was a pause, and Vance wondered whether to open his eyes. He dared not, for fear of breaking the spell Sinclair wove with his eloquence.

'I am a Ranger,' Sinclair began again. 'Anla'shok tulat. Entil'zha Veni.'

With this, the Anla'shok that lined the walls surrounding the main hall repeated in unison, 'Anla'shok tulat! Entil'zha Veni!'

'Over the course of your training you will learn the Creed of the Anla'shok in full.' Vance and the rest of the trainees took Sinclair's words as a signal to open their eyes. 'You will find it a comfort and a help to you during your time here and beyond.' He paused once more, drinking in the sight of the men and women under his care. 'All I can say to you now is good luck.'

With that he turned, unceremoniously, and marched from the great hall, closely followed by the other Anla'shok as Sech Turval walked to the front of the hall. 'You have heard the words of the Anla'shok Na. Heed them well. Now, meditate on what you have heard. You will be called one at a time to face the Mark of Fire. If any of you wish to leave now and return to the rest of your fellows, you are excused without shame.'

Nobody moved. Vance immediately adopted his favoured position for meditation and found himself relaxing. His previous excitement at the thought of a real test disappeared in an instant, as did the strange juxtaposition of pride and humility he had felt at hearing the Creed.

Only minutes seemed to pass before Vance's name was called, but when he opened his eyes almost half the recruits were gone. The rest were sitting silently at their meditations. Sech Turval stood over him, a grim expression on his face. Vance noticed the regal figure of the statue of Valen looming past Turval's shoulder. Turval led Vance from the hall, and as he followed, Vance found it difficult to take his eyes off the statue. The alien face with such faintly familiar features was spellbinding.

As Turval led Vance through the corridors of the Anla'shok academy, he noticed the absence of other bodies. No Anla'shok carried on their business, no other recruits milled around enthusiastically. There was no sign of anyone who had left the hall before him to take the Mark of Fire.

Vance hoped for a glimpse of someone who had already undergone the trial. Maybe then he could gain some hint of what was to come that might have set his mind at ease. The winding corridors led them down to the lower levels of the academy. By now, Vance knew the building well enough to recognise they approached the landing pad where he had first arrived.

Turval silently led him out of a small side exit and onto the wide platform. No spacecraft occupied the vast landing pad. Fanning out in a line across the centre was what seemed to Vance the entire contingent of fully trained Anla'shok. Some of them were breathing heavily, one seemed to show the beginnings of a black eye, and they all stared directly at Vance.

His quick glance at Turval was not returned. Instead the Minbari marched to one end of the platform and turned to face the line of black-garbed Rangers. Vance followed, turning to face them as well, standing shoulder to shoulder with his tutor. They stood for several seconds, watching the impassive wall of Minbari Anla'shok stare back at them. The night was clear, and if the floodlights on the walls had not illuminated the platform, the array of glittering stars would have done just as well.

'You must pass to the other side,' said Turval. Vance continued to stare at the seemingly impregnable wall barring his way. Turval reached into his robes and produced two cylindrical items. The first was instantly recognisable as a denn'bok, but not the training version Vance already owned; this was a genuine fighting pike. The second was much longer and had a switch on one side. 'Once you begin the test, you may neither speak to nor strike out at those who would stop you reaching your goal.'

Vance frowned at Turval. 'Then what's the point in having weapons?'

Turval regarded Vance with his grim look. 'Neither speak nor strike out,' he repeated. 'Step toward the line to begin. If you wish to decline the test, leave with me now.' With that he walked away and through the sliding door. It closed behind him with an ominous, metallic thud, a lock slamming shut within.

Vance turned once more to the line of Minbari sentinels barring his way. They had obviously seen some action and met some resistance from the previous recruits. Great, Vance thought. Trust me to have to face them when they're already madder than hell!

He glanced down to examine the second weapon, which was a long cylinder with a lockable switch to one side. Vance held it up and flicked the switch. The weapon started to give off a telltale hum. The unmistakeable feel of static electricity told him it was some kind of Minbari shockstick. Vance looked to his other hand and regarded the dormant fighting pike. Two weapons, but he wasn't allowed to strike out. Obviously self-defence would come into play here, and by the looks of his opponents, anything more than self-defence would be met with little understanding.

After a deep breath, Vance took a pace forward. He flicked off the power to the shockstick and kept the denn'bok contracted. He would not tempt fate until he was provoked into using the weapons. He would try to resist his natural urge.

The Anla'shok reacted little to his approach. One or two straightened slightly, stretching a stiff arm or clenching a tight fist. Other than that, they looked on with little interest as Vance steeled himself, forcing one foot in front of the other.

They had no visible weapons, but their fighting pikes were probably palmed and ready for use. As he drew closer, this last thought proved correct as Vance saw some of them move their arms to the side, giving themselves room to extend their denn'boks safely.

This would be impossible. No gaps presented themselves, and if these Anla'shok were even half as good with a denn'bok as Durhan, or even Merreck, he stood no chance. But he had to try. The last two tests seemed all but impossible. Maybe this one was the same. Maybe, as he drew closer to them, ready to take the brunt of their blows, they would desist and allow him to pass. When he became a fully-fledged Anla'shok, he would be a brother to them after all. Hadn't the Creed of the Anla'shok stated something about brothers and sisters?

Ten feet stood between him and the line. Those Minbari nearest him looked on, expectant of his next move. A surprise attack was fruitless against so many. He would have to test the line, see what their reaction would be.

Vance thought back to his sporting experience. His career in the EarthForce rugby team had been short lived. His reliance on personal excellence rather than being a team player had meant he was more of a hindrance than anything else. Furthermore, he was under six feet and around twenty kilos too light to make a dent in any rugby defence. However, what he had learned during that short time might just come in handy now.

As he approached, he saw the first Anla'shok move toward him, and he sidestepped to the right and away, rushing the Minbari next to him, who seemed unready for his sudden move. Unfortunately "unready" was the wrong assumption. Vance was more than three paces away when the Anla'shok's denn'bok was out and ready, flashing forward. Durhan's recent lesson on being ready at all times paid off, and Vance ducked just as the weapon shot forward. Before he could move back, a second pike jabbed out, catching Vance on his cheekbone. His momentum, along with the glancing blow, knocked him backward and off balance.

As Vance skidded on his rump, he saw the line of warriors advancing. His tentative attempt at breaking through was their signal to move in. Jumping to his feet, Vance flicked on the shockstick. A quick twist of his wrist extended his own fighting pike. His sudden move

did nothing to slow the steady Anla'shok advance, and he skipped backward, hoping to buy some time as he planned his next move. In the short time it took them to close, Vance had no flashes of inspiration. All he could do was charge.

With no gap to run into, Vance tried to aim for the adjacent shoulders of two of the warriors. He attempted to block each of their weapons, a speculative double parry at best. He was surprised as his raised denn'bok deflected the Anla'shok to his right. Instantaneously the second incoming blow glanced off his shockstick and hit his shoulder. As though an iron girder had fallen on him, a numbing pain coursed through his body, and he couldn't tell whether his collarbone had been fractured or not. Either way his left shoulder was useless.

Despite the blow, Vance kept moving forward. He barrelled through the two warriors, who tried to flatten him rather than halt his advance. He could see the other side of the platform ahead! Two double doors sat there, beckoning him forward.

Without looking back, Vance pumped his legs and left the line of Anla'shok behind him. He kept hold of the denn'bok, despite its weight. Past experience taught him never to relinquish a weapon when it might be needed, no matter how slim the chance.

Adrenaline coursed through him as he realised nothing stood between him and his goal. A hundred metres away sat victory! If he could sprint the distance faster than the Minbari, the Mark of Fire would be his!

A swooping noise preceded a solid bar of mnemonic ferricite cutting through the air behind him. The pike, aimed at his legs, hit its targets with a solid thump. Vance's legs were swept away in an instant, and he hit the ground as though he'd been shot by a PPG. He tried to get up quickly, but the first Anla'shok was already upon him. As he stood, his legs still numb from the thrown denn'bok, he felt a hard blow against his rump.

This incensed Vance past the point of rational thought. His goal had been right in front of him, and now it was taken away. The Anla'shok raised his denn'bok for another blow. The feel of the hard alloy in Vance's palm was too tempting. Even though he'd fallen, Vance managed to hold onto the fighting pike. It must have been for a reason.

As the Anla'shok drove his blow downward, Vance parried. A second Minbari warrior joined the fray. All thought of reaching the other side of the landing pad slipped from his mind. Vance stepped in as the Minbari advanced and thrust one end of the denn'bok towards his opponent. In his eagerness to reach Vance, the Anla'shok had dropped his guard. Vance's counter-strike hit him full on the bridge of the nose. Vance saw the satisfying spray of blood as his pike hit its target. He saw nothing more as two more Minbari joined the fray, denn'boks at the ready.

The shower of solid blows drove Vance to his knees. He had fought back and failed the test, but the lesson was not over. I guess I should have meditated, he thought as he lapsed into unconsciousness, regretting his sudden rash challenge, as he knew the Mark of Fire would never be his.

New Beginning

The blurry infirmary ceiling was spinning. Vance felt like he was resting on a broken twentieth-century turntable that kept resetting itself before getting halfway round. Vance tried to sit up, but the spinning got worse before he could rise to his elbows. Something strange about the bed registered in his buzzing brain. It took him a minute to realise the bed was fully horizontal, rather than at the forty-five degrees he was now accustomed to.

Vance raised a hand to his numb face. Swelling closed one of his eyes completely. His busted lip throbbed next to the dressing on his cheek. The shoulder battered by the denn'bok was sore but not broken. Strangely, despite the condition of his pulped face he still felt relief, as a broken bone would have kept him out of training.

He turned his head to examine the rest of the infirmary. Three of the six beds were occupied. Squinting a little, Vance recognised faces, although he couldn't remember, or had never been told, the names. When he'd been at EarthForce boot camp for as long as he'd been at the Anla'shok academy, he'd made a point to learn the names of everyone in his billet. He was suddenly ashamed. He spent more time worrying about being the best and proving his worth than getting to know his fellow recruits. A real warrior would know better than this. His fighting brothers and sisters deserved his respect, whether they had combat experience or not. He came here to prove a point, but he only nurtured some twisted sense of self-satisfaction. Trying to prove himself the best, as always. Out on that landing pad, he proved unequivocally that he was not. He had lost control, lashed out and this foolishness led him to having the crap beaten out of him.

From now on, things would change.

'You don't look that bad.' William's irrepressible voice was welcome, more welcome than any other voice he could have heard, including the guys back at EarthForce. Few people knew what he was going through right now. William was one of them.

Vance smiled – which caused him no small amount of pain – and turned his head. The shiny grin on William's face matched an equally shiny black eye. 'Yep, it seems it was worse if you fought back.' William looked over Vance's battered body. 'But as you can see,' he said pointing to his eye, 'even curling up into a ball got you something of a beating.'

'Did anybody pass?' asked Vance.

William paused, as though unsure whether to disclose the information. 'Well,' he said, 'your friend Merreck managed it. But no one else. If it's any consolation, he is amongst the walking wounded as well.'

Vance said nothing. It was no consolation at all. He had failed, and now Merreck had passed. Just one more thing for Merreck to lord over him. Never mind, he thought. This moment heralded a new beginning.

He struggled to a sitting position. William leant forward to grab Vance before he fell. 'Maybe it's not such a good idea that you get up just yet,' he said.

'Stop nagging. I'm fine.' Vance got to his feet. After a shaky start, he managed to take a couple of steps. 'I have to get fit anyway. I assume training will start again in earnest now.'

'Apparently not,' said William from beneath Vance's arm. 'The only work we have is learning the Anla'shok Creed. We have three days to contemplate and recuperate before we all have to recite it on the main landing platform, one at a time.'

'And until then?'

'Contemplation and recuperation.'

This brought another smile to Vance's face. He looked down at William, who seemed to be struggling slightly under Vance's weight. 'Boy, are you guys in for a treat.'

Vance easily found the contraband needed for a decent party. In fact, the Minbari in Tuzanor seemed only too happy to arrange for booze and cigars. Vance could only wonder how, when they had struggled for decent human food, they now managed to get Johnny Walker and what seemed like genuine Havanas with no trouble at all. The answer probably came in the form of Sinclair. Even though Vance had tried to keep his dealings with the Minbari secret, Sinclair always seemed to pop up just at the wrong time. He would smile and nod, but nothing would ever be said.

Within twenty-four hours of him walking out of the infirmary, Vance arranged for a row of alcohol bottles, all the smokes he could get his hands on and even a beat-up comm link that he wired to speakers to play audio-crystals. The hangar he "requisitioned" was like a bomb shelter, but it was out of the way and best of all, it was vacant. Now all he had to do was spread the word.

He found his supplies so easily that he couldn't help but think something treacherous was about to happen to him. Sinclair and his Anla'shok must have known he was planning a party, and they didn't appear to care enough to stop him. Consequently, letting everyone know didn't have to be such a clandestine endeavour. As long as they didn't dangle it in their tutors' faces, Vance reckoned they would be OK.

Of course, most of the human recruits turned up first and started partaking of the booze and cigars. Minbari initiates straggled in one by one and stuck to water. No matter how much Vance tried to persuade them, they would not touch the Johnny Walker.

Before long everyone relaxed. For most of the humans, they had been waiting for something like this since they arrived: a little music – no matter how low quality – and some booze in a relaxed atmosphere. As for the Minbari, they didn't need a drink to loosen up. Within minutes of relaxing with a bunch of friendly faces, most of them seemed to fit right in – even smile. At one point Vance observed one of them dancing. For the first time since he arrived, Vance felt like he belonged with these people. He regarded them as his new comrades-in-arms, and as he looked across the crowded hangar, he saw Jerklenn smiling at him.

The side door to the hangar suddenly flew open. A collective intake of breath filled the room as a Minbari figure stepped through. When it was obvious the figure was not one of their tutors, or another member of the Anla'shok, the group relaxed somewhat. Vance remained tense as he watched Merreck survey the festivities taken place in the hangar.

The Minbari had taken a real beating, much worse than Vance, but the obvious pain could not obscure his proud bearing. Vance stood and walked toward him, fully intending to invite him in, but before he could speak Merreck turned and left. As quickly as he could manage, Vance followed. It didn't take him long to catch the limping figure. 'Merreck,' he called, his voice echoing along the sparse corridor.

The Minbari stopped in his tracks, pausing for several long seconds before turning to face Vance. The look on his face wavered somewhere between disgust and hatred. 'I gave you a chance,' said Merreck. 'I gave you a chance to show your true colours, and this is what you do. Encouraging my people to indulge in your human pleasures. The very things that make your race so weak! To think, I would have insulted my father and my uncle by befriending you. I should thank you for showing me the error of my ways.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Vance. 'We don't have to be enemies. We cannot be enemies.'

'We are not enemies. Soon we will be Anla'shok. We will be brothers. But we will never be friends.' With that Merreck limped away. Vance did not follow. He wouldn't have known what to say even if he had.

Their three days of recuperation ended with a late-night gathering on the landing pad. The floodlights were switched off, and the light from Tuzanor's spires cast an ethereal glow across the platform. The recruits lined up in three short ranks. One by one they stepped forward and faced the Anla'shok Na. To their credit, every one of them recited the Creed of the Anla'shok word for word. Vance felt no sting of nerves, no butterflies of apprehension. He felt only a sense of belonging. The words of the oath rolled off his tongue as though he had always known them, even if he didn't yet understand their full meaning.

The last of them finally recited the Creed and walked back into line. Sinclair regarded each one in turn as he had done before the Mark of Fire, only this time he did not show concern or fear. His face was flushed with

pride and, for the first time since Vance had first met him, Sinclair looked hopeful.

'You are now acolytes of the Anla'shok, ready to be inducted into its mysteries. Much hard work lies ahead, but I am sure you can handle what is to come. You have proven you can get this far. Now you must prove that you are worthy to stand between the shadow and the light. Good luck to you all.'

As Sinclair left the landing pad, Vance looked across the row to either side. Flashes of pride appeared on some human faces, grim determination on others. Most of the Minbari wore contemplative expressions, as though drinking in the feeling so that they might reflect on it later. For himself, Vance hoped he would soon learn what was really being asked of him.

The next few weeks taught him more than his previous years of EarthForce training. Vance may not have improved as much as the other acolytes, but he put in no less effort.

Stealth seemed to be an Anla'shok watchword. Vance learned how to fly a fighter invisibly, land on a larger capital ship and run an audio tap into its systems. More important than the lessons, Vance's fear of flying as a passenger dissipated too. He learned to relax when someone else was in control, or at least when an Anla'shok pilot was in control.

In addition, his own piloting skills improved tenfold. From his limited knowledge, he surmised he was as good as any Fleet cadet. Perhaps training in the fast, agile Minbari ships made him think his skills were greater than they actually were, but he now possessed a pilot's eye for spotting danger.

Lessons in communication and intelligence began in earnest as well. At various points throughout training, spot tests were administered where an acolyte would be required to learn one of the hundreds of Ranger ciphers, then translate a message that would invariably be in a language unfamiliar to them. Using whatever resources available, the language would be translated, the message decoded and the reply sent in the shortest time possible using the relevant cipher. Although Vance showed an inherent talent in this area, and he had prior training in message ops at EarthForce, the sheer number of ciphers was staggering – and he was sure that the Anla'shok intended every acolyte to learn them all by heart.

As part of the Code of Tuvor, Sech Kattak instructed the acolytes on ghosting. This technique – involving various disguise, camouflage and surveillance techniques – the Anla'shok perfected over a thousand years, but the concept of not being seen whilst being seen was totally new to Vance. He had gained proficiency in concealment at EarthForce, but blending into a crowd, especially when that crowd was solely composed of non-humans, challenged his skills. Eventually, Vance found he could walk amongst the Minbari and appear as one of them from a distance, with the help of a hood and some slender wire.

The lessons that Vance enjoyed the most, however, and the ones he excelled at, were combat training. This did not solely involve the denn'bok. Vance mastered an array of weapons, from the faithful PPG to the Li'vath precision laser. Vance found himself unmatched at ranged combat and, much to his relief, even Merreck could not best him on the shooting range.

Tutors trained the acolytes in a number of hand-to-hand techniques, including traditional forms of wrestling and a number of non-human martial arts. The training in martial weapons, particularly the Ka'Toc and the ventar, fascinated Vance most of all. The Narn Ka'Toc was much like a katana, but heavier and more deadly. All the Anla'shok treated the weapon with respect and reverence, for any Narn who held one was not permitted to sheath it without first drawing blood. The ventar was a Minbari weapon, no longer in common use. The ancient sword was used in the first wars of the Minbari, when their clans would fight each other for dominance. Much like a broadsword from Earth, but more intricately carved and better balanced, the ventar seemed to know instinctively what the wielder wanted to do. Vance believed the sword fit his palm perfectly, and he felt strongly that if Durhan had been teaching him this weapon as opposed to the denn'bok, Merreck would have stood no chance.

Nevertheless, Vance continued his denn'bok training. In addition to the standard lessons, which Durhan taught during the day and gradually filled with more and more acolytes, Vance's evening training continued. Vance truly blossomed here, soaking in everything Durhan taught him, learning every nuance and subtlety of the art. On rare occasions, Durhan even congratulated him on his progress. Each day and each lesson brought a new surprise.

Despite the rigours of physical training and Vance's accomplishment in those areas, he put much effort and focus into his academic studies. Philosophy lessons turned to an examination of the meaning of the Creed, and Vance found himself suddenly paying much closer attention to Sech Fuhall's lessons.

While on the surface it seemed a normal philosophy class, it also contained elements of history: both military and social. For the first time, Vance learned of the first Shadow War: how Valen had, with the help of Vorlon allies, turned the tide of the first Shadow invasion and pushed them back into the dark; how Valen subsequently disappeared; how the Anla'shok fell from grace after that; how the Anla'shok had opposed the war between the humans and Minbari; and how they even went so far as to sabotage Minbari ships so that human casualties could be kept to a minimum.

The most surprising lesson was how the Anla'shok discovered the Shadow's re-emergence during the Battle of the Line. A hidden Anla'shok vessel spotted a cloaked Shadow vessel observing the battle. When it instantly disappeared into hyperspace, the Anla'shok's suspicions were raised. The only race capable of such instantaneous hyperspace travel had not been seen for over a thousand years.

In the ten years since the Battle of the Line, Ranger agents travelled to the farthest corners of the galaxy, searching for whatever evidence they could, clues as to the whereabouts of a Shadow base, or any information about the Shadow's plans and allies.

Vance listened with rising terror as he learned how far the conspiracy had spread and how little they actually knew of the Shadows' intentions. A small clue here and a disappearance there were the only trails the Rangers had to follow. The collation of their evidence showed considerable Shadow activity but provided too little intelligence to plan any kind of counter assault. If the Anla'shok were not brought back to full strength soon, the Shadows would be able to attack with impunity. There would be no advance warning.

Now, more than ever, Vance realised the importance of his job here. He knew his father had been right – if he had explained all this to him initially, there would have been no question of him joining the Anla'shok. But he also understood his father's secrecy. As the revelation of the Shadow threat brought cold sweat to his hands, Vance felt for the first time that he and his father now shared some kind of bond, although the two were hundreds of light years apart.

It finally happened. After weeks of trying to avoid it – or had he, had he simply been waiting for it? – Merreck stood opposite him in the fighting circle. He did not know if Durhan engineered this, whether he wanted them apart until Vance felt ready to take on the powerful Minbari or whether it was sheer luck. Regardless of Durhan's role in the circumstances, the moment had arrived.

They didn't have to say it. Both knew this would be a "no quarter" battle. Vance could see a smouldering hatred in Merreck's eyes. Since the night of the party, Merreck always avoided Vance's gaze. Any attempt at communication was met with a turned back or a blank, thousand-yard stare.

Now they were in the fighting circle once more for what Vance hoped would be a more even match. He and Durhan had trained religiously over the past weeks. During that time Vance felt he had attained a mastery over the denn'bok like no other weapon.

Merreck and Vance faced each other, pikes at the ready, with no pretence at ceremony. Durhan, knowing their rivalry, let this slide. A personal conflict needed to be settled here, and there would be no cry of "vakash'tuli". Neither of these warriors would accept any defeat.

Vance chose not to give Merreck the pleasure of being the first to attack, as he knew enough now to put the arrogant Minbari on the back foot from the start. He stepped in, using the katrat'voras. Roughly translated it meant "leaping bird", even though there was no actual leaping involved. The voras was a small predatory bird found only in the very north of Minbar. The move involved a combination of lateral strokes with optional breaks for parrying that had with them yet more options for counters. Vance tried for weeks to master it, but now he felt satisfied he could perform the manoeuvre successfully. Against anyone unfamiliar with it, the katrat'voras would be an opening move to end most combats.

Merreck parried every blow. At no point did he try a counter-stroke that might leave him open to Vance's own counter. Merreck obviously knew the move intimately. The flurry of strikes, utilising both ends of the denn'bok, should have been devastating. The sheer strength of the blows should have put Merreck on the defensive, but he wasted no time counter-striking.

Keldranan. Vance recognised it from the first blow of the six-move combination. He gave silent thanks to Durhan for teaching it to him. The first strike, a powerful overhead chop, sailed straight at the opponent's forehead. Vance parried the blow easily, moving his denn'bok vertically to fend off the sideways blows that would come in. There was the first. After the second, Merreck did not go straight into the third move. Instead, as their weapons clashed, he dragged his weapon downward and across Vance's knuckles. Vance cried out and released his right hand's hold on the denn'bok.

Merreck performed the rest of the combination, but now Vance was in no position to defend himself. He leapt over the next low blow and attempted to parry the last move with his arm, but it never came. Again, Merreck improvised his attack, hooking his foot around the Vance's leg. Already unbalanced, Merreck's elbow strike into his sternum knocked Vance to the ground.

Normally this would signal the end of the combat, but intuition told Vance not to drop his guard. It was a wise decision. Merreck struck down at Vance's prone form. Vance managed to grab his denn'bok with both hands once more and held up the shaft to parry. The sound of the ferricite weapons smashing into each other was deafening. Again, Merreck struck down, and Vance parried once more. He could feel his arms quiver. More blows like this would soon leave him completely unable to defend himself. Merreck stood over him so he could not roll away. A kick at Merreck's groin would be risky for two reasons: one, the Minbari was probably expecting it; and two, he was tough. A groin strike would just serve to make him madder.

When the third blow rained down, Vance struck out with one end of his fighting pike, deflecting the blow away to the floor. A cracking sound echoed as Merreck's denn'bok sent chips of cerracrete flying into the air. Vance lashed out with the end of his pike still in the air, catching Merreck across the jaw. The reprieve allowed him to bend his knees and use his denn'bok as a lever to roll backwards.

Merreck's assault did not cease. Vance realised he had to try a little improvisation. Durhan had taught him well, but their limited training covered only the proper moves. Vance's experience told him an infinite number of combinations could be performed freestyle, but he just didn't know them yet. Vance was going to have to fight "EarthForce-style dirty" if

this battle was going to have an outcome that didn't involve another stay in the infirmary.

Before Merreck could strike, Vance leaned in, feinting the start of the mashuk'gari, a long and complicated move involving a kicking spin. Thankfully, Merreck leaned backwards, adopting the stance to carry out the appropriate parrying sequence. With one end of his denn'bok, Vance struck down, smashing one end into Merreck's bare foot. The Minbari's squeal was music to his ears.

Seizing the initiative, he moved in, feinting the start of the katrat'voras. Stumbling back, Merreck positioned his denn'bok laterally to parry. Vance moved in, sweeping his weapon behind him and landing a head butt right on the bridge of Merreck's nose.

Both combatants reeled back. Vance miscalculated the solidity of Merreck's head. Blood poured from one of Merreck's nostrils, and Vance was satisfied to see anger flaring in his eyes. Hopefully his anger would lead to a mistake.

Merreck sprinted forward, and at the last second slid across the ground, attempting to hook his legs around Vance's and flip him over. Vance leapt above him, quickly turning and sweeping low with his denn'bok. He missed, but forced Merreck into a rolling retreat. Seizing on Merreck's vulnerability, Vance struck as his opponent turned. They brought their weapons up simultaneously and the denn'boks clashed. Vance knew that a standoff favoured the stronger Minbari.

He tried a twist, but Merreck anticipated the move, releasing one hand from his own denn'bok and grabbing Vance's. With his own fighting pike flat against his forearm, he managed to get Vance in a chokehold.

Vance could do nothing. His stronger opponent held his weapon while the cold ferricite pushed against his windpipe. He could not even wriggle free. Merreck was silent, every muscle tensed. Vance could feel his opponent's quick breaths in his ear as he slowly passed out from lack of oxygen. The last thing he heard before lapsing into unconsciousness was Durhan's powerful voice ordering Merreck to release him.

Revelations

The now-familiar sight of the infirmary ceiling greeted him when he woke. This time though, he was the only occupant. His neck was tender to the touch, and clearing his throat sent a sharp pain down his windpipe. Anger flared within him as he jumped out of the bed onto unsteady legs. He had done everything he could. Made every concession and accepted the Anla'shok in the spirit he thought they would have wanted. And this was how he was repaid. It just wasn't fair!

But what could he do? Normally when he was treated like this he would lash out, but Merreck seemed invincible. What was he supposed to do, shoot the guy? Vance realised the person he used to be would have seriously entertained that option, even though he knew he could not carry out the plans. Now, though, he immediately dismissed the thought before it formulated itself into a real idea.

He left the infirmary still angry, pushing past the startled Minbari healer and marching down the corridor to the dorm. Thoughts of packing and leaving entered his head, but like his murderous thoughts they were extinguished quickly – like the immediate flash of the flames that had consumed everything he owned upon his arrival here. Besides, he understood he would never be allowed to leave with the knowledge the Anla'shok had imparted, and the prospect of a memory wipe was terribly unappealing. He was going to have to ride this out. The job was too important to let one individual put him off.

The empty dorm was Vance's clue that the rest of the acolytes were in lessons. He took the opportunity to take a walk alone. Doubtless the Anla'shok were watching, as their surveillance systems within the academy were unparalleled, but the opportunity to walk around alone didn't arise much, and Vance needed the solitude.

As he walked the grounds of the academy, he realised just how much he took the beauty of the place for granted. It contrasted starkly with the dark knowledge held there and the grim responsibility borne by those who trained within its walls.

Eventually he came to the small building that housed the Night Walker contingent: two-dozen Minbari Warrior Caste specially seconded to the Anla'shok academy and bound to pledge their lives to its defence. Vance arrived as they began their changing of the guard ceremony. Each carried a ventar, holding the two-handed blades in front as they marched in their ritualistic formation. He stood spellbound as they circled one another, bowing on occasion, touching blades at others. All the while the banner of the Night Walkers was paraded between them.

As he leant against a towering minaret watching the scene, Vance felt humbled once more. He watched a ceremony outdating his own civilisations traditions by hundreds or possibly thousands of years, and yet they still held their customs in the highest regards. He felt self-conscious, as though he viewed something forbidden to his eyes, but he could not drag his gaze away. Slipping into the nearby shadows, he watched from the darkness, safe in the knowledge he was fully hidden.

When the Night Walkers finished the ceremony, half of them began to drill. Their ventars flashed as they practiced. At first they simply smashed their blades together like the Germanic duelists of Earth, but the strikes came faster and faster. Vance could see that many bore facial scars, and it didn't take a genius to imagine how they got them. As the striking blades reached a crescendo of blurred, whirling danger, the warriors instantly retreated from their partners, walking back ceremoniously, then advancing once more and starting over again.

Vance didn't know how long he stood observing the Night Walkers, but it could have been hours. He would have

stood there for hours more had he not heard the deep voice from behind him. 'Spellbinding, isn't it?'

Vance spun to see the shadow-shrouded form of Turval, who had somehow managed to find him despite Vance's skill in concealing himself. Not only that, but the old man also managed to advance silently on Vance's position without revealing himself.

'It is,' replied Vance. 'Their skill with the ventar must be unparalleled.'

'Yes, its use is a dying art. Much like the denn'bok's was some years ago. But that wrong has recently been righted.'

Vance suddenly thought back to his battle with Merreck. Watching the Night Walkers had taken his mind off it, but now the bitterness crept back in. 'And some of us are better with it than others.' Vance found it difficult to disguise the venom in his voice, even through the croaky sound his damaged throat made.

'One cannot expect to excel at everything,' said Turval. Vance had no answer. If he admitted it to himself, he would have had to say that sometimes that's exactly what he expected. 'You must put aside your anger,' continued Turval. 'Both of you.'

'Try telling that to Merreck!' Vance snapped.

'Maybe if you had a certain understanding of events, it might help you to overcome your anger. Walk with me.' Turval turned and moved away from the Night Walker barracks. He walked silently, seeming to glide through the shadows. They walked back toward the academy, skirting the numerous training halls and instruction rooms, heading straight for the Temple of Valen.

They walked into the Chapel, and Vance soaked in the sense of reverence and peace that pervaded the room, from its tiled floor to its lofty ceiling. Turval stood before the statue of Valen, looking up with a contented smile. 'I know you felt antagonism towards your father for sending you here,' said Turval.

'At first I did. But I have since seen the wisdom in his actions, Sech Turval.'

The smile spread across Turval's face. 'That is good. But I still feel you bear him a certain antipathy. Much between you has not yet been resolved.'

'With respect, Sech Turval, I fail to see what this has to do with–'

'Indeed you do,' Turval said, turning towards Vance. 'You fail to see many things, much of which is no fault of your own. Ignorance is sometimes a valid excuse for the mistakes we make. I will set that to rights. Why do you think Merreck wants to see you fail?'

Several different answers popped into Vance's head. Most of them involved assumptions that Merreck was a fanatical racist with a superiority complex who couldn't talk to girls and was probably bullied at school as a youth. Other more colourful responses entered his mind, but Vance stifled them. 'I have no idea,' he replied.

'The reason is something you could never have known before you came here.'

'Something to do with Neroon?' asked Vance, thinking that Merreck's uncle could be behind a plan to sabotage the re-emergence of the Anla'shok.

'Yes and no,' replied Turval. Vance was getting annoyed by the increasingly cryptic answers. 'It has more to do with your father.'

Vance was stunned. This was an answer he certainly hadn't been expecting. He clenched his fists… it was happening again. No matter where he went or what he did, his father would always raise his stern visage and try to take over, try to influence or ruin or sabotage.

'How much do you know of what your father did during the war between our people?'

'I know he worked for various Special Forces units. Behind enemy lines on a number of occasions. Apparently he was decorated several times, but I have no idea for what.'

'Your father was what we call "enkra'tak". It is a little-used word, for there are few examples of people like your father in Minbari warfare, and it is not a part of the Jen-aot'la, our Warrior's Code. The Warrior Caste has always fought with honour, and enkra'tak are often frowned upon and seldom used.'

'Assassin,' said Vance, recognising the word from his knowledge of the Warrior Caste dialect.

'Yes,' said Turval, 'and apparently a very gifted one. He would often be placed behind our lines for several weeks, hunting our leaders – often killing from a distance, sometimes up close.'

'I was under the impression that no human had ever killed a Minbari in hand-to-hand combat.'

'We do not consider the use of a knife in the dark as hand-to-hand combat. It is murder, pure and simple.'

Vance flushed with anger at the twisted distinction. On countless occasions the Minbari had destroyed helpless or stranded EarthForce ships. Wasn't that murder as well? Was that honourable? Turval nodded, as if sensing Vance's thoughts. 'Whatever the differences between our cultures' moralistic views on war, the fact is your father was a very prolific and successful assassin. Toward the end of the war, EarthForce became even more desperate, and he was sent to eradicate a number of Minbari war leaders. It was a suicide mission, and he was not meant to return. During his mission he was partly successful, but before he could kill Neroon, the last of his targets, he was captured.'

'So this is what it's about. My father tried to kill Neroon, so now his nephew sees it as his personal goal to bury me.'

'Not exactly. One of the war leaders your father assassinated was Merkhat, Merreck's father and brother to Neroon.'

Vance had no idea what to say. If Merreck had been responsible for the death of his own father, he would no doubt have the same attitude. Even though he and the Colonel were not close – and sometimes Vance even hated the man – he was sure that he would want vengeance if his father was assassinated and Vance knew the identity of the culprit.

'Neroon had your father tortured for weeks. Even beyond the end of the war. With his mother dead there was no one to care of Merreck, and Neroon took the boy under his wing, intending to hold your father captive until Merreck was old enough to take his own vengeance and restore his family's honor. This may well have happened had the Grey Council not discovered Neroon's plan and ordered him to release your father. Merreck feels he has been cheated out of his revenge.'

This information left Vance in a stunned silence. He wanted to hate his father but couldn't now that he knew the truth behind his long absences. He wanted to hate Merreck, but the Minbari was only seeking a vengeance that Vance himself would most likely seek under the same circumstances.

'I know this comes as a shock to you,' said Turval. 'When you first came, we did not fully know the truth ourselves. It would be no shame upon you if you wanted to leave and return to your EarthForce.'

Slowly Vance looked into Turval's sympathetic eyes. 'What's done is done,' he said. Vance didn't even know if he meant the words, but it didn't matter. His head told him it was the right thing to say. 'There are more important things than old feuds to consider here.'

Turval nodded, a smile returning to his face. 'Of course, I will speak to Merreck on this matter.'

'No,' replied Vance. 'We are Anla'shok. He said himself we would soon be brothers. It is between us.'

'I understand. I must leave now.' Turval glanced once more to the statue of Valen. 'This is a good place for reflection.' With that, he silently left the temple.

Vance stayed a while to enjoy the serenity of the Chapel. The long-dead face of Valen looked down on him, and he felt as though it were watching over him, reassuring him. With a renewed feeling of purpose, he walked from the Chapel and out into the streets of Tuzanor.

The beauty of the city could only be truly appreciated by walking its maze of streets. Vance lacked the time and inclination until now. His appreciation of architecture was limited, but even he had to admit the place was wondrous, easily matching the best Earth had to offer.

Though known as the City of Sorrows, Vance did not get any morose feeling as he wandered. The busy Minbari faces took the time to nod and smile and the problems he faced in the academy did not follow him out onto Tuzanor's streets.

Vance came to a wide square, its edges lined with onyx and marble statues depicting various figures from Minbari history. The legends at the bottom of each statue were difficult to read, and Vance could not identify which Caste dialect they were written in.

Two of the statues were easily recognisable. Dukhat and the obligatory statue of Valen were in pride of place at the centre of the square. The others Vance could not name. Several Minbari generals with whom he was familiar were not honoured here. Many of the statues seemed to be representative of Religious and even Worker Caste members. Vance marvelled at a race that saw fit to revere its labourers and priests as highly as its war heroes.

In each of the four corners of the square sat small gardens, meticulously cared for without a bud or blade of grass askew. In one of the gardens, an ancient Minbari kneeled, busying himself with pruning a strange phosphorescent plant. Vance moved closer, fascinated by the man's fluid motion and expert ability with his gardening tools. The longer he watched, the more the old man gave him the impression of a sculptor at work. Before Vance's eyes the plant, which looked beautiful before, began to change shape, metamorphosing into another, even more beautiful creation.

The old Minbari stopped and leaned back, running his fingers down his rickety spine to iron out the rheumatic pain. Then he slowly laid down his pruning tool and turned to smile at Vance. As the man turned, Vance suddenly felt self conscious, as though he had interrupted some kind of intimate act. Still, the old man merely smiled. Vance took a step back, nervously returning the smile and fully intending to leave the man in peace. As Vance backed away, the old man beckoned him closer. Vance stopped, surprised by the gesture. Slowly the old man reached down and picked up his gardening implement, holding it out to Vance. He then motioned to the strange-coloured plant.

With a nervous nod, Vance approached and knelt by the old man. He gingerly took the pruning clippers and reached for the plant. Still smiling, the old man firmly grasped Vance's free hand and laid it gently on the plant, guiding the hand over the stem and touching his fingers to the leaves. Vance felt the plant, caressing its smooth edges and enjoying the way the leaves gently brushed against his skin. The old man then took Vance's other hand, which held the gardening tool, and slowly moved it toward the plant.

At first Vance was reluctant to use the tool. The plant seemed perfect; it didn't need pruning at all. But after a few seconds his free hand brushed against a leaf that protruded further than the rest. Automatically Vance clipped it at the base and allowed the leaf to fall to the ground. He looked

back to the old man, seeking some kind of reassurance that he had done the right thing. The old man merely smiled, but gave him no hint of either approval or disapproval.

Vance turned his attention back to the plant, guiding his hand over its undulating leaves, feeling and testing the stems. He gently pulled each one out, allowing it to bend back of its own accord. Those that did not naturally settle back onto the plant, he clipped. The first few times he looked to the old Minbari gardener, but each time he was given no clue as to whether he had done the right thing, and he soon carried on of his own accord.

'You have never seemed one who would easily take to the horticultural arts.' Vance froze. He recognised the voice immediately. He turned to see Jerklenn's serious face.

'I'm not. I mean… he invited me.' Vance motioned to the old man, then he clumsily handed the pruning tool back to him.

A smile broke across Jerklenn's face. 'I know that, Vance. Do you think you are the only one who can joke?'

Still feeling foolish, Vance stood. He bowed to the old man, who returned his gesture and returned to the plant. Vance brushed the leaves from his trousers, thinking they would probably now need cleaning, but he was surprised to see they were not stained or dirty at all.

'Why are you embarrassed?' asked Jerklenn.

'I'm not. You just surprised me, that's all.'

'No. I think I am the one that is surprised.' She smiled even wider, and Vance couldn't help but smile himself.

'I heard what happened to you. I think you are brave to face him, even though you know that you have no chance of beating him.'

'It's good to know you have confidence in me.'

'What is the point in giving you false hope? You cannot defeat Merreck. Not through any physical contest anyway.'

Vance walked away, not knowing how to respond to the obvious insult to his martial prowess, but Jerklenn matched his stride. They walked silently for some distance, leaving the square and disappearing into Tuzanor's backstreets. Eventually Vance glanced over at her. 'Well?' he said. 'What is it? Are you going to impart some great piece of ancient Minbari wisdom? Tell me how I can defeat my enemy by being nice to him?'

'No. I was merely going to walk with you while you reflected. But if you wish to be alone–' She turned to leave.

Vance sighed. No matter how much he tried not to, he always seemed to offend Jerklenn, one way or another. 'Wait,' he called after her. 'I would. I mean I do want company.'

She nodded and returned to his side. They walked on and Vance told Jerklenn of what he had discovered, of his father's past and Merreck's vendetta. Jerklenn looked very sombre at hearing the news, almost panicked. 'It seems you indeed have a problem. Merreck is of the Star Rider clan. Your father's dishonour cannot be easily forgiven.'

Vance clenched his fists. The talk of his father's dishonour angered him. The Minbari showed no honour in their slaughter of humans. Worse yet, despite what he learned about his father, he could not help but blame him for the current situation. 'Why does everyone keep talking of his dishonour? He was doing what he had to do to fight an enemy that was dedicated to destroying the entire human race? Can anyone here understand that?'

Jerklenn nodded her head slowly, searching for words. 'I understand. But perhaps it is you who does not understand.' Her voice was strong and clear, although she kept her eyes on the ground in front of her.

Anger began to creep into Vance's words. 'What is there to understand? My father is being criticised for doing the same thing that the Minbari were doing to countless humans. Killing. Does it really matter how?'

'The killing, on both sides, was terrible and unfortunate. Perhaps the stronger of the two sides in any conflict, not being as desperate as the weaker, feels superior enough to dictate the terms of what is honourable and what is not. But regardless of the reality of the situation, you are on Minbar now. You don't have to accept the feelings others have about your father, but you have to recognize that people are going to have them.'

Everywhere Vance turned, his father seemed to be there already, lining his way with booby traps. 'And I thought this might be a clean start,' Vance said.

'You should still believe that,' Jerklenn replied. 'We will soon be Anla'shok. Our focus must be on defeating the enemies to come, and the phantoms of our past should be forgotten.'

'That's just the point; these phantoms aren't mine. They don't belong to me. They are my father's, but I can do nothing to get out from beneath them. Well, I suppose I could let Merreck kill me.'

'That will not happen. Trust me. Merreck will want to see you suffer for as long as he can.' Jerklenn did not smile as she spoke those words.

They reached the eastern limit of Tuzanor and stood at the end of a street that forked into a seemingly endless promenade, one edge looking out onto the distant horizon. Night was beginning to fall, and the Se'en Voltayn, the ridge of crystals that surrounded the city, sparkled in the distance.

Vance stared out. The horizon was spectacular, a red line turning green as it rose to the heavens. The clouds burnished gold as they were lit from behind.

Despite the prospect of facing his unstoppable enemy once more, Vance could not help but be filled with awe at the sight.

'You won't see a sight like that on any other planet.' The man's voice was deep and filled with authority. Jerklenn and Vance both spun round to see Sinclair, the Anla'shok Na himself, standing behind them. They both bowed simultaneously.

'Please,' said Sinclair. 'We are not in the academy now. On the streets of Tuzanor, at least let me be a man again.' They both rose, Vance smiling at Sinclair's candour, but Jerklenn looking shocked.

'You are the Anla'shok Na. Wherever you go,' she said.

'That may be. But first and foremost I am an ordinary man. Pomp and ceremony I've rarely been comfortable with.'

The three stood for several moments. The silence became a little uncomfortable, but Vance could think of nothing to say. 'Would you mind, Jerklenn?' Sinclair said eventually. 'I think Vance and I have some things to discuss.

Jerklenn bowed reverently once more and walked back into the labyrinthine streets. Sinclair walked forward to stand beside Vance. He looked out into the distance and took a deep breath.

'I have nothing to say about what happened in the fighting circle,' said Vance.

'Good. I have nothing to ask you,' replied Sinclair. He had expected Sinclair, with his rigorous military background, to at least make a mention of disciplinary proceedings. 'I am more concerned with what you learned of your father today.'

It was Vance's turn to breathe a sigh. All things eventually came back to the Colonel. 'With all due respect, I think I've heard just about enough of the old man for one day.'

Sinclair turned suddenly. 'I don't think you have.' His tone was harsher than Vance expected. 'I have an idea what you're thinking right now. Don't assume I'm ignorant of the relationship you have with your father. You probably blame him for what's going on at the moment. You're angry and that's understandable. But the bare-bones facts of his past aren't all there is to it.'

Sinclair paused. He took in the sight of Minbar's second moon as it appeared from beyond the horizon. The grey orb was ringed with an ethereal blue light that pierced the cloud line. Vance looked at the silhouette of Sinclair's face in the waning light. His features seemed to soften as he took in the celestial phenomenon before him. 'He always loved you and your mother. You were everything to him.'

'Is that why he left us for months on end? Is that why he put himself in constant danger?'

'Well, yes it was. You have no idea what it was like during the war. The Minbari were approaching Earth. We had no way of stopping them, and no way of knowing whether they were on a genocidal rampage or not. We had to assume they were. Your father volunteered for more and more dangerous missions, and he was good at what he did. He did it to protect his family. He took any chance he could to damage the Minbari advance, and by God he suffered for it. It wasn't medals or glory. He was never interested in any of that. It was his wife and son. Trust me, I know. We spoke about it more than once. You know, for a while I was jealous of him. For what he had. I'm not married and I've never had children. In some ways I think the war was easier for me. I had less to lose. He knew if he died he'd be leaving you both behind, but there was no other way. He was happy to sacrifice himself to give you both a chance at life. Then he was captured and tortured, and when he eventually returned he found his wife had died.'

Sinclair continued, still looking at the heavens. 'Can you really blame him for what he did? I know you think he's interfered in your life, Vance. I know you blame him for a lot of things that have happened, but he always wanted the best for you. Why do you think he sent you here? He knows you're one of the best. He's prouder than you know.'

'Then why has he never said it?' Vance said through clenched teeth.

'Some men just aren't built that way. Some are good with words. Some aren't. Your father was always good at being a soldier. Don't think for a minute that because he can't say it he doesn't feel it.'

They could no longer pick out any detail of the Minbari landscape other than the glittering crystals in the distance. Vance was glad of the darkness. 'I hope you'll think about what I've said.' Sinclair patted Vance on the shoulder and turned to leave. 'Oh, just one thing,' he said suddenly. 'Merreck is of the Star Rider's clan. It would do you well to learn of their traditions.'

With that he left.

Vance could only wonder what the Star Riders' traditions would do to help him beat Merreck. He cared little anyway. All he felt was guilt. For years he had hated his father and blamed him for the death of his mother. He realised now how selfish he had been. As he continued to watch the night sky over Tuzanor, he could not hold back the tears.

PROTOCOL

The weeks passed in a rush of training and Vance fully dedicated himself to becoming Anla'shok. After what he had learned, nothing else mattered. He had to succeed, had to make a difference. For the first time in his adult life, he wanted to make his father proud. Well, maybe not for the first time, but this was the first time he had ever admitted it. The faith that the Colonel had put in him would be rewarded, even if it killed him.

As time went on, Merreck demonstrated no more open hostility, at least none that manifested itself in outright vio-

lence, and Vance assumed that someone must have spoken to the big Minbari about his vendetta. If they had, no one mentioned it to Vance, least of all Merreck. Vance hoped Merreck might have at last called off his feud.

Nevertheless, Vance continued his study of the Star Riders as Sinclair had suggested. His investigations revealed that their name was derived from the clan's ancient history as a band of mounted warrior nomads who navigated using the stars. Their deeply honourable history harkened back to long before the first Shadow War. During that conflict, they were instrumental in the suppression of a renegade warrior clan known as the Dark Knives.

Valen's attempt to unite the warrior clans and face the Shadows as a single force failed. Seeing no other choice, Valen challenged the clan leaders to decide amongst themselves who was the strongest. He would face that champion in single combat, and the winner would lead all the clans. The champion the clans sent forth was Nershan of the Dark Knives. Even when Valen subsequently defeated Nershan in single combat, the leader of the Dark Knives rejected him and sought out the Shadows, offering the services of his clan to the enemy.

These renegade, or Shadowsouled, Minbari fought on long after the end of the Shadow War, and the Star Riders accepted it as their personal mission to suppress the traitors. They accomplished this, but at great cost. Centuries passed before they could rebuild their numbers, but during that time they became much stronger.

Vance also learned in his studies that over the centuries they built many traditions and rituals unique to their clan. The overriding theme of these was honour, duty and sacrifice. Vance could only see how this would stand against him. Surely Merreck was bound by honour to seek vengeance for the death of his father, and the tenets of his clan reinforced it. However, the vows of the Anla'shok probably took precedence over the strictures of a warrior's clan. He hoped they did.

Try as he might, Vance could find nothing in the history or traditions of the Anla'shok forbidding Merreck from fulfilling the vow he owed to his father and clan. Even though he had gone through the same ritual of burning his possessions as Vance had, there was no reason for him to forget past sins. Even worse, the Star Riders considered themselves clan members for life. Even if they joined other clans or cultures, they would be returned to the Star Riders for burial. Merreck would be a member of the Star Rider clan even after his death as Anla'shok.

The Minbari were also very dogmatic about their memories and how they regarded past slights. They were generally quick to forgive, but they never forgot. Where Merreck was concerned, he seemed to have decided to skip the "forgive" part. As long as he did not allow it to interfere with his training or dedication to the Anla'shok, Merreck would be free to harbour his grudge. And he was careful about it too. He only confronted Vance in the proper place at the proper time, where his challenges could be put down to eagerness or a yearning to face the best in healthy competition.

Vance had seen Merreck face other recruits. He made short work of them as well, dispatching them with ruthless precision, but he was never sadistic or bloodthirsty. Only Vance's judicious use of stealth tactics prevented more altercations. It pained him to run from a fight, but he recognised this as a fight he could not win. Neither did he want to win. If he was honest with himself, he felt pity for Merreck – and in some way he did feel guilty for his father's actions. The more he read of the Star Rider's traditions, the fewer options he saw at making amends. But there must be a way. Why else would Sinclair suggest he investigate this avenue?

Despite Merreck's apparent cessation in hostilities toward Vance, he still pursued his scholarly quest, sometimes long into the night. If there was a way to set things right, he would find it.

It had been a particularly long day, with no time for rest between stealth training and a full afternoon of combat. Vance spent much of the afternoon sparring with Jerklenn, whom he had to admit was turning into a capable warrior despite her religious Caste sensibilities. Afterward, he did not retire to the dorm but found himself in the library, once more studying Minbari military history. He had exhausted every tome on the history of the Star Riders clan and now turned to more general texts in the hope of finding a solution.

Several hours passed before Vance finally found it in a text that roughly translated as "Fearing Darkness", written in an archaic version of the Worker Caste dialect. Vance's recent advanced study of Minbari languages allowed him to translate the text, and he silently thanked Sech Nelier for his firm tuition. The manuscript described several internal conflicts from Minbari history, described from the point of view of a Religious Caste Minbari named Kelveer. He wrote the text in Worker Caste so that all might benefit from his unique viewpoint. Other transcripts Vance read on the internal squabbling of the various warrior clans all took the soldier's perspective. They analysed detailed combat actions, large-scale military strategy, the reasons behind certain orders and the philosophy of the warrior, but none revealed the real reasons: some clans lusted for glory, some interpreted honour in very different ways to others, but the most far-reaching and over-arching reason was at the core of all conflicts: power.

The text described an account of Kelveer's encounter with a group of Star Riders during their conflict with the Dark Knives clan. Kelveer met the warriors after a battle, and many of the Star Riders were severely injured. Their own healer had been killed, leaving only Kelveer to administer to them. Luckily for the Star Riders, Kelveer was an experienced healer, well versed in the art of battlefield medicine. He stayed with the Star Riders for several days, ensuring the warriors survived their wounds. In the fractious time he spent with them, the surviving Star Riders taught Kelveer an invaluable greeting

ritual: one that no Star Rider could refuse to pay credence to. The greeting ritual itself only passed through the ranks of the Star Riders through verbal tradition, but Kelveer saw no betrayal in writing it down for all to see, particularly since very few warriors would deign to read a book written in the Worker Caste dialect.

Now that Kelveer knew the ritual, he could greet any Star Rider, hailing him as a friend. If the correct statements, responses and protocols were followed, the two would remain allies until the instigator of the ritual decided otherwise. The book went on to describe how Kelveer travelled the system, free to meet and greet the Star Riders without fear of reprisal, always expecting to be treated with the respect due a member of their clan and Caste.

Vance could barely control himself. He pushed down a foolish impulse to leap ahead and confront Merreck immediately. Any error in his recitation of the ritual would leave him open to Merreck's wrath, and the Minbari would not be forgiving if he thought Vance was trying to trick him.

The firelight by which Vance studied flickered, and he decided sleep could not wait. He would return to this the next night, and so he placed the tome in a secure spot, marking the correct passage to learn. Hopefully, in the next few days, his problems would be over and he could concentrate on what really mattered.

Merreck was relaxing in his favourite location. The combat hall was empty but for the feral figure of the Minbari warrior, practicing his art. Occasionally his denn'bok cut the air so swiftly the sound carried to the roof and echoed back down.

From the far side of the hall, shrouded in darkness, Vance watched. His extensive study of the correct protocols had prepared him for this moment, but still he hesitated. Could he trust Merreck to honour the ritual? Clenching his fists tightly, he stepped from the shadows. Merreck's split-second pause was the only thing that betrayed his surprise.

Vance breathed deeply as he approached the combat circle. Merreck ignored him, perfectly executing the complex moves. Vance finally reached the edge of the circle, careful not to step beyond its intricate boundary. He began to speak in flawless Warrior Caste Minbari.

'Greetings from the earth to the stars. As far as you ride may the light guide your way and your mount remain steady.' Vance levelled a gaze at the Minbari and waited for the requisite reply.

At these words, Merreck stopped dead mid-strike. Vance saw he recognised the words and did not like them one bit. Vance hoped Merreck remembered – and cared – that failing to reply would mean losing face and dishonouring the clan.

Merreck had his back to Vance, his fist wrapped tightly around the denn'bok. Vance could not fail to see the whiteness of the knuckles and the slight trembling. Slowly he turned, his eyes flaming in fury but his jaw clamped firmly shut. The expletives he wanted to express must have been burning in his throat.

'Fire burns for my clan,' he began. 'Rain slakes our thirst and we prosper. Who wishes to share the fortunes of the Star Riders?'

'James Vance.' The reply was without hesitation. Vance wasn't about to waste any time.

'Then kneel, James Vance, and tell why you should be honoured thus.'

Vance quickly fell to one knee, making sure he kept his eyes on Merreck's feet. This was a crucial part of the ritual and to hold any kind of eye contact would show a lack of respect. 'I honour as the Star Riders honour. I fight as the Star Riders fight. I worship as the Star Riders worship. Together we can roam the plains and watch the stars, and you will know my friendship is unmatched. Our joining makes us stronger until I sunder it.'

Vance slowly looked up. Merreck's face was resigned to what had just happened, and he slowly turned his back, a last show of trust. When he turned back, Vance extended his arm. Merreck reached forward and grabbed it tightly. In Kelveer's description of the ritual, he hadn't described this part in detail, but Vance was sure that Merreck did not need to grip quite so hard. He grabbed Merreck's arm in return, and for several seconds they watched each other silently, waiting to see who would be the first to release the other. Vance knew that the protocol bade Merreck to let go first. Vance's heart beat faster, wondering if Merreck would stand here forever, forcing Vance to let go out of fatigue or dehydration.

When Merreck finally released the grip, a smile of relief spread over Vance's face. He knew the ritual had to be a success, for if it hadn't Merreck would have challenged him there and then. 'Allies?' asked Vance.

'Allies,' nodded Merreck. 'Until you break it asunder. I hope you know what that means, James Vance. You are now bound by the tenets of the Star Rider clan. Once you break one, we are no longer allies. Then I am no longer bound by the ritual we have just performed.'

'I understand.'

With that, Merreck turned and left. Vance felt relief wash over him. At last! At least for as long as he could uphold the tenets of the Star Riders, he needn't worry about any more beatings from Merreck. Quickly he headed back to the library. He felt compelled to remind himself of the traditions and conventions of the Star Riders.

Despite the fact that the bond of the Star Rider clan now joined him to Merreck, Vance still spent much of his spare time in the library. He never considered himself studious, but after a few weeks of forcing himself to pore over tome after tome, he quite enjoyed it. Reading dusty old texts was more enjoyable than watching a data-crystal. It wasn't passive; the simple act of learning was much more exciting if there was a book to read.

Since his forced alliance with Merreck, he had not been alone in the library either. Jerklenn joined him on most evenings, expanding her own knowledge of her culture's history and traditions. When one of them found a particularly pertinent passage, they informed the other. Vance had never been to college, but he now understood what the fuss was about. The satisfaction he found in learning and gaining knowledge, as well as sharing that knowledge with others, rivalled his other training. In fact, Vance began to liken it to the camaraderie he had felt when training with other EarthForce recruits.

'What are you smiling at?' Jerklenn asked him one evening.

'Just thinking,' Vance replied. 'If the guys in my old unit could see me now, they'd think I was mad, or just soft. Spending R&R time studying was definitely frowned upon back on Earth by most EarthForce grunts.'

'What is "R&R"?'

'Rest & Recuperation. After you've had a tough time on manoeuvres, you kick back and relax.'

Jerklenn still looked a little confused. 'What do you "kick back" against?'

'I think maybe you should spend more time studying Earth colloquialisms. It might make these little interludes easier on me.'

'Well, we are here to be educated, so educate me.'

Vance considered which details on EarthForce ground pounders at play to share with her, but before he had chance, a figure stepped into the dimly lit library.

'Jerklenn, I would speak with you.' Merreck stood in the doorway, arms folded. Vance was surprised. Who did Merreck think he was, demanding to speak to Jerklenn like that? What surprised Vance more was that Jerklenn immediately stood and meekly walked toward him. They spoke for several seconds. Vance could not hear the words, but Merreck's harsh tone was obviously upsetting Jerklenn. He would not stand for it, truce or no truce.

'What's all this about?' he said rising to his feet.

'This does not concern you,' was Merreck's curt reply.

'The hell it doesn't–'

'Please, Vance,' said Jerklenn suddenly. 'Do not involve yourself.'

Her words stunned Vance more than a kick in the face. What was going on between them? As they continued their conversation, Vance thought he could hear a little of what they were saying. Words like "dishonour" and "shame" seemed to be repeated, and a realisation dawned on Vance. Perhaps they were betrothed. In his studies, he read little of Minbari courting rituals, but Vance realised he might be in the middle of some strange alien domestic. 'Look,' he said, walking forward. 'I don't mean to get in the middle of anything, but Merreck, you should know there's nothing going on between us.'

Fury flashed across the big Minbari's eyes, and Vance knew he had said the wrong thing. 'What does he mean?' Merreck's words had venom in them that Vance had not heard before. 'Is it not enough that you should court shame by spending so much time with the man who–' Merreck grasped Jerklenn's arms, and from the look on her face it was hurting.

'Nothing's going on. Now let go.' Vance's casual manner was gone. He clamped his hand over Merreck's wrist. 'I said let go,' Vance repeated

Merreck slowly tore his eyes away from Jerklenn and glared at Vance. Then, without looking away, he shoved Jerklenn backward. His arms held enough power to send her reeling back across the library, where she clattered into a chair and fell in a heap.

Vance rushed to her side. Her lip was bleeding, but she was otherwise unhurt. She looked up into Vance's eyes and could see his anger steadily boiling to the surface. Jerklenn shook her head, but Vance was beyond being reasoned with. He looked up and saw Merreck had advanced. No smirk, no arrogant look of triumph decorated his face, but the Minbari still had his victory. Vance shot forward, his clenched fist connecting with Merreck's jaw. Merreck made no attempt to avoid the blow, which knocked him sideways. When he looked around, Vance could see that he was smiling.

'We are no longer allies,' said Merreck, his smile widening.

'Then let's get to it,' answered Vance walking past him. He got to the door of the library and stopped. 'Well? Are you coming to the circle or not?'

'No!' said Jerklenn, clawing at the bottom of Merreck's jacket as he followed Vance through the door.

The walk from the library to the combat hall was a long one. As the other acolytes saw Merreck and Vance walking so purposefully, the whispers began. When their destination was finally confirmed, the rumours spread like wildfire. By the time the pair had reached the combat hall, most of the other acolytes were hot on their trail.

Vance could hear Jerklenn all the while, pleading for someone to stop them. It was obvious whom she feared for. It was also obvious what would happen, but Vance simply could not stand for this anymore. He hated bullies, but before he had always been tough enough to beat them. Now he would take yet another beating, but he'd make sure he gave as good as he got. For a while, at least.

'This time I will give you no quarter,' said Merreck as he stood on the edge of the combat circle, denn'bok in hand.

'Neither will I,' Vance answered, though deep down he knew it was unlikely he would have the choice. With a flick of his wrist, Vance extended his own denn'bok.

Merreck stepped forward, entering the combat circle. Vance didn't hesitate to follow him. Both immediately adopted defensive stances, staring into each other's eyes despite the constant distraction of acolyte after acolyte bursting into the hall.

Waiting for Merreck to make the first move might have been Vance's best option, but he was too angry to stop himself. He wanted to end this as quickly as possible. He slid in low, blocking any noise from outside the circle, focusing all his attention on Merreck and trying to read him as best he could. The Minbari made no reaction until the last second, anticipating Vance's combination and blocking his first blow. Vance swung his weapon around to counter the block, but Merreck read him and blocked that too, quickly countering. The denn'bok swept downward, and Vance heaved himself backward and out of range. He quickly readied for Merreck's subsequent attack. If he had learned anything from his previous defeats, it was that his opponent was a relentless foe.

True to form, Merreck leapt in with a second overhead strike. Vance raised his denn'bok high to block. As the weapons clashed, Vance felt the shockwave reverberate through his hands and down his forearms. Merreck struck down again, and Vance held his denn'bok defensively. Too late, Vance spotted Merreck's blow was merely a feint. At the last moment the Minbari halted his downward sweep and instead jabbed forward, smashing Vance's nose. He fell backwards, tears streaming from his eyes. Despite the pain and shock, Vance maintained his concentration, turning his fall into a fluid backward roll and immediately finding his feet.

Blood poured from his nose. He could hear its patter as it struck the cerracrete floor. After blinking the tears from his eyes, he focused his blurry vision on Merreck once more. The Minbari simply waited, knowing he had the upper hand. To his right, Vance noticed Durhan pacing toward the combat circle. Jerklenn ran toward him, demanding he do something to stop the fight, but Durhan shook his head. Vance could not hear their exact words, but Durhan was bound by the laws of the combat circle. And since Vance made the challenge in the first place, he had to see it through to the end.

Vance needed to take the initiative before he became disoriented, before Merreck could take advantage. But how was he going to do it? The Minbari was just standing there waiting for him. He cast his mind back through all of his EarthForce combat training. Surely there must be something in his repertoire he could use, some dirty trick that would tip the balance.

In the two seconds he had to think, he realised there was nothing: no move, no feint, no dupe could be used to defeat Merreck. He knew this must be why they had been losing the war before the Minbari had surrendered at the Battle of the Line. There was no option but to adopt the same policy EarthForce had used.

Vance charged in. The smile instantly dropped from Merreck's face as he lowered himself into a crouching defence. In the time it took him to cover the distance between them, Vance forgot all his denn'bok training. The weapon was now a useless piece of metal in his hands. He swung it sideways at Merreck, who easily batted it aside. As the denn'boks clashed, Vance loosed his hold on the weapon and barged straight into his opponent. Merreck had not expected a brawl, but he adapted instantly, moving backward and allowing Vance's own attack to overbalance him. As Vance fell forward, almost on top of Merreck, the Minbari rolled onto his back, hooked his leg beneath Vance and kicked upwards. Vance was in the air for only a split second, long enough for Merreck to rise to a crouch and smash his denn'bok into Vance's face.

The force of the blow flung Vance through the air. He landed hard, and from the tightness of his jaw he was sure it was broken. He could hear nothing as he raised a hand to his face. Blood was pouring from one ear, probably a burst eardrum. His head was nodding and he could hardly raise it; lord knew where his denn'bok was.

Then echoing footsteps. Vance managed to focus his vision for a moment and saw the advancing form. Merreck's boots reverberated like they were inside a massive cave and the floor was made of glass. Merreck's face was grim, showing no pity, no remorse. He was about to finish Vance off. Even if he had a clear head and the ability to run, Vance doubted he could have escaped the combat circle in time. He simply stared at Merreck as he approached, awaiting the inevitable strike.

The footsteps stopped three feet away. Vance raised his head as much as he could; he wanted to look Merreck in the eyes as the final blow came. The Minbari raised his denn'bok high with two hands.

Vance tried his best to keep watching as the weapon came hurtling toward him, but at the last second an inner reflex forced his eyes closed. He heard the clash but strangely felt no pain, consciousness staying with him. When he opened his eyes, he saw Merreck's weapon had been blocked by another denn'bok. Maybe Durhan decided to break with tradition after all.

But it was not Durhan standing within the combat circle. At first Vance thought he was seeing things, maybe the blow to his head had done something to his vision. Jerklenn had come to his defence.

Vance raised a hand, desperate to stop her. Surely she could not know the rules of the combat circle. Those who entered could be challenged, could even be killed. Merreck himself looked shocked, as though he had no idea how to react to the situation. Then he took two swift steps backward, again adopting a defensive stance. At the same time Jerklenn spun her denn'bok and slid down into a remas stance. That surely couldn't be right. Vance himself had

not studied all the moves and techniques that followed on from the remas.

With a growl, Merreck burst forward, his weapon spinning in an almost invisible web of strikes. Jerklenn didn't take a single step backward as she parried each one, wielding her denn'bok with a master's skill.

Merreck swiftly retreated, glancing from Jerklenn, who stood resolutely before him, to Vance, who was still on all fours on the ground behind her. His nostrils flared and anger welled in his eyes. Vance had never seen Merreck lose his cool before, but something in this particular situation had him riled.

The big Minbari stared back at Jerklenn, his eyes narrowing, his teeth gritted, stopping some unspoken Minbari curse from spurting forth. Again he raced forward, bringing his denn'bok round in a devastating arc. Jerklenn ducked and spun, retreating in a blur of speed and ending up at Merreck's flank. Her denn'bok flashed downward, connecting with Merreck's heel. He stumbled and flung his arms out in an attempt to hold his balance. At the same time Jerklenn's free arm snaked forward and snatched Merreck's denn'bok from his hand. She swiftly twirled each weapon simultaneously and brought them to rest in the crook of each arm.

Merreck, now incensed, snarled as he charged, unarmed, at Jerklenn. She flung one of the denn'boks toward him. Merreck grabbed the weapon from the air, but before he could bring it to bear, Jerklenn moved forward, her own denn'bok shooting forth, its end aimed at his head. The strike was too fast for Vance to see and he doubted that Merreck even noticed it coming. The end of the denn'bok struck him right between the eyes and his head snapped back. Vance winced at the sight and sound, wondering if Merreck could survive such a vicious blow.

As the big Minbari fell, Vance tried to gain his feet but stumbled. Several hands grasped him and his fellow acolytes, human and Minbari alike, helped him to his feet.

Jerklenn did not even seem out of breath. As a number of acolytes rushed to Merreck's aid, Durhan walked toward her. 'You have been holding back during your training,' he said, his voice stern.

'Apologies, Sech Durhan,' she replied. 'I had my reasons, but that course of action is no longer necessary.'

Durhan glanced down at Merreck's prone form. 'Indeed,' he muttered, the hint of a smile crossing his face. With that he turned and left.

Vance tried to approach Jerklenn. So many questions ran through his befuddled head, but the dizziness would not allow him to walk. Before he could speak, Jerklenn left the hall with the eyes of the other amazed trainees following her.

THE BECOMING

Vance had grown accustomed to being administered to by the white-robed Minbari healers. He took some small consolation that Merreck was unconscious for almost an hour. The Minbari healers fussed around him, ensuring he was stable. Vance could understand most of what they were saying, and the unanimous notion was that he would live. Vance wasn't sure if he was happy or disappointed at his enemy's prognosis.

The dizziness soon cleared from Vance's head, and the healers painfully straightened and bandaged his broken nose. His jaw was not broken, although he would have difficulty speaking for several days. Vance thanked Valen that the infirmary held no mirrors. He never considered himself vain, but he probably valued his looks a little too much, and the prospect of seeing his features beaten to a pulp was not one he relished.

In no mood to face Merreck when he awoke, Vance took his leave as soon as the healers finished with him. Besides, he needed to find Jerklenn and get an explanation of what was going on. She wasn't hard to find. First Vance visited the empty library seeking her, but then he left the academy and worked his way through Tuzanor's streets to the square where he had tended the garden weeks before. Jerklenn sat silently by the garden, her hands crossed on her lap. Now a picture of serenity, Vance could not reconcile this Jerklenn with the dervish-like warrior she had been earlier.

As Vance approached she glanced up, meeting his eyes for an instant before looking down, as though ashamed. Without a word, Vance sat beside her, unsure how to begin. Despite the endless questions swirling through his mind, Vance hesitated, knowing Jerklenn was finding the current situation difficult. Tact wasn't one of his strong points, and if he wasn't careful he would only be a short sentence away from deeply offending her, possibly so deeply that she would not speak to him again.

'I know what you're thinking,' said Jerklenn. Vance was surprised when she spoke first. 'That I have deceived you, that I have deceived everyone. But I did it for good reason.'

'I believe you,' said Vance with a smile that made his face throb. He could hear the hurt in her voice and only wanted to allay any fears she had. The reason she deceived everyone was low on his list of questions.

She continued. 'Only, when our father died, we were sent to different guardians. It has been as difficult for him as it was for me.' Vance was suddenly confused. Jerklenn was making little sense. What did she mean by "our father"? Jerklenn looked into his eyes. It was obvious she could see his sudden confusion. 'Merreck is my brother,' she said gently.

Vance's eyes widened. Impossible! 'But how? You're Religious Caste and he's Warrior Caste.' Even as he spoke

the words, he understood that this revelation answered most of his questions.

'When our father was killed, Neroon took my brother in but had no need for me. He took the child whom he deemed the strongest, and he groomed my brother to be his protégé. I was sent to family friends in the Religious Caste. I had not seen my brother for many years, until we arrived at the Ranger Academy.'

'I thought the Religious Caste was a peaceful order. You're the best denn'bok fighter I've seen, apart from Durhan.'

'Yes, we are a peaceful order. But it does not mean we are ignorant to the ways of martial training. My father trained both Merreck and I in the way of the denn'bok, and many other fighting methods as well. In the Religious Caste this did not stop. My foster parents respected my father's wishes that I be versed in all modes of combat. It is better to have training and not need it, than to need it and… well, I think you know the adage.'

Vance found himself smiling and Jerklenn suddenly stopped. 'You're just full of surprises, aren't you? And all this time I thought you were a peace-loving girl. You're a real dark horse.'

'I am peace loving. Even those of the Warrior Caste are peace loving. Nobody loves war, Vance, but the Minbari have simply realised that war is an unavoidable part of life and to be prepared is to avoid being a victim.'

It was only a matter of time. Vance and his big mouth had offended her again. He raised his hand in a gesture of placation, but a smile was already spreading across her face. 'I have taken offence again, haven't I?' she said. 'Again, you meant nothing by it. I assume a horse that is dark is not a human insult?'

'Well, at least you're learning,' said Vance. 'I'm sorry too. But you know eventually we'll have a conversation without having to apologise. I should be thanking you anyway. It must have been difficult to face your brother because of my feud.'

'It is not a "feud". "Vendetta" would be a better way of describing it. And it was my father who was killed also, not just Merreck's. I am a Star Rider as well. If I can find the desire and the means to forgive, then there is no reason why he should not.'

It suddenly dawned on Vance. His father had killed hers, had changed her life forever and split up her family. She had not seen her brother for years because of the Colonel. Again the anger flared within him, a momentary resentment at what his father caused that consumed itself when he looked at Jerklenn's placid face. If Jerklenn could forgive the Colonel, then he could too. After all, it was a time of war. Vance's father had been defending his own family. He had little choice.

'So why the secrecy?' Vance asked, too curious to change the subject.

'My brother has always respected and yearned for martial prowess. It is how Neroon brought him up – to be the strongest and fastest. Out of respect for my father's memory, I could not embarrass my brother by appearing more skilled in the martial arts than he.'

'But how did you know you could beat him?'

'I didn't,' said Jerklenn, a sly smile suddenly creeping across her face. Before Vance could speak, she stood and walked across the square, a hand covering her smile.

'Wait a minute,' said Vance, following her. 'What do you mean "you didn't"? You must have had some idea. Merreck's almost a master. Just how well trained are you Religious Caste types?'

'As I said, my foster parents were always respectful of my father's wishes and teachings. However, my foster father, Keltoc, was not always of the Religious Caste.'

Vance could see another session in the library coming on. Whoever this Keltoc was, he must have been a denn'bok master, maybe even as good as Durhan. 'You realise you're now going to have to impart your teachings to me,' he said, struggling to keep up with her. She didn't answer, changing her walk into a trot, then into a run. Vance began to pursue, and he was sure he could hear her giggling as she ran into Tuzanor's maze of streets. However, increased heart rate caused a pounding in his mashed face, forcing him to stop. Much to his frustration, she had lost him completely within seconds.

Despite her initial reticence, Jerklenn agreed to spar with Vance in the combat hall, and this time she did not hold back. She proved to be a good teacher, and Vance responded to her instruction much better than to Durhan's. Merreck appeared in the view of others only when he had to. His pride had taken a real beating, and he made a point of avoiding Jerklenn and Vance whenever he was in the same part of the academy. Vance felt sorry for Merreck but could never actually bring himself to offer words of consolation. He knew they would not be accepted in the proper spirit, and he would get a condescending rebuff at best.

One morning at prayers, Turval interrupted the assembled acolytes with news of their impending graduation. 'Soon you will walk the path of the Ranger, but a number of tasks lay ahead before you can do this.' The assembled trainees sat obediently, hanging on Turval's every word. 'Some of you will find the tasks ahead rewarding, while others will see them only as obstacles to be overcome. However you consider them, remember they are necessary to your acceptance into the Anla'shok. Embrace them.'

The acolytes awoke the next morning to be greeted by several Anla'shok but none of their actual instructors. They were taken – without breakfast, much to Vance's chagrin – straight to a transport and flown across the surface of Minbar. The long and silent journey unnerved Vance and several others, but the acolytes knew better than to question the more experienced Anla'shok.

Eventually the transport touched down in a sparse area of desert. From the trajectory and position of the sun, Vance could only guess they were in the planet's southern hemisphere, thousands of miles from Tuzanor. In a silent procession, the acolytes left the transport and followed their leaders across the barren landscape, walking for what seemed like hours. Soon, Vance could make out their destination. The sound reached him first: the clank of heavy machinery. In a place like this, such a sound could only come from a mining facility. When they reached the installation, Vance noted the building and machinery looked like something out of a history book detailing Earth in the twentieth century.

As they descended into the complex, Vance's spirits lifted at the sight of Turval's familiar figure awaiting them. They obediently lined up in front of him as the Minbari addressed them, raising his voice above the incessant noise. 'Humility is important for all, not just Anla'shok. I have already warned you there would be a heavy task ahead, and any of you who feel this work beneath you are free to leave.' He paused, waiting for any sign that someone might take him up on his offer. None did. 'You will each swear fealty to the Worker Caste who mine this facility and work with them freely for as long as we deem fit. Good luck.'

With that, he and the rest of the Anla'shok walked back in the direction they came. Immediately, several dust-covered Minbari appeared from large caves set around the mine. They bowed before the trainees and the trainees bowed back – some more readily than others.

One of the Minbari removed a mask that protected his face from the fine dust of the mines. 'I am Tallka. I will be your instructor whilst you are with us. Please, follow me.' Tallka led the trainees to a room where masks and tools for mining were distributed. He explained that for the next week, the would-be Anla'shok would learn how to mine the "old-fashioned way". The prospect of the hard, dirty work seemed a mixed blessing to Vance. While it wasn't fighting the Shadows, it represented a chance to show the Minbari that he, as well as the other humans, willing accepted any challenge or chore.

Over the course of the week, Vance noted with pleasure that Merreck bore no love for the job but nonetheless threw himself into the task. The rest of the trainees did likewise, although some seemed to take to it better than others. The few complaints – besides the occasional grumble that the galaxy was in danger and here they were digging for gold with pickaxes and shovels – were met with encouragement from the other acolytes.

When the week was over, the trainees assembled once again, their uniforms much the worse for wear. Turval and the Anla'shok returned to greet them and, before they left, each trainee received a large nugget of gold ore. When they were gifted with the ore, Tallka smiled and bowed, thanking them for their labours. With that, Vance and his fellow acolytes walked back to the ship.

The journey back to Tuzanor did not seem half as long as the journey to the mine, but Vance's exhaustion allowed him to sleep for most of the trip. While he was awake, he could not help but stare at the ore, wondering about its significance. The acolytes debated that significance upon their return. What was the ore actually for? There was no way they could use it as currency. Late into the night, William came up with the answer.

'The symbol!' Vance almost leapt from his slanted bed to find William crouching by his side.

'Huh? What?' replied Vance, still groggy and finding it difficult to breath with all the mine dust that clogged his nostrils.

'The gold is for our symbols, the Ranger pins. All the Anla'shok wear them, the gold pins. The gold must be to craft them.'

'And this important information couldn't have waited until tomorrow?' said Vance. William nodded sheepishly and slid off back to his bunk. Despite Vance's curt reaction, he was grateful to William for putting that quandary to rest.

The next morning, when they went for prayers, Turval was waiting for them yet again. 'Some of you realise why you were assigned your most recent task. The rest of you will discover it in time. Now, a similar task awaits. Good luck.'

Turval left the acolytes in the care of the Anla'shok once more. Again the acolytes followed the Anla'shok out of the academy and onto a transport. This time, though, they did not cruise within Minbar's atmosphere but shot beyond it, breaking the planet's invisible boundary and lurching into the blackness of space.

In scant minutes the ship slowed to landing velocity, and Vance guessed they were approaching one of Minbar's two moons. When the doors to the transport opened, Vance could see they were at yet another mining facility. As before, the acolytes entered the complex, but this time the sterile atmosphere of a hab dome welcomed them rather than the dusty confines of the other mining facility.

One of the Anla'shok stood before the acolytes, waiting for them to finish taking in their surroundings. When he had everyone's attention, he began. 'This is the Kayaz'kar mining facility. The Worker Caste mines silver ore from the surface of the moon. The job is very dangerous and casualties are sometimes unavoidable. Consequently, none of you are allowed near any of the mining equipment or the mines themselves. You will confine yourselves to the habitation dome at all times. You have six hours to procure a piece of silver ore, identical in size to the gold you already possess. Now begin.'

The Anla'shok and his comrades returned to the transport and the doors closed. At the same time, the airlock to the hangar opened. Vance could just see the smiling face of a Worker Caste miner beaming from within.

William approached first, smiling in his usual, amiable way. He spoke a few words in English, but the Minbari had no idea what he was saying. One of the Minbari acolytes then spoke in clear Worker Caste dialect. After the initial pleasantries, the Minbari acolyte asked if they could enter. With a smile, the miner let them in without question.

Inside the hab dome, it was comfortable if a little fusty. The air recycling system was working overtime to deal with the emissions of dozens of filthy miners. As soon as they were inside, some of the would-be Rangers crept off to explore and maybe locate some ore by chance. Vance, Jerklenn and William remained for a while, hoping to find any clues regarding the best course of action.

The miner simply stood, his friendly smile still plastered across his face. After several minutes, Vance grew bored. 'I'm off to do a little sight-seeing,' he whispered to Jerklenn. 'If I find anything, I'll let you know.' She and William nodded their reply, obviously still intent on gleaning what they could from the miner. Vance made his way down the nearest murky corridor to see what he could find.

After about an hour of wandering, it became clear no ore could be found in the normal hab zone. However, several signs for restricted areas were beginning to tempt Vance. He had watched a number of acolytes walking past with beaming smiles. They were on to something but would not tell him what they knew. The few Minbari miners he had passed remained characteristically coy about the information they gave out.

Vance freely admitted his diplomacy skills were substandard at best, and he felt his frustration mounting. Maybe this was one test he could not pass. He probably wouldn't be able to talk his way into a piece of ore. In that case, he would have to complete the task by other means. Quickly retracing his steps, he found a door to a restricted area. The words "No Access" were written above it in clear, red Worker Caste script. A keypad and ID card slot rested beside the door.

Vance pulled a miniature jemmy from his belt and hooked it around the back of the keypad. Kattak taught the acolytes every aspect of infiltration, from stealthily scaling walls to overriding security systems just like this one. Vance timed himself as he worked, just to see if he could circumvent this simple security device as quickly as he could a rigged simulation. Five seconds and the door slid open. Not a bad time at all, though he supposed Kattak could have done it in three.

Stepping through the door, Vance could see he was close to his goal. This area was even filthier than the rest of the complex. It seemed the Worker Caste miners were not quite as particular about cleanliness and appearance as the other Castes. A sudden noise forced Vance to duck into the shadows. Something large was being wheeled his way, probably a cart, hopefully full of silver. From the shadows he could even hear the wheezing breath of the old Minbari who pushed it along. Seconds later the Minbari appeared. Unfortunately his barrow appeared to be empty. Vance followed the old miner as he pushed his cart, sticking to the shadows and using the sound of the barrow to mask his movement.

They soon entered a large chamber with a number of passages leading off. The old miner headed for one of the tunnels, but Vance's attention was grabbed by something glistening on a table in the corner. Mining implements and safety clothing lay strewn across it, but Vance was sure he had seen something on it glisten for a split second in the dim light. He waited for the miner to leave, not really believing he could be this lucky. There was no way it could be this easy.

As soon as the old Minbari disappeared down the corridor, Vance moved closer to the table. He kept his eyes fixed on the point where he had seen the glint of light, hoping against hope. When he was halfway across the chamber, more noise came from one of the other tunnels. Vance glanced around, desperately searching for the nearest spot of shadow. The chamber was dimly lit, but a lack of cover forced Vance to assess his situation in an instant. Abandoning silence for cover, he sprinted forward and dived to the ground, rolling beneath the table just as a group of miners entered.

The miners laughed as they strolled into the chamber, obviously ignorant of Vance's presence. He could see only their lower halves, covered in the dust and filth of the mine itself. They walked straight across the chamber and exited the other side. Suddenly one of them turned back, telling his fellows to wait a second. Then he approached the table under which Vance hid.

Vance froze, holding his breath as he watched the miner draw near. A pair of dusty legs reached the table, paused for a second and then returned to address the rest of the group. Vance felt relief wash over him until he heard the Minbari's words: 'Someone left a piece of ore behind.'

As soon as the miners left, Vance let out a long sigh. Quickly, he stood and examined the table. No ore. The miner must have taken it with him. What was he going to do now? There wasn't much time left until they were due back on the ship. Throwing caution to the wind, he dashed toward the exit through which the miners had disappeared. Using everything Kattak had taught him, he slipped along the corridor, making no sound and hugging the shadows, until he caught up with the miners. Their good spirits led Vance to believe they must have just finished their shift, and their noise made his pursuit easier.

After several seconds of stalking the miners, they eventually reached their destination, and Vance allowed himself a smile of satisfaction. They were headed for the shower area. No ceramic tiles lined the walls. The surfaces were covered with a sheer, one-piece material, crystalline in appearance but warm to the touch.

Vance stayed at the edge of the room while the miners disrobed. They left their garments on hooks then entered the cleaning area. Vance took his chance and darted forward. He patted two of the coveralls, but they had nothing in their pockets. As he searched the third, his fingers closed

around a rough, hard object. Vance dipped his hand into the pocket and pulled out the glittering piece of ore. While smaller than the gold one he already owned, he hoped it would be enough. One of the showers suddenly cut off, and Vance realised a miner was approaching. Before the miner had time to step out of the shower area, Vance was away and down the corridor without making a sound.

Back in the small hangar the rest of the acolytes waited. Vance was the last to return. William and Jerklenn stood together, beaming at Vance as he appeared. 'Have any trouble?' asked William.

'None to speak of,' Vance replied. 'How did you manage to get hold of yours?' he asked, nodding towards the large nugget William held out on his palm, obviously proud of his acquisition.

'Well,' the smile spread across William's face, 'Jerklenn and I simply asked.'

Vance raised an eyebrow. He found that highly unlikely, but by the way Jerklenn was smiling, he assumed William couldn't be embellishing that much. 'How about you?' William asked.

'Yeah,' Vance forced a smile on his own face, ' I asked too.' He could tell by his friends' expressions that they were not convinced.

Before breakfast the following morning, each acolyte handed over his gold and silver ore, and the precious materials were taken away. Vance felt slightly aggrieved that he had spent so much time and effort procuring the items and now had to hand them over. It hardly seemed fair.

After their morning lessons, the acolytes gathered in the Chapel, and Sinclair arrived to speak with them. At first his stern face made Vance think that maybe he had some bad news, but his expression soon softened. 'Your time at the academy is almost at an end. You have all proved yourselves beyond expectation, and each of you should be proud of your achievements. Remember though, your training never really ends. When you are on a mission, you will be learning every second of the day. Just remember to keep your eyes open and be careful of whom you trust. Now you will be going on another short trip, but don't worry. You won't be asked to beg, steal or borrow anything this time.' A low ripple of laughter filled the Chapel as Sinclair departed. The acolytes filed out of the ancient building and were led yet again to the hangar.

'Where to this time?' whispered William. Vance shrugged his answer as they boarded the transport.

Upon leaving Minbar's atmosphere, they were met by a Sharlin. Their velocity didn't seem to slow as they docked, and Vance could only marvel, as he had done a hundred times before, at the efficiency of the Minbari fleet and its pilots.

Soon they stood in files in the Sharlin's hangar, a procession of Warrior Caste Minbari flanking them. Vance could see no antipathy in their disciplined faces, although so many humans had probably never been aboard a Sharlin at any one time. At least not without wearing shackles.

The acolytes were led through the bowels of the ship to an anteroom. Despite no visible source of illumination, Vance could still see his fellows. When he strained all his senses to their limits, he felt the presence of others in the room. Probably Warrior Caste Minbari sent to watch them as they waited.

One by one the acolytes were led off into the darkness, but Vance felt no uneasiness. Long gone was his anxiety about the Minbari and their "tricks". No longer did he mistrust them. He was almost Anla'shok, one of their elite, ready for whatever challenge they could pit against him.

Before long Vance's turn came, and a black-robed figure suddenly stood before him. Silently, the figure raised an arm, beckoning Vance to walk forward into the darkness. Vance obeyed, fearlessly embracing the darkness. After only ten steps he was suddenly bathed in pale blue light. The surrounding blackness instantly switched to a huge field of stars enclosing him on every side. Then, one after the other, nine more blue lights each illuminated a single shrouded figure, until he was eventually surrounded.

'Who wishes to speak the last words of youth?' It was a woman's voice, stern and clear.

'James Vance,' he replied.

'And what are you, James Vance?' This time the voice was male.

'I am a Ranger,' he said, without hesitation.

One of the figures strode forward, head hidden by a grey hood. In one hand the figure held a staff with an ornate head, and his other was clenched into a fist but held out, palm upward. 'Are you the light that seeks out every place that the shadows might hide?' asked the figure.

'I am a Ranger,' Vance replied.

'Do you come to the place between the candle and the star?'

'I am a Ranger.' Vance realised he was saying the words without thinking, as though he had rehearsed this scene a hundred times, even though he hadn't.

'Will you remain forever true, forever Anla'shok?' asked the figure.

'I am a Ranger,' replied Vance once more.

Slowly the figure dipped the staff and touched it to Vance's forehead. He felt energy suddenly wash through him, like a cleansing of the soul. The figure raised his upturned fist and opened his hand. The Ranger's pin, a stone set in gold and silver, sat there. Vance took it and bowed.

'Welcome, Anla'shok,' said the figure. 'Stride forever among the stars.' With that he walked back to his place, and the nine blue lights winked out as suddenly as they had illuminated. The field of stars disappeared from around Vance, and complete darkness enveloped him once more.

Again, Vance knew his next move instinctively and walked forward with confidence, despite the dark. Ahead was a tall figure he recognised. Turval's face was stern, but his eyes still smiled in their usual fatherly way. 'Congratulations, Anla'shok.'

'Thank you, Sech Turval,' replied Vance.

'Unfortunately, you will not be joining the rest of you brothers and sisters for the celebration.'

'Is there something wrong?' Vance asked, sure it could be nothing he had done.

'No, but we must return to Tuzanor immediately. You are about to begin your first mission.'

TORVAG

Sinclair's office was still sparse. The last time Vance had been there, three months before, the room had been bare, and it was little different now. Vance was ordered to sit. Durhan and Turval, as well as another Minbari Vance didn't recognise, stood silently behind him. The stranger was obviously Anla'shok – his uniform gave that away – but this Minbari was like no other Vance had ever seen. Facially, he more resembled a Drazi than anything else. The front of his face was flat, as though he had been repeatedly beaten with an array of blunt objects. His skin was criss-crossed with scars, although one stood out more than the others, running from the right side of his mouth to his right ear. Vance was sure that, when fresh and laid open, the wound would have exposed the inside of his mouth.

'This is Bakkatt,' said Sinclair, 'one of our most experienced Anla'shok.' Vance bowed his head respectfully and was surprised when Bakkatt reciprocated. 'He is to lead your mission. When the rest of your team arrive, I will give you further details.'

Vance sat in an uncomfortable silence for several seconds, before a stout knock at the door offered respite. Durhan opened it and allowed Jerklenn to enter. Vance's spirits soared. He could hardly contain his delight. Not only did he consider Jerklenn a close friend, she was practically invincible with a denn'bok. He could think of no one else he would rather be in a tight spot with.

Jerklenn bowed to Durhan, Turval and Sinclair. She was introduced to Bakkatt and took the seat next to Vance. Within seconds there was another rap at the door. Vance realised the mission must be dangerous indeed to require four Anla'shok.

'Merreck, this is Bakkatt,' said Sinclair. Vance couldn't bring himself to look around. He had the best and worst comrades he could have asked for on this mission. Hopefully, now that they were offically Anla'shok, the ill will would disappear.

Merreck took his seat in silence, acknowledging neither Vance nor Jerklenn. Sinclair regarded them all with his usual thoughtfulness. 'You are all aware of what is coming. The Shadows are rising, and they have been for some time. As a consequence, we have been monitoring several governments and their representatives for any sign of Shadow influence. Bakkatt is in charge of several Rangers on surveillance throughout the Drazi Freehold.' With that he nodded to the scar-faced Minbari, who stood and regarded the three fledgling Rangers.

Bakkatt's voice rumbled deeply when he spoke. 'For some time now we have been concerned about the Drazi. Their violent nature makes them susceptible to, and an obvious target for, Shadow manipulation. As a consequence, they have been closely monitored. Keldulan was… is the Ranger posted on Zhabar, the Drazi homeworld. I was receiving weekly reports from him, but last week they suddenly stopped. A few reasons for this are possible: capture or death being the obvious two. We will travel to Zhabar and meet with Keldulan's Drazi informant, then take our investigation from there. Any questions?'

Gruff and straight to the point, thought Vance. This wasn't what he had come to expect of the Minbari, but he liked it nonetheless. When there were no questions, Bakkatt retook his seat.

'I know the three of you are inexperienced,' said Sinclair, 'and this may seem like a dangerous mission for your first time, but I have every confidence you will do well. You are Anla'shok. Remember that.' Although Sinclair looked at all three of them before he continued, Vance heard the subtext of the message loud and clear. 'Take note of Bakkatt, as he is our most experienced brother. Consider him your teacher during this mission. Dismissed.'

With that they all stood. Bakkatt exited first, but before any of the others could leave, Sinclair motioned for them to stop. 'I would like to speak with the three of you alone,' he said, gesturing to Merreck, Vance and Jerklenn. Durhan and Turval bowed and left without a word. As the door closed, Sinclair regarded his new Anla'shok with a furrowed brow. 'Now, I know there's been plenty of talk of this "live for the One, die for the One" credo. Well, just this once, since this is your first mission, I want you all to forget about that. When you have a few missions under your belt, then valiant and heroic deaths are allowed. Until then, if you find yourselves in trouble, run like hell. Do I make myself clear?'

Vance and Jerklenn nodded their agreement. Merreck did not move an inch. Sinclair looked at him, his brow relaxing. Vance could tell that Sinclair wanted to persuade Merreck to heed his words, but there would have been little point. 'Alright, you'll leave straight away,' he said. 'Make sure I see you all again when this is over.'

The three of them left. No words were spoken between them as returned to the dorm. When they arrived, Bakkatt was waiting for them, Durhan by his side.

'Leave your Ranger pins and uniforms,' said Bakkatt. 'We will be travelling to Zhabar in disguise.'

Vance could see the simple robes laid out on their bunks. Before they could change, Durhan stepped forward. 'You have all excelled in the combat arena, one way or another.' Vance amused himself with the thought that getting beaten to a pulp and protected by a female must have been the "other" way to excel in the combat arena. 'There is one piece of equipment you will all require.' From within his robes, Durhan produced three denn'boks. He handed one to each of them, bowing as he did so. Vance held the small piece of metal in his hand, wondering how long it would be until he was required to use it on their mission.

The three of them silently changed into their plain robes and followed Bakkatt to the landing platform. A shabby-looking freighter waited for them, and they boarded, each silently contemplating their own thoughts and fates. Once in orbit, Bakkatt turned, his piercing blue eyes regarding them from within his ruined face. 'Follow my lead at all times. Use your initiative when appropriate, but stay focused on the job at hand. We must first find out what has happened to Keldulan and then, if necessary, take action.'

They nodded their reply. Vance could feel the butterflies fluttering in his stomach, as they did before the start of any mission. This time, though, an inner calmness seemed to act as a net to catch those butterflies, relaxing him. Somehow he knew he would not fail. On EarthForce missions, that element of the unexpected, which made him apprehensive and tense, had always hounded him. Now, even though anything might happen when they landed, Vance was a thousand times surer of himself. He was on a mission for the Anla'shok. He would walk in the dark places. If death came, so be it. He would fight with the strength of the light.

They came out of hyperspace an hour from Zhabar. When they eventually reached their destination, Vance could see the planet – a massive landmass with little water or cloud cover. Most of it was desolate, sparsely dotted with huge cities that would be teeming with violent, bloodthirsty Drazi.

As they broke the planet's atmosphere, the freighter shook erratically, as though the planet itself were in a hostile mood. Despite the uncomfortable landing, Vance was calm, no longer panicked by his lack of control over the situation.

Torvag City was the Zhabar's capital, but despite being the most densely populated city on the planet, its main spaceport was primitive at best. The Drazi seemed to care little for immigration or customs controls, but then again few could comfortably deal with the caustic nature of Zhabar's inhabitants.

As the four Anla'shok made their way through the port, they were greeted in a gruff manner: no warm welcomes, no offers of help and certainly nobody offering a sightseeing tour.

The situation did not improve as they navigated the city's streets. Threatening looks assailed them from all sides. A palpable air of violence filled the narrow streets.

'We should split up,' said Bakkatt. 'I am not due to meet with Keldulan's contact until noon, and we do not need any trouble before then. Three Minbari and a human wandering the streets together will draw suspicion. Let's meet at the market square fifteen minutes before noon, and then we can rendezvous with the contact together. Do not travel far from the square. If any of you find yourself in trouble, use your discretion. Remember, you are Anla'shok.' The three nodded their agreement. 'Entil'zha veni,' pronounced Bakkatt with a bow, and he departed down one of the adjacent streets.

Without a word, the three of them split up, Vance taking a street to the north. He wound his way through the annoyingly narrow alleyways, remembering what he had learned about Torvag. The streets themselves were narrow, perhaps out of necessity to cut down on the number of deaths when the various factions carried out their regular running battles. Vance surmised that if the enraged Drazi could not reach each other en masse, casualties could be kept to a minimum. Not that it really helped alleviate the violence. The scope of the violence would simply be reduced to a smaller scale.

Despite the reason for their construction, Vance couldn't help but be impressed by the architecture of Torvag. It did not compare to the dark majesty of Tuzanor, but it easily stood up to any ancient city of Earth.

He eventually came to a row of stalls set back from the main path. Vance could see they were attached to the front of a row of houses, the stallholders obviously working out of their dwellings. 'Serius petoolo dakkad,' spoke a growling voice in Vance's ear. Stepping back, he saw a squat female Drazi holding toward him a bowl of some pungent-smelling meat, smiling all the while. Vance smiled back, shaking his head. It would be suicide to try any food offered by the Drazi, particularly in these back streets. He could only hope that he wouldn't cause offence by refusing.

Hugging the shadows, Vance became as inconspicuous as possible. Even in the narrow streets of Torvag, he found that he could rely on his stealth abilities. A Drazi who approached him would move to one side, paying him no mind as though he was not significant enough to bother. For the next hour Vance wandered around, observing silently from the shadows. More than once he witnessed two or more Drazi begin arguments over nothing. Their harsh words turned to blows until one of them was incapable of stand-

ing or continuing to fight. At one point a Drazi was so badly beaten Vance feared him dead. However, as he watched from the shadows, the hulking, scaly creature shakily regained its feet and, after wiping the blood from its brow, continued on its way as though nothing had happened.

Checking the slender timepiece on his wrist, Vance saw it was almost time for him to meet the other Anla'shok. He moved toward the square and was struck by the sudden change in atmosphere. The bustling marketplace rang with the sounds of lively barter and trade. Little of the oppressive, violent atmosphere of the rest of the city seeped in here, and Vance even heard raucous laughter from other parts of the square.

Despite the change in atmosphere, Vance remained alert as he walked out into the open, his hood still concealing his face. As he made his way past an alleyway, he heard a sudden whisper. Looking up he saw Bakkatt, partially concealed in the shadows. 'Over there,' Bakkatt motioned to a small door with a wooden sign above it. 'It's a Drazi drinking den. We are to meet our contact in there. I will go first. Wait two minutes then follow me in.'

Vance let Bakkatt lead the way. To his right he could see Jerklenn and Merreck also hanging back, waiting to follow Bakkatt. After waiting two minutes as ordered, Vance entered the drinking den, bowing his head to avoid the low doorway. The stench of pungent Drazi ale assaulted his nostrils and almost choked him. A smoky haze from the weed of the den's patrons choked the room. The strained violence of the city was replaced here with a strangely subdued atmosphere.

Bakkatt was already seated in one corner with a sleepy-looking Drazi. Vance walked over as Jerklenn and Merreck entered the drinking den behind him. The Drazi looked up and smiled as the trio approached, really little more than a leer, as though the Drazi was showing his disdain for social niceties. The Rangers sat in the spare seats at the table.

'You have babysitters, Bakkatt? Or are you babysitting them?' The Drazi laughed at his own joke. Bakkatt remained silent, locking the Drazi in a stony gaze. The smile soon slipped from the Drazi's lips. 'Straight on to business then, eh? Serious as always, Bakkatt. I've come to expect that. That's why I like you Minbari. You always know what you're going to get.'

'Keldulan,' said Bakkatt suddenly. 'Tell me where he is, Rottik. Right now.'

The Drazi leaned back, as though hurt by Bakkatt's commanding tone. 'Your guess is as good as mine. But I think he was beginning to stick his nose into places it wasn't wanted.'

'Explain,' ordered Bakkatt. It was obvious his patience was growing thin.

A smile spread across the Rottik's face, and he reclined in his seat. 'Keldulan was most generous with his rewards for the information I gave him. Are you so generous?'

Slowly, Bakkatt reached into his robe and withdrew his clenched fist. He held it out over the table. The Drazi eagerly opened his palm beneath Bakkatt's fist. In a flash, Bakkatt grabbed the Rottik's hand and twisted it almost all the way around. After giving a short, high-pitched squeal, Rottik managed to control the pain. To show weakness in a place so public would have hurt his reputation. 'Alright, alright.' The Drazi's voice was dry and throaty. Vance made a mental note to ask Bakkatt to teach him the hold he was using. Bakkatt released the Drazi, who quickly clenched his ill-treated hand. 'No need to be so violent. I thought you Minbari were peace loving.' Then, glancing at Vance, 'Well, at least before the war. No offence.'

Vance did not answer, and Bakkatt leaned forward again impatiently. 'He was investigating the Thath Vorak,' said the Drazi quickly, not wanting to invoke Bakkatt's wrath once more. 'Or more specifically, a member of the Thath Vorak named Musan Volt. Apparently Musan Volt had been having the occasional "rendezvous" with someone that concerned Keldulan. He was on his way to spy on one of Volt's meetings when he was, er, disappeared.'

Vance knew of the Thath Vorak, a group of Drazi, most of them venerable, who influenced, or more often meddled in, the political and military concerns of the Freehold. Much like the Freemasons of Earth, their numbers mostly comprised ex-military and businessmen of wealth.

'Where can I find this Musan Volt?' asked Bakkatt.

'He resides in the Merchant's Quarter,' answered the Drazi, 'and is not difficult to find. But be careful, as he is a powerful man, very influential. I'd hate to see you upset the wrong people and go missing like your friend.'

'Let us worry about that. What kind of security can we expect?'

'How would I know? I'm just a lowly–'

'You're telling me Keldulan didn't have you reconnoitre Volt's movements before he went to investigate him? I find that hard to believe. That makes me think you're lying, which also makes me think you had something to do with his disappearance.'

As Bakkatt spoke, Vance saw Rottik becoming more and more agitated. At the academy, he had been taught how to spot liars and deceivers and, despite the lack of telltale signs allowed by Rottik's Drazi features, he obviously had something to hide.

Rottik's chair creaked backward. Before he could make a break for it, Merreck grabbed his arm. Vance stood as inconspicuously as he could and surveyed the rest of the drinking den. The patrons were too interested in becoming inebriated to care about someone being strong-armed in the corner.

'Tell me what you know, Rottik, or you will suffer as you cannot imagine,' said Bakkatt.

'May the sic-tari strike me early if I am lying to you, please–'

'Alright, we take him with us,' said Bakkatt, nodding to Merreck, who dragged the Drazi to his feet.'

'May Droshalla strike me down, Bakkatt, please see reason.'

'I think I have shown great restraint with you. That time is over.'

'Wait… wait. You don't know what you're getting into. I can't tell you anything about them. You have no idea what they can do.'

'Believe me, Rottik, I do.'

As Bakkatt grabbed Rottik's free arm, Vance saw the Drazi bartender disappear into the back of the drinking den. His movement did not look out of the ordinary, but something about it made Vance nervous. 'Wait,' he said to Bakkatt. 'Something is wrong.'

'The bartender?' asked Bakkatt, obviously sensing the same danger. Vance nodded. 'Is there another exit from here?' The Drazi shrugged, his eyes already wide with fear. 'Alright,' said Bakkatt. 'We'll walk straight out of the front door. Not a sound from anyone,' he directed his comment at Rottik. 'If anyone looks at us twice, hit first, make apologies later.'

They moved quickly across the sticky floor, but before they were halfway across, the louse-ridden door opened. Three Drazi, their faces grim and their fists holding steel clubs, entered. All locked their eyes on Rottik as soon as they stepped into the room, but they paused when they saw his escorts. The one at the front nodded his head sideways, and the Drazi at the rear sprinted out into the marketplace. 'Hand him over, Minbari. Don't want to crack those bony heads, do we?'

'He's gone for reinforcements,' said Jerklenn, ignoring the Drazi's demands.

'We must act quickly,' replied Bakkatt, releasing his grip on Rottik.

Before the Drazi could bring his weapon to bear, Bakkatt produced his denn'bok and smashed him halfway across the room. Merreck and Vance quickly revealed their own weapons, but Jerklenn was faster. The second Drazi snarled as he lurched forward, but the butt of Jerklenn's weapon struck his flat face, full on. No need to check if the Drazi were going to get up again anytime soon, thought Vance. The Rangers seized Rottik and rushed passed their prone assailants.

Out in the street the marketplace still buzzed with life. The Rangers burst from the drinking den, taking a moment to survey the scene. Danger approached from several directions as more angry Drazi made their way purposefully between the stalls. Rottik's head swivelled in panic. Vance was pleased to see at least one Drazi who did not seem to relish violence as much as his brethren.

'Take Rottik,' ordered Bakkatt, thrusting the frightened Drazi towards Vance. 'We will make a path. Stick close behind.'

Bakkatt walked forward, flanked by Merreck and Jerklenn, as the first three Drazi stormed forward. In a flurry of denn'bok blows, all three of the Drazi fell, and the group began to move through the marketplace. The stallholders looked on with eager interest, although no panicked cries for help erupted, as Vance would have expected from a sudden burst of violence in such a public place. Obviously the militia around Torvag City cared little for the odd street skirmish.

The Rangers stuck to one side of the market, keeping the high wall that surrounded it to one side of them. Vance was impressed with Bakkatt's tactics – he was obviously aware that by following the wall they could not be outflanked by their Drazi pursuers.

Two more Drazi appeared from behind a nearby stall. Vance could not help but be impressed by their foes' tenacity. However, the Drazi couldn't possibly know they were dealing with Anla'shok. Even if they did, Vance doubted it would have made the stubborn warriors think twice.

They both held a tru'far in each hand. The short punching daggers made the Drazi appear to have single sharp talons at the end of each arm instead of hands. Merreck reacted first to the new threat, quickly batting the blades of one Drazi aside and smashing his denn'bok into his enemy's sternum. A crack of breaking bone preceded the Drazi's collapse.

The second assailant ducked beneath a vicious swipe from Jerklenn and headed straight for Vance. As the grim-looking Drazi approached, Vance released Rottik's arm and moved forward, prepared to parry the wicked blades. The Drazi raised one arm high, ready to bring the weapon down on Vance's head. His second arm was low, and Vance waited until the last moment to act in case the high blow was a feint, with the real danger coming from the second weapon. As he met the Drazi, he quickly realised his error: the Drazi's entire attack was a bluff, his real target being Rottik. As Vance lifted his denn'bok to parry, the Drazi sidestepped, speeding straight toward the defenceless Rottik.

Vance's heart sank. He could see the Drazi moving in, seemingly in slow motion, but he could do nothing to stop his swift opponent. Rottik was wide-eyed, his back to the high wall, transfixed by the vision of his impending demise. Bakkatt's denn'bok swept down, snapping the Drazi's arm as it shot towards Rottik's throat. Jerklenn finished him off with a solid blow to his thick skull.

There were no words of chastisement in response to Vance's blunder. Bakkatt took the lead once more, and Vance grabbed Rottik's rigid form,

dragging him onward. They reached the edge of the marketplace and sped down a narrow passage that exited the walled-off area. Vance glanced over his shoulder, seeing several more Drazi taking up pursuit. Bakkatt led them through the maze of streets, never pausing to consider his direction. Vance wondered if he knew where he was going or if he was simply running blind.

Despite the speed of their flight, the Drazi stayed in pursuit. Vance remained at the rear, with Rottik in front of him, running at Merreck's heels. The big Minbari glanced over his shoulder and then stopped, squeezing to the side and allowing Vance and Rottik to speed past. Vance knew what Merreck planned but dared not stop in case he lost the rest of the group. As they rounded a bend, Vance could hear the sound of falling blows and cries of pain behind him.

'Bakkatt,' cried Vance. The lead Ranger turned, realising what had happened when he failed to see one of his team.

'Wait here,' said Bakkatt, retracing his steps and disappearing around the corner. Vance clenched his denn'bok tightly. Staring at the end of the passage, he expected a horde of Drazi to round the corner and leap to the attack at any moment. Jerklenn moved to his side, the two of them blocking the street.

The sounds of battle died off and were replaced by running feet. Merreck and Bakkatt rounded the corner, sprinting towards the rest of the group. Vance felt relief wash over him as he saw his companions approach, but the look on Bakkatt's grim face made him wary.

'Where is he?' said Bakkatt, motioning toward them. In his apprehension, Vance had turned his back on Rottik. He spun round but already knew the Drazi was gone. Vance silently scolded himself for the second time. Their first encounter on their first mission, and already he had messed up. Twice.

'Never mind,' said Bakkatt, as though reading his thoughts. 'We don't need him. We know the name of Keldulan's target. Let's see what this Musan Volt knows.'

Musan Volt

Hot winds blew sheets of dust across Torvag City's rooftops. The four Rangers navigated the roofs of the city's many teeming tenements, surveying the length and breadth of the metropolis. In the distance, the Merchant's Quarter spread out before them, the sole lead in the search for their Ranger brother.

'The assassins sent to find Rottik were most likely Musan Volt's men,' said Bakkatt. 'He somehow knew Rottik had information linking him to Keldulan's disappearance and wanted him silenced. Rottik was the target, not us. Volt knows we are here now, though, and he knows we are dangerous. I would expect his security to be extremely vigilant.'

'Should we call reinforcements?' asked Jerklenn.

'We are Anla'shok,' answered Bakkatt with a smile that seemed out of place on his battle-scarred face. 'Breaching impregnable defences is what we are trained for.'

Bakkatt's sudden smile showed Vance that this kind of mission, and being in the thick of it, was what this particular Minbari lived for. 'For now we rest. When night comes we will position ourselves in the Merchant's Quarter and see just what this Musan Volt is up to.'

The three Rangers nodded in unison at Bakkatt's plan and hunkered down within their robes as the waning sun travelled across Torvag's impressive skyline. Bakkatt sat motionless, staring at the staircase leading to the roof. Vance watched him for several minutes before he realised the Minbari was meditating. Even with his eyes open, Bakkatt was able to reach a meditative state and keep guard at the same time: another trick he would have to persuade the experienced Anla'shok to teach him.

As their shadows grew longer on the exposed rooftop, the Rangers exchanged glances. Vance's eyes met Merreck's, and the Minbari gave him a cursory nod. The comradely gesture surprised Vance, especially considering his blunders in almost allowing Rottik to be killed and then letting him slip away. Nevertheless, Merreck seemed unconcerned, and Vance wondered if the brotherhood of the Anla'shok truly meant more to Merreck than the vendetta of the Sky Riders.

'Now we move,' said Bakkatt. The Rangers immediately jumped to their feet, crouching on the low-sided rooftop. They cautiously descended the stairs and moved into the street, making their way towards the Merchant's Quarter. When they reached the outskirts of the area, Bakkatt stopped them. 'Remember, our descriptions have surely been circulated, and we will not be difficult to spot in the open. Three Minbari and a human is a rare group in Torvag City. Remember what Kattak has taught you.'

Vance felt strangely safe within the confines of his robes. The grey cowl he wore seemed to more than hide his features, as though it made his entire body blend into his surroundings. Of course that was impossible, but as they moved through the narrow streets, no one gave them a second glance.

Finding the Merchant's Quarter proved simple. As they moved toward it, the drab grey brick that surrounded them gradually morphed into carved stone towers topped with domed minarets. The opulence of the district did nothing to alleviate the air of violence encompassing the narrow streets. The Rangers made their way to an open area. Much like the marketplace, a wide, walled-off area full of stalls surrounded the plaza. These stalls were now empty, the whole area deserted.

Just as Vance pondered the problem of finding the residence of Musan Volt in the vastness of the Merchant's Quarter, Bakkatt held up his hand, giving the signal to disperse and await orders. Instantly they scattered, clinging to the shadows of the spacious square, finding discreet spots from which to observe their leader.

From the shadows, Vance watched Bakkatt approach a small building built against one of the walls, possibly a sentry hut. He rapped on the door and waited, his head bowed and his features hidden within the confines of his robes. The powerful Minbari looked like a crumbling old man in the dying light.

The door to the small building opened slowly, and an eerie yellow light lanced across the marketplace. Bakkatt stood hunched in the yellow illumination, his shadow spreading for thirty feet along the ground behind him. Vance could hear voices, the first one harsh and openly annoyed, the second weak and croaking. Although he couldn't make out any of the conversation, Bakkatt's disguised voice entreated information from the building's inhabitant. The voices spoke for several seconds, Bakkatt's remaining low and submissive, the other harsh and aggressive, until they finished their parley. The door slammed shut and darkness fell over the marketplace once more.

Bakkatt turned and strode purposefully across the market square. When he reached an area of light, he made a swift hand signal ordering the Rangers to regroup. Vance moved toward Bakkatt, remaining invisible as he padded across the stone streets. Merreck and Jerklenn appeared out of the shadows simultaneously. Although he had seen this many times, Vance never ceased to be staggered by their skill at concealment. In EarthForce, he had been trained to shade and track a target without being seen, but now he could stand right beside a subject, even someone with a keen ear and a vigilant eye, and still not be noticed.

'The market registrar has given me Volt's address,' said Bakkatt.

Vance frowned. 'He just gave it to you?

'The merchants of Torvag must register their whereabouts at all times. Only in that way can they guarantee the goods they trade. No merchant who valued his neck would try to swindle a stallholder or customer if his address was common knowledge. For this reason, merchants are also very well protected. We must assume that Musan Volt is better protected than most.'

Under cover of darkness, the Rangers moved deeper into the Merchant's Quarter and toward the residence of Musan Volt. The buildings seemed even more expertly crafted up close than they had from across the city, each clawing towards the night sky as though they were bejewelled hands sprouting from the ground. Vance saw no easy entry points for any of them. Visible entrances were blocked by ornate wrought-iron gates or solid, steel-shod doors.

Above them, several walkways linked the various towers. From his low vantage point, Vance spotted guards roaming the balconies, ever wary of thieves and assassins. This would not be easy.

Bakkatt stopped after they had covered the entire length of the Merchant's Quarter. Vance could see the huge wall at the end of the narrow street, which he assumed was the perimeter wall of the city. 'There,' said Bakkatt, pointing to a scarlet tower that stood on the corner of the street. Its sheer sides were crafted from blood-red marble that shone in the light of the street lamps. 'Volt's home.'

Vance craned his neck to see the top of the tower, which disappeared into the night sky. Several walkways led to it from adjoining buildings, which gave Vance some hope.

Bakkatt searched for something down the maze of streets that led from their position. 'This one will do,' he whispered, moving toward one of the high-sided buildings. When he reached it, the other Rangers at his sides, he ran his hands over its smooth sides. Vance saw his fingers testing the surface, scratching and peeling at various parts of the stone. The smooth plaster flaked under the pressure of Bakkatt's fingers, and a smile soon spread across his face. 'We can scale this,' he said, looking upward. 'We only have to reach as far as the first walkway.'

The other Rangers followed his gaze. Vance estimated they would have to climb a hundred feet. Straight up.

Bakkatt led the way, followed by Merreck, then Jerklenn, with Vance bringing up the rear. He understood he was getting the easiest job of it, for by the time it was his turn to climb, enough mortar had been removed by the other Rangers for him to gain a secure handhold quite easily. However, the danger of the others falling made his position less than secure.

Blocking out any notion of fear, Vance and the rest of the Rangers scaled the side of the huge building. At times they heard footsteps from below or from one of the elevated walkways, and the four of them would freeze, waiting for the danger to pass. Of course, their skills at concealment eliminated most of the danger of being spotted.

Vance reached the edge of the walkway and vaulted over, relieved to feel the solid concrete beneath his feet, albeit a hundred feet above the ground. The other Rangers were already crouched on the walkway, their eyes scanning in every direction for signs of a guard. Silently, Bakkatt moved toward a corridor that ran parallel to one of the buildings. Once inside, he slowed to allow the other Rangers to join him. Together they moved across the dimly lit corridor, one side overlooking the vista of Torvag City.

As the corridor turned left, Bakkatt stopped. He pointed over the balcony at the red-sided building. 'Musan Volt's residence is just over there,' he said. Silently, the Rangers looked out. A walkway led from a lower level of the building they were in to a huge door. Two well-armed and armoured Drazi stood guard, unmoving in the dull light. They resembled statues, and only the occasional turning of a head revealed they were Volt's sentries.

'Kill the lights,' ordered Bakkatt. Jerklenn located the power conduit that fed electricity to the dim lights illuminating the corridor. Within seconds, they flickered and died. Hidden in the shadows, Vance watched the sentries look

toward the sudden darkness. One even stepped forward, straining his eyes, looking for signs of movement, but the Rangers were as good as invisible.

The Rangers spent the hours before dawn watching Volt's doorway. The sentries were a disciplined bunch, holding their posts throughout the night without dropping their guard for even a second. The door to Volt's home opened only once as the sentries were relieved by two equally impressive-looking bodyguards.

'This is no good,' said Bakkatt, just as the sun began to peer over the horizon. 'We need to get inside, and that window at the side of the building is as good an entryway as any.' When Vance saw what Bakkatt was pointing to, he had to disagree. The door at the front, despite its intimidating sentries, looked far more attractive than a single window a hundred feet above the hard concrete of Torvag's streets.

'The two of you will keep a watch,' said Bakkatt, looking at Merreck and Jerklenn. 'If there is any sign of a disturbance from outside, disable the sentries and secure our escape route. Vance, you're with me.' Despite Vance's doubts, he followed Bakkatt without hesitation. They climbed flights of ancient, dusty stairs until they reached the roof. Bakkatt reached into his robes and produced a cylindrical object. At first Vance thought it was his denn'bok, but then he saw that the item had a trigger on the side.

Bracing one hand behind the cylinder, Bakkatt pulled the trigger. A dull popping sound thudded through the night as a zip line shot from one end of the cylinder and landed on the roof of the red building. Vance took a tentative glance over the side, relieved to see the sentries outside Volt's apartment were too far below to hear the anything from the rooftop.

Bakkatt pulled the zip line tight, wedging the grappling hook at the opposite end. He then secured the cylinder by wrapping it around one of the many short chimneys that protruded from the roof. 'Wait until I am across, then follow,' he said. Vance nodded his reply. Bakkatt grasped the line and hooked one leg around it. Expertly, he pulled himself across the gap between the buildings. Despite the Minbari's bulk, he took only seconds to reach the other side.

Vance followed immediately. He had traversed rope lines a hundred times before on an array of different assault courses, but never at such a height. Blocking the prospect of imminent death from his mind, Vance pulled himself across as swiftly as Bakkatt. The words "we live for the One" unconsciously popped into his head as he reached the other side.

The two Rangers moved like hooded ghosts across the rooftop to the edge of the building. Without pausing, Bakkatt swept over the side, clinging to the scant undulations of the red slabs that made up the brickwork. Vance followed, shadowing the more experienced Anla'shok all the way down. When Bakkatt was level with the window, he peered in. Vance watched, holding his breath all the while. When the Minbari was satisfied, he grabbed the ledge and eased himself in. As Vance followed, Bakkatt grasped his arm and helped him through.

Richly embroidered throws and rugs decorated Musan Volt's apartment, alongside the strangest ornaments Vance had ever seen. Drapes hung from the ceiling and walls, and an array of twisted pottery and carved idols, resembling various animals that Vance could not identify, dotted shelves and other surfaces.

Dragging his eyes away from the splendorous sight, Vance followed Bakkatt toward the room's nearest exit. Before they could reach it, footsteps approached. Bakkatt darted behind a trestle partition at one side of the room. Vance glided to an identical partition at the room's opposite end. Crouched low with their hoods pulled tight, the Rangers were all but invisible in the drape-covered room.

The fattest Drazi Vance had ever seen strolled into the room moments after the Rangers took their positions. Every finger on his hands bore a large jewelled ring, and a sparkling purple robe hung from his greying shoulders. The Drazi was old, but he still conducted himself with a regal demeanour. This had to be Musan Volt.

Vance felt every muscle in his body bunch. He was ready to leap out, but he knew to wait for Bakkatt's move. For now they would wait and observe. Musan Volt gazed from his window for several seconds as though looking for something. Then, with a shrug of his sloping shoulders, he turned and poured a glass of pale yellow liquid from a crystal decanter. He held the liquid to his nose and sniffed, closing his eyes and savouring the aroma. When he was satisfied, he pressed the glass to his lips.

A noise from outside made Volt freeze before he had the chance to swallow. The scraping sound grew louder, as though something were approaching up the wall. Vance could see Volt's hand begin to shake. Whatever was drawing nearer, Volt had a pretty good idea what to expect. Like a huge spider crawling from its web, the source of the noise arrived. One long limb after another crept over the window's ledge. Volt did not turn to greet his new "guest" even though he must have heard its arrival.

The creature was spindly, clad in plates of chitinous armour. Its face, fully visible, was wedge shaped and bore both dog- and snake-like features. 'Musan Volt has done well say the Ky'Thain,' hissed the creature. Its eyes looked Volt up and down, as though it were about to devour him. 'The Ky'Thain's masters are pleased with Musan Volt.'

'This has gone too far,' said Volt, spinning on the creature. 'I never intended to end up a murderer. There is no honour in it.'

The creature regarded Volt blankly for a few seconds before breaking into peals of hissing laughter. As it watched Volt, it swayed from side to side hypnotically. 'What did Musan Volt expect. Never going to be easy. Musan Volt should be happy.'

Volt turned his back on the creature once more. 'Well, Musan Volt is not happy,' he said, almost under his breath.

The creature suddenly halted its movement, the mirth draining from its bestial features. 'Musan Volt's happiness is not of importance. Only the Ky'Thain's will. Musan Volt will obey, and reward will be great. Musan Volt fails and even Ky'Thain will not be able to protect him from consequences.'

'Don't try threatening me,' said Volt, his anger rising. 'We had a deal. You help me gain influence within the Thath Vorak. I act as your eyes and ears within the establishment. I have held my side of the bargain, but I have seen nothing in return.'

'Time, Musan Volt. All in good time will the Ky'Thain uphold its end of the bargain.'

'You've had more than enough time. All I've had is orders and demands. When do I start gaining from the deal?'

'Patience is all we require. Though a demonstration can be arranged if it is a show of strength you wish to see.'

'It's too late. I've had enough of you and your brethren. Start delivering on your promises or you can find someone else to be your spy. Do you know who I am? I am Musan Volt of the Caves of Shuur, Slayer of Kin-ram, the deadliest vorlath ever known. I am no lackey. Go back and tell your masters that.'

The creature bowed solemnly before Volt. 'As you wish, Musan Volt.' The Drazi turned and reached for his decanter once more. As he did so, the creature looked up, venom in its eyes. Before Vance could move, Bakkatt burst from behind the trestle, denn'bok in hand. The creature glanced towards the charging Ranger but did not deviate from its target. An eight-inch spike lanced out from the chitin vambrace at the creature's wrist, and it leapt forward on its spindly legs. Before the spike could pierce the back of Volt's head, Bakkatt parried the strike, following up with a counter-strike toward the creature's head. Before his blow could land, a spike shot from the creature's other wrist, parrying the denn'bok.

Volt spun, the decanter falling from his hand and smashing into tiny shards. Vance moved from behind the cover of his trestle, extending his denn'bok as he charged. Volt shrank to the ground as the Ky'Thain looked around, deducing which would be the most sensible target. The Rangers waited for its next move as footsteps approached along the corridor. Volt's sentries, alerted by the sound of the smashing decanter, stopped dead as they entered the room, taken by surprise at the sight of three armed intruders who had managed to enter unseen. Vance gripped his denn'bok tighter, itching to act but not wanting to pre-empt Bakkatt. The Minbari simply stood and waited, not taking his eyes off the Ky'Thain. Vance glanced from the Drazi guards to the strange jittery creature as it looked at each of its enemies in turn, its monstrous head darting to each of its potential targets. Volt remained still, not even daring to move into cover.

The Ky'Thain was the first to act, snarling in fury as it once again leapt toward Musan Volt. Although the creature was shockingly fast, Bakkatt managed to intercept it mid-strike, batting the beast sideways. It landed in the centre of the room, next to the sentries.

Simultaneously, the Drazi guards reached to their hips, grasping for their autopistols. The creature moved so swiftly its attacks looked blurred. In a split second it sliced one Drazi's throat and pierced another in the chest. Without pause it turned toward Vance, who only managed to block its blow on pure reflex. His hands shuddered as the Ky'Thain's weapon struck. Despite its spindly limbs, a feral strength powered its attacks. Before the creature could unleash a second blow, Bakkatt was on it, his denn'bok flying in with strike after crippling strike. The creature managed to parry some of Bakkatt's attacks, and others it simply absorbed on its hard carapace. Vance attacked as well, raining blows down upon the seemingly invincible creature. Although it did not seem to be wounded by any strokes of their denn'boks, the Rangers managed to hold the creature at bay. The three danced across Volt's chamber, their steps a series of strikes and counter-strikes. Vance had never faced an opponent like this. The Ky'Thain seemed to possess a combination of speed and strength that no other race could possibly match. Despite being faced by two skilled opponents, it not only held its own, it managed several counter-strikes that Vance only blocked because of luck and the aid of the other Ranger.

After parrying a blow from each of its adversaries, the creature somersaulted away from the Rangers, who manoeuvred themselves in front of the cowering Musan Volt. The creature knelt by the window, panting like a cheetah that had just missed its prey. 'The eyes of the Ky'Thain are watching you,' it spat, and then leapt through the open portal.

Vance sprinted forward and leaned out, just in time to see the beast nimbly crawling away down the side of the tower. When he turned, Bakkatt had already picked up Musan Volt. The old Drazi stared into Bakkatt's face as though unable to comprehend what had just happened. 'Can you hear me?' said Bakkatt. Volt gave no answer; he simply stared towards the open window. Bakkatt slapped him hard. Volt's tough skin absorbed the blow, but it roused him from his stupor. 'Can you hear me?' Bakkatt repeated. Volt simply nodded, his mouth open and eyes wide. 'You will come with us. It is your only chance for survival.'

Volt looked around the room until his eyes came to rest on his two bodyguards, their corpses bleeding on the ground. Volt's nod grew in conviction as he regarded the corpses. Bakkatt grabbed him by the arm and guided him toward the door. Vance followed, quickly glancing back at the window in case of attack. As Bakkatt and Volt left the room, Vance looked at the two sentries. He unbuckled one

of their gun belts and strapped it on. The autopistol was a useful weapon to have in a tight corner, and if any more of these Ky'Thain creatures stalked the night, they would need all the firepower they could get.

They reached the door and Bakkatt peered out carefully. Jerklenn and Merreck waited in the shadows; the two remaining sentries were prone and unconscious in a corner. 'They must have heard you inside,' said Merreck. 'We thought it best to secure your exit.'

'Good work,' said Bakkatt, pulling Musan Volt beside him. 'We need to reach a safe place so we can question our new friend. Keldulan had a safe house not far from here. I doubt we will be disturbed there.'

As they moved once more into the shadows of Torvag's narrow streets, Vance turned a watchful eye toward every shadow, above them as well as on the ground. If the Ky'Thain was going to return, he wanted to be ready.

INTERROGATION

Keldulan's former bolthole was more of a warehouse than a safehouse, positioned on the edge of the Merchant's Quarter, bordering the Craftmen's District. Vance wondered why the Merchant's Quarter was so far from the spaceport. Surely merchants would want to be in close proximity to air travel so that their goods might more easily be transported through Torvag's tight streets.

Bakkatt explained that the separate districts of Torvag had been in place for thousands of years, much longer than the Drazi possessed the ability to travel in space. Consequently, the spaceport was built in one of the few remaining places available in Torvag. The Drazi's attachment to their traditions and history prevented demolition of large parts of the city to make room for a convenient spaceport.

Traversing Torvag's streets and finding the safe house took almost no time. Again, Bakkatt led the way as though a built-in radar guided him to his destination. They pulled Musan Volt's limp form along with them, and he offered no resistance. No one paid them any mind as they travelled. A merchant being dragged along by hooded figures was not out of the ordinary, and it paid to mind one's business in Torvag.

Now they stood in a brick room with a high ceiling, some broken furniture and little else. The Rangers entered and checked the exits. A set of double doors led to the main street. Merreck posted himself beside them, spying through a crack in the wooden doors. They had entered through a side door in a back alleyway. Stairs led down from the side door into the safe house, and Jerklenn posted herself at the top of these, listening for anyone approaching.

Bakkatt found a chair that wasn't smashed to pieces and sat Musan Volt down roughly. Vance stood to one side, watching the senior Ranger at work. Volt was still dazed. He did not seem to notice the Rangers around him, his mind obviously elsewhere. 'Who are the Ky'Thain?' said Bakkatt, his voice low so as not to echo in the ramshackle chamber.

Volt shook his head. Vance at first thought he was refusing to answer, but Volt looked up, tears welling in his deep-set eyes. 'I only did as they said to aid the Drazi. You understand that, don't you?'

Bakkatt nodded, his scarred face managing somehow to look sympathetic. 'Nobody blames you, Musan. I know of the Ky'Thain's masters. They have sweet tongues and whisper a thousand promises, but in the end they just use you to further their own ends. Now, who are the Ky'Thain? I need to know as much about them as you can tell me.'

'They came to me several weeks ago. They said they were servants of a great master who would soon be unleashed upon the galaxy. They showed me such things – you have no idea.' As he spoke, Volt clawed at Bakkatt's robes. The Ranger made no attempt to stop him, patting the old Drazi on the back as he wept.

'Believe me, my friend. We know what horrors you have seen. We also know the "masters" the Ky'Thain speak of. We have come to stop them.'

'You can stop them? You have seen their power? There were two of you, plus two of my guards, and still you could not defeat it. And it is not alone. Soon it will return, bringing more of its kind with it.'

'You are safe here,' said Bakkatt, his voice surprisingly soothing. 'This place is secret, known only to a few of my order.'

'They will find us. I have refused them, turned my back on them. Now they will come to finish me.'

'Fear not. I can send a message to my brethren, and more warriors will come to our aid. All I require is that you tell me all you know of the Ky'Thain. Where are they from, and what are their weaknesses? Tell me, Musan, and I can get you far from here where nobody will find you.'

'You are only a Minbari. How will you protect me?' Volt had managed to stifle his tears, suddenly growing serious. 'What were you doing in my chamber to start with? Are the Minbari spying on us, on the Thath Vorak? How can I trust you? Maybe the Ky'Thain were right, and their masters are not the enemy of the Drazi. It is you and the humans.' Volt glanced quickly at Vance. 'You are in league together. Maybe it is you who want to conquer the galaxy.'

Bakkatt moved like a coiled serpent, so fast it made Vance jump. He grasped Volt's head and placed his fingers under the Drazi's eyes. Moving his own head close to Volt's, he pulled the Drazi's lids down.

'What was in that decanter, Volt?' he asked. 'It has obviously fogged your thinking. The Ky'Thain tried to kill you, and we saved your life. Tell us what you know or we will leave you on this rock to die at their hands.'

Volt gripped the sides of the rickety chair, staring at Bakkatt. 'Alright,' he whispered. 'Just don't leave me here.'

A sudden feeling of sorrow for the old Drazi overwhelmed Vance. He was a big individual, even for his race. Before the flab had set in, he must have borne considerable physical power. His claim about having slain a mighty vorath was probably true. Even if it wasn't, no Drazi could rise to Volt's level of power and influence without having been a formidable warrior, even in the merchant's guild. Seeing such a character reduced to a simpering coward was hard to watch.

'I know I was their tool, but I was a willing tool. They offered power but not what you think. Personal power means nothing to me. What they offered was far more valuable. Through their masters, the Drazi would become one of the most powerful empires in the galaxy. We would no longer be among the League of Non-Aligned Worlds, no longer grouped with the rest of the minor powers. We would be able to stand beside the Centauri and the Minbari, equals… no, betters!' Volt's rant had grown steadily more shrill, but Bakkatt allowed him to continue despite the danger of being heard. Now Volt made a visible effort to calm himself.

'I was supposed to influence the Thath Vorak. Subtle persuasion here, stern guidance there. Enough to bring people to my side but not enough to make them think I was power-mongering. It wasn't until the bodies began to pile up that I realised I was in too deep. I thought I could control the Ky'Thain – they seemed primitive and unintelligent – but they are nothing of the sort, and their masters even less so.'

'Do you know who their masters might be?' asked Bakkatt. He once more affected a sympathetic tone.

'I never saw them. I asked and they did indeed promise, but a meeting never happened.'

'And what of Keldulan?'

Volt looked confused, but then an expression of understanding crossed his face. 'You mean the other Minbari? I knew he must have had something to do with you. After all, how many Minbari do you ever see in Torvag?' He paused when he realised the unpleasantness of what he would have to say next, continuing in a much more subdued voice. 'I never meant anything to happen to him. He would not heed my warnings, and that gutter slurper Rottik did nothing but encourage him. Everywhere I turned, there he was. I even sent some of my employees to discourage him, but they said they could not locate him. Now I know why.'

The Drazi glanced from one Ranger to another, as though unsure of how to proceed. Vance simply stared back, trying his best to look neutral, neither threatening nor sympathetic. 'I did not ask for his death,' continued Volt, 'if that is what you want to know. I guess you are not merely assassins; otherwise I would be dead already, right?' Volt smiled nervously. The Rangers merely stared back blankly. 'He got too close, and he was always there. When the Ky'Thain questioned me about him, I had no answers. One day he stopped shadowing me, and I can only assume it was because of them. But I didn't ask, and they didn't tell me. I am sorry for the loss of your friend, I truly am, but you must believe I had nothing to do with his death.'

A silence filled the room. Volt seemed to be waiting for reassurance, but when no one spoke, the squirming Drazi panicked. 'You have to get me off Zhabar. I have told you all I know. You have to believe that. You promised!'

'Keep your voice down,' said Bakkatt. He looked at Vance. 'There should be communications equipment hidden beneath the boiler in the corner. Use a code key and send a message in the Drazi cipher. We require more of our brothers. The Ky'Thain will take more than the four of us to bring down.'

'What are you talking about?' said Volt as Vance moved over to the boiler. 'We have to get off the planet. You cannot hope to take on the Ky'Thain and live, even with reinforcements.'

Vance slid his hand beneath the boiler and found the telltale lever that would reveal the hidden cache. The Anla'shok commonly left these at safe houses throughout the galaxy, and those who knew where to find them could easily retrieve them. As his fist closed around the lever, Vance suddenly froze. The position of the lever, the way it felt in his hand and the fact that he knew Keldulan had been discovered and murdered made Vance hesitate. Gingerly, he released the lever and bent to look beneath the boiler. A thin wire entwined the lever's base. Vance trailed it from under the boiler to a pipe at the back.

'Vance?' said Bakkatt.

'I think you should take a look at this,' he replied, backing away.

Bakkatt quickly examined the booby trap. No sooner had he knelt to glance beneath the boiler than he was back on his feet again, denn'bok in hand. 'We need to get out of here, now!' he barked, grabbing Volt and pulling him to his feet.

'Is it going to blow?' asked Vance, reaching for his own weapon.

'Worse than that–' Bakkatt was suddenly cut short as the roof of the safe house collapsed. Two spindly figures rappelled down on gossamer threads. Vance recognised them instantly, and a reflexive action brought the pistol into his hand. He was loosing shells before the Ky'Thain reached the ground. The automatic clip unleashed its payload, striking both of the intruders. The first seemed not to notice the stream of fire, as the pistol rounds bounced harmlessly off its carapace. The second reeled backward as it landed, one round striking its wedge-shaped head. Although the round did some damage, blood spraying from the

wound, the creature dove straight into the fray to back up its comrade.

Bakkatt rushed forward to take on the first creature. A loud clashing sound erupted from his fighting pike as he struck against the organic spikes that protruded from the Ky'Thain's armour.

As soon as the Ky'Thain landed, Vance holstered the autopistol and sprinted forward. He glanced to his right as Merreck also rushed toward them. The Minbari was lucky. Just as he left his post, the double doors imploded and another Ky'Thain warrior burst through. Merreck turned and faced this new warrior, leaving the others to battle their own enemies.

Vance ran at the wounded Ky'Thain as Bakkatt took on his adversary in a twisting, violent dance. All he could hear were Musan Volt's cries for mercy as the Drazi tried to find somewhere to cower. As Vance met his enemy, all doubt left his mind. He previously faced the Ky'Thain with the help of Bakkatt, but he was not phased by the fact he now faced this foe alone. He knew that doubt would only lead to his defeat, and he would not allow himself to be easy prey.

Rivulets of blood ran down the creatures face as it lurched forward, vicious spikes protruding from its wrists. Its left eye was filled with blood, and Vance assumed it was blind on that side. He parried its frenzied attacks and swiftly moved around to flank it. The creature swept its long arms wildly, but Vance easily ducked the predictable blows, countering with a measured stab at the creature's throat. The denn'bok would never damage the creature's carapace if the autopistol rounds bounced off them harmlessly. Vance knew he must find weak spots.

The strike hit home, and Vance felt the satisfaction of spongy flesh giving way beneath the strength of his blow. A strangled cry left the Ky'Thain's throat, and it retreated slightly, fury twisting its bloody face. On any other creature such a blow to the throat would have crushed the windpipe, leading to suffocation, but the Ky'Thain was still standing. It stared at Vance, quivering in fury. Then its throat began to inflate, swelling up to twice its normal size as though it were about to burst. Two blow holes opened on the sides of its neck and Vance heard a sudden intake of air. These Ky'Thain seemed to be able to adapt to anything.

With a look of hatred, the Ky'Thain ran forward once more, its spindly arms swinging in a wild attack. Vance managed to parry one of the organic spikes, but the creature was strong. It locked his denn'bok down, and Vance could only watch as the second arm spike shot toward him. Jerklenn's denn'bok deflected the blow as she rushed to aid him, and the Ky'Thain reeled back under the strength of her counterattacks. Vance noted this was the second time she had saved him in such a way. If they got back to Tuzanor in one piece, he would spend every waking hour trying to repay her.

He took a second's repose to survey the battle scene. The other Rangers, much more skilled in the use of the fighting pike, were managing to hold their own against the Ky'Thain, but it seemed like a battle of attrition. Vance doubted the Minbari would have more stamina than their bestial opponents, and it was only a matter of time before they became exhausted. He drew the autopistol once more and shouted to his comrades using the cant of the Anla'shok.

Instantly the other Rangers broke off from their enemies, Bakkatt grabbing Musan Volt as he did so. Each dived to the ground as the Ky'Thain turned their attention to Vance, the only opponent still standing. Vance's shot was on target, aided by the autopistol's automatic burst of fire. He riddled the base of the boiler, not waiting to see if his shot was accurate or not. As he threw himself to the ground, he heard the booby trap's trigger flip, followed by a loud hiss and then a muffled explosion.

A wave of heat washed over Vance, and his ears were assailed by the high-pitched squealing of the Ky'Thain. When the heat subsided, he raised his head. Vance smelled burning and saw his cloak was smouldering. He leapt to his feet, flinging the cloak to the floor. The other Rangers were on their feet too, and Bakkatt gave Vance a nod of appreciation.

'We need to find a communications rig,' said Bakkatt. 'This planet has to be scoured for more of these things.' He motioned to the ground and the ash-covered outlines of the Ky'Thain. 'I think the Anla'shok will also have more questions for our friend here.'

Musan Volt stood slump-shouldered next to Bakkatt. He opened his mouth to respond but never got the chance. Before anyone could react, one of the Ky'Thain bodies leapt up in a flurry of ash, its wrist spike piercing Musan Volt's neck. Bakkatt reacted as quickly as he could, but the creature bounded away from his attack. Volt's lifeless cadaver fell to the ground in a cloud of cinders. The other two Ky'Thain rose from the ash, their bodies blackened, but otherwise unharmed. Merreck took a step forward, but Bakkatt raised a hand to halt him.

'Get to the ship. Get off planet,' he said, without taking his eyes from the crouching Ky'Thain. Two figures appeared at the double doors, more Ky'Thain warriors attracted by the exploding booby trap.

'Do not wait for me,' said Bakkatt. 'Take the stairs, now!'

'No,' said Merreck, stepping forward.

'We live for the One, we die for the One. Today, make sure you all live.' With that Bakkatt leapt forward. Vance had never seen anyone attack with such ferocity. He doubted even Durhan could have matched him.

Merreck took another step forward, ready to attack. Jerklenn grabbed his arm. 'We need to report what has happened here. Otherwise our mission will be a failure,' she said.

Vance pulled the autopistol once more, spraying a wide arc at two approaching Ky'Thain.

'Let's go. I don't have much more ammo,' he shouted. With that, Jerklenn pulled Merreck away and the two of them scaled the short flight of stairs, ran through the door and burst into the street. As Vance followed, he fired two more bursts to keep the Ky'Thain at bay. When he reached the doorway, he saw Bakkatt still fighting like a whirlwind, his denn'bok striking impossibly fast blows at his feral enemies, surrounded on all sides by the creatures that seemed hell bent on defeating him. Although his body was lacerated from a score of wounds, he did not look like he would slow. Unable to watch any more, Vance followed Merreck and Jerklenn.

The two Rangers ran just ahead down the narrow alleyway. Vance had only covered a few short metres when he heard the sounds of pursuit. Before he turned the corner, he allowed himself a quick glance over one shoulder. Two Ky'Thain followed, gripping each side of the street as they pulled themselves along like huge, swift insects.

Vance pointed the autopistol and emptied the last few rounds from the clip. The Ky'Thain paused for cover, and Vance sprinted on, dropping the now-useless weapon. Ahead the other Rangers paused, allowing him to catch up. 'Keep moving,' screamed Vance, determined that at least one of them should escape.

'This way,' shouted Jerklenn, urging Vance on as she and Merreck fled once more. Vance followed, allowing himself the occasional glance backward. Despite the Ky'Thain's agility, they did not seem to be superhuman sprinters. They were matching the Rangers' pace though, and no matter how many back alleys they navigated, their pursuers were always there. As Vance turned yet another corner in the maze of streets, he saw Merreck and Jerklenn waiting at the top of a flight of stairs that led into a wide tunnel. A sign pointed down into the passage, but with only rudimentary Drazi, Vance could not decipher it. Nevertheless he ran headlong down the tunnel alongside the other Rangers.

The tunnel was lit with green strobes, and it did not take long for Vance to realise they were heading towards Torvag's underground transit system. Behind him the sound of the approaching Ky'Thain still echoed, but now there was hope of escape.

A few Drazi travellers occupied the subway, and they seemed disinterested in the pursuit. At least the Ky'Thain did not seem to be attacking any innocents. Neither did they seem concerned with keeping themselves concealed from the general populace, so intent were they on their prey.

When they made it to the platform, no train appeared. Two black holes stood at each end of the platform, the track running between them like an ancient steel bridge. The only thing coming down either tunnel was a gentle, stale breeze that wafted trash and detritus across the station floor.

The three Rangers turned to face the tunnel they had just emerged from. Each had a denn'bok in hand. Their ash-covered clothes hung heavy on their bodies and determination marked their faces. Vance forced a smile as he regarded his comrades. Merreck glanced back at him and, through the grime on his face, forced a smile too. 'We live for the One, we die for the One,' said Vance. The two Minbari repeated the phrase as the Ky'Thain burst from the tunnel.

A scruffy Drazi who had been lying beside the tunnel siphoning gut-rot liquor from a dusty bottle, leapt into the air in shock as the creatures appeared. The Rangers ran forward to meet their enemy while the Drazi sprinted off down one of the station's gaping tunnels.

Vance took the Ky'Thain on the right. Jerklenn took the one on the left. Merreck, twisting his denn'bok in all directions, tried to aid his fellow Rangers and keep both of the creatures busy. Without Merreck's help Vance realised he would have lasted only a few seconds. His enemy seemed incensed, its frenzied attacks flashing in from every angle.

Within seconds the Ky'Thain had the measure of the Rangers. They leapt apart, trying to split up their foes. Merreck immediately picked the closest creature and raced toward it. 'No!' screamed Vance. 'They are trying to break up our defence. Don't get drawn in.'Merreck immediately stopped his attack, seeing the sense in Vance's advice, and together the three Rangers backed away from the circling creatures.

The Ky'Thain moved to stand at the both flanks of the grouped Rangers. Then they rushed in again. Despite his best efforts, Vance could not avoid the flashing spikes and took a slash across the top of his thigh. If he had he not seen the attack coming and seen the blood that followed, he would not have noticed the wound was there, so wickedly sharp were the weapons of the Ky'Thain. His skin parted like a gaping mouth and a flood of crimson poured forth. The wound was too fresh to be painful, but he knew the sting would come soon. For now, Vance would ride his adrenalin rush until he got a chance to catch his breath – if that chance ever came.

As they fought, Vance suddenly heard an echoing scream. In his peripheral vision he saw something speeding from one of the tunnels. Just as he registered that it was far too small to be a train, he realised it was the Drazi drunk who had fled earlier. The Drazi scrambled to the platform in a panic as Vance jumped from it, narrowly avoiding the Ky'Thain's swinging arm. Vance cleared the track in two bounds, silently praying that the subway train would be moving at speed. He leapt onto the other side of the platform and turned, parrying another attack from the pursuing creature and knocking it back onto the track.

A roaring sound filled the station as the train blasted in, consuming the flailing figure of the Ky'Thain. In a split-second, the high-speed train had shuddered to a stop, its doors flipping open. Vance raced through the open doors to the other side of the platform to join the fray with the remaining Ky'Thain. Seeing that it now had three opponents, the

creature backed away, its baleful eyes flicking from one Ranger to the next.

A strangled buzzing sounded from the train, and the Rangers quickly backed onto it, the doors sweeping shut between them and the creature. As the train shot from the station, the Ky'Thain continued to watch them, fury drawn across its animal features.

For several seconds the Rangers stood, breathing heavily and bleeding profusely from their numerous wounds. 'Tickets,' came a gruff voice from one end of the carriage.

Vance looked towards the voice and nearly burst into laughter. A venerable-looking Drazi wearing the most ridiculous conductor's uniform he had ever seen stood before him. The smile soon dropped from his lips as he realised that none of them had any currency.

BIG TROUBLE IN TORVAG

They stayed on the subway train for two stops, hoping it would take them somewhere near the spaceport. Jerklenn spent that time calming the Drazi conductor and persuading him they had no money. Eventually he trundled off down the train, grumbling about off-worlders.

The Rangers patched up their wounds before the train stopped. Then, sticking close to one another and scanning every angle for their pursuers, they stepped off the train. Curious eyes fell on them as they disembarked. This area of the subway was far busier than the previous platform, and their dishevelled and bloody state drew more than a few stares.

As they passed through a tunnel and out to the street, Vance scanned the horizon and realised they were somewhere in the south of the city, still at least two or three kilometres from their ship. 'We need some transport,' he said, starting to feel the numbness wearing off around his lacerated leg. 'If the Ky'Thain are as intelligent as they seem, they'll realise where we are going and be on their way to head us off.'

'I wouldn't worry about that,' said Jerklenn.

'Why not?'

'Don't look, but one of them is trailing us.' Vance felt every muscle tighten, and the hairs on the nape of his neck stood to attention. 'It must have followed us on the underground train.'

'OK, does anyone have a plan?' asked Vance.

'We could turn and fight,' replied Merreck. 'It would be no match for three of us.'

'No,' said Jerklenn. 'I think that is what the creature wants. It has probably contacted the rest of its kin by now, and they will be on their way here. If we try to fight the creature, we only waste valuable time while the rest of the Ky'Thain arrive.'

'Only one option then,' said Vance. 'We run for it.'

The Rangers turned another corner in the labyrinthine streets, and as soon as they were out of sight of the Ky'Thain, they bolted. No time for stealth now. Where before they had stepped softly, passing the Drazi like spectres, now they sprinted headlong through the surprised civilians. They were met by angry jeers and calls of "come back and fight", but the Rangers were deaf to the cries.

Vance allowed himself a quick glance over his shoulder, and the Ky'Thain was nowhere to be seen. 'I think we've lost him,' he said, slowing the pace a little. The other Rangers followed suit, and all three of them sucked air into their lungs.

A sudden commotion from down the street indicated they had not lost the Ky'Thain after all. Cries of alarm rang out as the Drazi spotted the spindly creature rushing after its prey. 'Get back to the ship,' said Vance, brandishing his denn'bok. 'I have an idea.'

'But we cannot allow ourselves to be split up,' said Jerklenn.

'Trust me,' Vance replied with a wink. 'Get to the ship and don't wait for me. I'll head this one off, and hopefully it will lead the others away from you. It's the only way.' His last words drowned out Jerklenn's attempts at protest. Vance nodded to Merreck who, with a nod back, grabbed Jerklenn's arm and pulled her along. Reluctantly she and Merreck began their flight once more.

Vance turned to face the charging Ky'Thain. As it saw him simply standing in the middle of the street, it slowed, eyeing him suspiciously. Vance stared back, hoping that Merreck and Jerklenn could put as much distance between them and the Ky'Thain as possible.

Skittishly, the Ky'Thain glanced around, wondering if this was some king of trap. It stepped forward, but Vance did not move, trying to stare down the creature as best he could. Gradually it advanced, flicking the spikes from its wrist carapace.

Vance spun his denn'bok in a tight flurry: one of the katas used by the Anla'shok to teach basic proficiency with the weapon. The simple move was designed to look impressive to the untrained eye. The Ky'Thain stopped in its tracks, seemingly mesmerised by the weapon's blinding speed.

It had now been long enough, Vance thought. Jerklenn and Merreck must have covered quite some distance by now. With a final flurry, Vance adopted a basic fighting stance. The Ky'Thain moved backward and out of range of Vance's weapon. As it did so, Vance turned and sprinted down an alley, opposite the one his fellow Rangers had escaped along. Just as he hoped, the Ky'Thain followed close behind.

He did not have to sprint for long before he faced another obstacle. Several Drazi marched quickly down the street in his direction. When they saw him they gesticulated in his direction, moving toward him with none-too-pleased

looks adorning their wrinkled faces. This was working better than he'd hoped. His delaying tactics had left enough time for the Drazi militia to appear. He imagined after the trail of destruction they had left across Torvag, they would want a stern word with him. As he stopped in the middle of the street, he glanced back. The Ky'Thain had disappeared as soon as it had heard the approaching militia.

Vance lifted his arms. One of the militia spoke to him quickly in Drazi, but Vance could not catch his meaning. Anyway, it was probably best if he played the ignorant foreigner rather than try to answer any probing questions. 'You come with us,' said another of the Drazi, who, by the look of his uniform, was some kind of officer. They grasped Vance from both sides and searched his pockets quickly. It pained him to give up the denn'bok, but he promised himself he would have it back before he bid the Drazi goodbye. He allowed them to march him through the streets to the headquarters of the militia. All the while he was conscious that the Ky'Thain must be watching him, waiting for the rest of its brethren to arrive.

The militia building was small, containing a series of offices and cells. When the time was right it would be difficult, but not impossible, to escape. For now, at least, he was safe. It was doubtful even the Ky'Thain could break in unseen.

He would allow the Drazi to question him for as long as it took to work out where their communication centre was. As soon as he had sent a message for assistance, he would take his leave.

The Drazi frogmarched him to a small, secure room. Since the room didn't appear to be a cell, Vance assumed he was not being held for any serious crimes. Yet. That meant they most likely had not found Musan Volt and Bakkatt, or what was left of them. Vance sat quietly, surveying his surroundings. As soon as they brought him in, he spotted the security camera, high up in one corner of the room. He positioned himself so that his face was not visible. He would undoubtedly be picked up on cameras in other parts of the building, but there was no need to advertise his identity.

The lock on the door was a simple keypad sequence. Vance had already worked out the code from one of the Drazi's finger movements. Even if the same combination did not open the room from the inside, he could override it manually in seconds. He wasn't cuffed either, which would make his escape that much easier.

After a few minutes, the door swung open and two Drazi walked in. One was squat, the other tall and powerful. Vance almost smiled at the antiquated intimidation routine. "Good cop, bad cop" had become an outmoded form of interrogation on Earth a century ago. Obviously nobody had told the Drazi.

The squat militiaman sat in a chair opposite Vance. 'Name?' he said, staring deep into Vance's eyes. Vance decided to stall and gave no reply. 'Ok. Let me explain the trouble you're in. Brawling in the streets. I assume that was you in the marketplace yesterday?' Vance almost laughed at the insinuation that brawling in the street was against Drazi law. 'Importing alien technology,' he said as he produced Vance's denn'bok. Although it looked like a harmless metal tube, the Drazi were obviously bent on trumping up any charges they could. 'And non-payment of transportation fare!' Vance was unable to stop a smile spreading across his face. 'You think that's funny! There's also the question of your association with unregistered alien life forms on Drazi soil.'

'That creature is dangerous,' said Vance, feigning terror. The Drazi was suddenly interested, leaning forward to hear Vance speak. 'It knows where I am. It will gather others of its kind. You will not be able to stop them.'

'Don't worry. We are quite safe here, believe me.' The Drazi turned to smile at his silent colleague, who smirked back. Vance remembered Bakkatt saying something similar to Volt at the safe house, and a pang of regret crept into his mind. He forced himself to concentrate.

'You need to call for reinforcements. You need to get off-world help. Other League planets and the Earth Alliance must be notified. Do you have the means to communicate with them from here?'

'I told you we are quite safe.' The Drazi held up his hand, obviously worried about Vance's increasingly erratic state. 'We have everything we need. We have an interstellar comms rig, so help is just a call away. But tell me more about these creatures.'

'Will we be safe on the first floor when you use the comms rig?' asked Vance conversationally. His change in tone was intended to throw the Drazi and lower his guard. Luckily it worked.

'No, it's on the third,' he replied with a frown.

'Thanks,' said Vance, his hand shooting forward and snatching the denn'bok from the Drazi's grip. The taller Drazi reacted, reaching to his holster. Vance smashed him to the ground before his hand could touch the butt of his weapon. As the squat Drazi reached for his own gun, Vance slammed the denn'bok into his forearm, cracking the radius and ulna. Before the Drazi could cry out, Vance's denn'bok was at his throat, pressing him to the ground.

'How many militia in the building,' said Vance.

'Ten,' croaked the Drazi through gritted teeth.

'Thanks again,' said Vance, stunning the Drazi with a blow the side of his head.

Vance punched the combination to the door into the security keypad, and it flipped open. He glanced into the corridor and saw no one there. Before he left the room, he took the gun belt from the first Drazi. An autopistol had been somewhat useful before, so hopefully it would be again.

He walked carefully to the end of the corridor. No good would come from running, since he would be spotted sooner or later anyway, and running would only draw attention. The elevator on the right held no sign of any militia. Vance pressed the "up" button and wondered if anyone was actually manning the security cameras when the internal alarm sounded. The door to the elevator opened, and Vance encountered two startled Drazi. They both reached for their weapons, and Vance bolted forward. The confines of the elevator were too small to use his denn'bok, so fists and feet would have to do. Two swift blows downed the first Drazi before he could reach his gun. Vance already had his own weapon pulled and pointed at the second Drazi's head before he could grab his own.

With the barrel of an autopistol at his head, the militiaman froze. 'Floor three, please,' said Vance. The Drazi stretched out and pressed the button on the wall, not daring to move his head from the autopistol. As the elevator door closed, Vance rapped the gun butt across the Drazi's head. The thick skull absorbed most of the blow, causing the Drazi to stagger but not fall down. Another strike sent him to the ground.

Vance realised he couldn't use the autopistol on any of the Drazi, even just to wound them. The autopistol was a burst fire weapon, shooting several rounds with every pull of the trigger. Even if he tried to shoot a target in the arm, the danger of a stray round hitting a vital organ, or a bystander, was too great.

With that in mind, Vance stepped from the elevator onto the third floor, gun held ready to threaten anyone waiting for him. He was relieved to find nobody there. Again he walked along the corridor, watching for any signs of movement. The chance of him hearing anyone approaching were nil with the sound of the internal alarm singing its monotonous tone.

As he marched down the corridor, a door to his right opened. Vance stopped, allowing the militiaman to walk out and see him holding the autopistol. Without a word, the Drazi raised his hands. 'Take me to the comms room,' ordered Vance, raising his voice above the alarm. With a nod the Drazi turned, keeping his hands in the air and marching toward the end of the corridor. He opened a door on the left and flicked the light switch. A blow to the back of the Drazi's neck put him down. Vance wondered if the autopistol would still fire straight after pummelling so many hard Drazi skulls.

The interstellar comms unit was a basic design, but Vance was sure he could find a relevant frequency on it. Within seconds he had found the correct coordinates and, using the Drazi cipher, sent an encrypted message: a simple call for help, straight and to the point. Hopefully nearby Rangers would hear it.

When the message was sent, he inhaled deeply to clear his mind and focus on the next step in his escape. A movement out of the room's single, barred window caught his eye, and he saw the unmistakeable crouching silhouette of a Ky'Thain on a rooftop across from the building.

All he had to do now was escape, but it looked like that would be far more difficult than getting to the comms system had been. Gripping the pistol, he moved back into the hall. Another two Drazi sped toward him, guns in hand. Vance sprayed a burst above their heads, and the militiamen ducked into an adjacent room. Vance had to get to the elevator and out of the building as soon as possible. He pointed the autopistol straight in front of him and pulled the trigger, forcing the Drazi to seek cover as he sprinted down the corridor. When he passed their position, he rolled forward as bullets ricocheted overhead. As he fell into the elevator he turned, loosing another burst from the weapon, then punched the button for the basement.

The two Drazi he had previously knocked unconscious were still lying on the floor of the elevator. Vance quickly swapped his depleted magazine for one of the militiamen's and noticed something else attached to his belt: a low impact frag grenade. This was an over the top weapon for a militiaman, but knowing what he did about the Drazi, it came as no surprise. Vance unclipped the grenade and attached it to his own belt just as the elevator hit the basement. Hopefully there would be a tunnel out of here that could hide him from the watchful eyes of his enemy outside.

The door opened and Vance could see the basement was the militia's vehicle pound. A quick survey of the basement's layout revealed no tunnels. He quickly evaluated the array of vehicles, assessing what might be useful. An armoured car rested closest to him, although what use it would be in Torvag's narrow streets Vance did not know. Around it were various automobiles, but Vance's eyes came to rest on something much more useful: a skimmer, mainly used for desert travel, but just what he needed under the circumstances. It was probably one of the fastest vehicles in Torvag.

The ignition was a simple button, so he didn't have to waste time hotwiring it. Vance gunned the engine and the skimmer came to life, gliding across the floor of the basement and up the ramp to the surface. By the time he arrived at street level, Vance understood the controls, which were much the same as those of dust bikes he'd ridden back on Earth.

Vance had to push his nostalgic thoughts to the back of his mind as he saw movement above. The Ky'Thain were on the move. Vance turned several corners, hoping to leave the creatures behind, but they followed via the rooftops, saving valuable seconds by not having to navigate Torvag's winding streets.

When Vance grew accustomed to the skimmer's controls, he pulled out the autopistol, waiting for one of the Ky'Thain to show itself. So intent was he on spotting an aerial attack, he didn't see the danger straight ahead. One of the creatures, anticipating his route to the spaceport,

crouched low in the street in front of him. Vance saw it at the last second and manoeuvred the skimmer just in time. The Ky'Thain's wrist weapon took a chunk out of the skimmer's rear exhaust, but the vehicle was otherwise undamaged.

With the creature's screeching alien curses fading behind him, Vance gunned the skimmer and sped away. Smoke sputtered from the damaged exhaust, but the vehicle maintained its speed. He continued through the streets, now keeping an eye on the road ahead, as well as the rooftops above. Every step of the way the Ky'Thain shadowed him, flitting from building to building as he wound his way toward the spaceport.

For several minutes he seemed to be out of danger. The spaceport loomed ahead, the sight of a ship taking off, its thrusters raging like thunder, spurred Vance onward. Hopefully the security would be as lax for leaving Zhabar as it had been on arrival.

Vance soon saw the hangar where their freighter was housed, and no security controls or personnel blocked his progress. Keeping the skimmer steady, Vance headed straight for the hangar, passing between too low outhouses. As he did so, a dread shadow fell over him. Vance ducked instinctively, feeling the displacement of air that told him he had narrowly avoided death. The Ky'Thain was on top of him immediately, the extra weight dipping the front end of the skimmer and driving it into the ground

An ear-piercing screech ripped through the air as the front end of the skimmer scraped against the hard earth, buckling the metal chassis and throwing Vance and the Ky'Thain forward. He rolled and regained his feet at the same time as the nimble creature. It advanced immediately, its face a bloody mess after hitting the ground. Vance's own shoulder hurt like hell, probably dislocated. With his good arm Vance drew the autopistol and unleashed a burst whilst moving away toward the hangar. His wounded leg began to throb, fresh blood trickling from the reopened wound.

The burst from the autopistol repelled the Ky'Thain, which covered its vulnerable head from the spray of rounds. As soon as Vance took his finger off the trigger it advanced once more, striding forward on its spidery legs. Vance kept firing, limping toward the hangar, but the Ky'Thain gained ground. Another twenty yards remained between Vance and the hanger when an ominous click told him the autopistol's magazine was empty. He discarded the gun and pulled his denn'bok as the Ky'Thain surged toward him.

Vance managed to bat away the Ky'Thain's first three blows. The fourth, an elbow strike that snaked out unseen, hit him square in the face. Vance was propelled backward, the strength of the blow belying the creature's spindly body. Vance managed to keep hold of his denn'bok, but the strike had driven him onto his back. Before he could even attempt to stand the Ky'Thain was on him. It gripped the denn'bok with one clawed hand, pressing it down against Vance's body. Slowly, and with a beastly grin spreading across its face, it raised one arm, ready to punch its wrist spike through Vance's head.

With a tremendous blow the creature was batted aside, leaving Vance free to gain his feet. Merreck stood there, defiantly facing the Ky'Thain, which looked toward each of the Rangers in turn, its face contorting in rage. Merreck moved in, allowing the creature no time to gain its composure. His denn'bok swung in a devastating combination as Vance limped forward, trying his best to help. If he could distract the Ky'Thain, Merreck might gain the edge needed to defeat the creature.

As the Rangers attacked, the Ky'Thain became a blur, deflecting the blows raining in on it from both sides. Vance swept in with a low blow that was neither powerful nor intended to do much damage. At the same time Merreck spun in with a head blow. The Ky'Thain easily stepped over Vance's attack whilst ducking Merreck's. The ease with which it avoided Vance's attack left him vulnerable, and the Ky'Thain whipped its foot up, catching Vance squarely on the jaw. Momentarily dazed, he fell back to the ground. Merreck stubbornly continued his attack, but the Ky'Thain was too fast, blocking every strike and managing to counter. Blood was pouring from several wounds on Merreck's arms and chest, whereas the Ky'Thain seemed little affected by the denn'bok blows that managed to breach its defence.

As Vance tried to get to his feet once more, the Ky'Thain found the measure of Merreck. Blocking blows from both ends of Merreck's weapon, it stepped forward, smashing its foot onto Merreck's knee. His leg buckled, and as he fell the creature's head butted forward, knocking him to the ground.

Using his last reserves of strength, Vance found his feet. 'Hey!' he shouted at the creature, desperate to distract it from Merreck's prone figure. The Ky'Thain spun round, forgetting about the stunned Minbari and approaching Vance, hatred burning in its eyes. Vance reached round and unhooked the grenade from his belt, holding it behind his back and out of sight. As he pressed the timer button the Ky'Thain reached out and grasped his throat. It pulled him close, so close Vance could feel the creature's malodorous breath on his face. He stared deep into its eyes and felt its hatred. With pain burning in his shoulder, Vance grasped the creature's head and pushed close, sinking his teeth into its wounded face. The Ky'Thain's blood seeped into his mouth, and it gave off a high-pitched wail. At the same time, Vance jammed the grenade beneath the carapace on its chest.

Still screaming, the Ky'Thain thrust its arm out, throwing Vance several feet away. It grasped its face, staring at Vance with unrestrained hate. The creature now obviously desired his death more than anything. Before it could rush forward it stopped, feeling something strange underneath the armour plating on its chest. It reached a panicked claw

up, and Vance rolled over, burying his face in his hands. The explosion was not as loud as Vance expected. The gory mess he saw when he opened his eyes, however, was precisely what he had hoped for. Pieces of scaly flesh and shards of armoured shell lay all around for a hundred metres.

Merreck was already on his feet, limping toward Vance. The Minbari helped him up, and silently they stumbled toward the hangar. A glance back confirmed Vance's worst fears. More Ky'Thain were approaching in the distance like giant insects in search of prey. When they reached the freighter, its engines were already running, the roof of the hangar opened. The two wounded Rangers staggered onto the ship and closed the main doors. Jerklenn was already initiating takeoff as they strapped themselves in.

Vance could see the Ky'Thain rushing forward in a suicidal rage as the main thrusters burst to life, spreading molten fuel throughout the hangar and burning the evil creatures as they approached. A few seconds more and they were in the air.

As he was pressed back into his seat, the pain of Vance's injuries started to register. The laceration in his thigh, the numbing pain of his shoulder, and his throbbing face all seemed to grow worse as the roar of the freighter's engines intensified. It lasted for only a few short, painful seconds, for once they broke Zhabar's atmosphere, and the pull of the planet's gravity lessened, so did the pain.

Vance glanced across at Merreck, who was a filthy mess, bleeding from several wounds, but his face was a stone mask. Vance felt compelled to speak and thank Merreck for saving his life. Before Vance could utter a word, however, he was interrupted by the pealing sound of a console alarm.

'We are being followed,' said Jerklenn, her voice calm and reposed.

Vance quickly unbuckled his belt restraint and moved forward as fast as his broken body would allow. The ship's proximity sensor showed three craft of fighter class approaching fast. 'Merreck, take weapons. Jerklenn, get us out of here,' said Vance.

Without argument, Merreck moved to the weapons console. Vance would later realise the Minbari had obeyed his order without question, despite the fact that they were of equal rank.

Vance checked the ship's fusion power point. The generator showed eighty percent power. Hopefully the fighters would have limited attack capability, at least little enough so Merreck could take them out before they crippled the ship. 'What's our location? Other than Zhabar do we have any options for cover?' Vance asked.

'Negative,' answered Jerklenn. 'Zhabar's moon is the nearest satellite to our current position, but we cannot reach it before we are engaged. It will take us one hour to reach the nearest jumpgate.'

'Options are thinning as we speak,' said Vance quietly, watching the three flashing icons moving closer to the freighter on the proximity sensor. 'What condition are our weapons in?'

'One hundred percent,' replied Merreck. 'But these approaching ships are fast and have an unclassified designation.'

Manipulating the console, Vance confirmed the ship's sensors could not identify the fighters. 'We have to assume they're Ky'Thain,' said Vance. 'And that means we have to assume the worst as far as their capabilities are concerned. We could be in trouble. Unfortunately we have nowhere to hide.'

'We live for the One,' said Merreck.

'We die for the One,' Vance finished, smiling despite the danger of the situation. 'OK, Jerklenn, full thrusters, let's make it look like we're making a run for it. When they're within weapons range, we'll turn on them and open up with everything we have.' Jerklenn expertly manipulated the freighter's controls, pushing its engines to their limit. Vance saw the pursuing fighters likewise increase their speed, still gaining on their ship. 'As soon as they're in range, Merreck.' Vance did not take his eyes off the ship's sensor screen.

'Understood,' Merreck replied, likewise keeping his eyes fixed on his console.

As the trio of bleeping lights drew ever closer, Vance stared at them, feeling a strange glee as they approached. There was little chance they would survive this encounter, but the Ky'Thain would pay dearly.

'Now!' Vance shouted, as the first of the ships entered their weapons range. Jerklenn banked the ship as Merreck locked the freighter's electro-pulse guns on the first Ky'Thain fighter. Both vessels fired simultaneously, the Ky'Thain particle beam bouncing off the freighter's mediocre armour. In turn, the freighter's weapons cut through the front of the Ky'Thain ship, igniting its fuel ports and wrecking its life support systems. The ship flashed as its engines ignited for a fraction of a second, instantly extinguished in the vacuum of space.

When the remaining Ky'Thain fighters opened fire, the freighter's defences proved completely inadequate. The Rangers held on as the fighters' particle beams rocked the ship. Vance could see the armour reducing right before his eyes, fifty percent, twenty, ten. 'Jerklenn, relay a message on all encrypted channels. Tell the Anla'shok as much as you can. We don't have much time.'

An explosion jolted the rear of the ship as the last of the freighter's rear armour was destroyed. 'Merreck, talk to me,' said Vance.

'They have our measure,' he replied. 'Now that they know we can fight back, they are avoiding us. Their ships are too quick to lock on.'

'They're blocking us,' said Jerklenn. 'Even our encrypted channels can't get through. Nobody knows we're here.'

Another explosion rocked the ship. The klaxon sounded, signifying that life support was in danger. Something had to be done to reserve it or they would only have seconds to live. 'Cut engines. Our only chance is to play dead and draw them in. Concentrate power to life support in the cabin and re-route everything else to weapons.'

Jerklenn obeyed, her hands moving across the console as though she were manipulating some colourful musical instrument. Vance could see the fighters readying for another pass.

'We may only have one shot at this, Merreck.'

'I understand,' replied the Minbari, never taking his eyes from the display.

Vance could see the Ky'Thain fighters approaching from different angles. They would come close to the guns, but not close enough.

'Jerklenn, I need power to the port thrusters, now!' shouted Vance, as the console signalled to him the fighters had locked onto them for a final strafing run.

The small readout that signified engine power suddenly shot up halfway and Vance engaged the thrusters, banking the freighter just enough to bring the pulse-cannons in line with the approaching ships.

Merreck needed no encouragement, sending a single volley out into space and right into the path of the approaching fighters. The Ky'Thain ships had no time to manoeuvre out of the way as the pulse blast cut them in two.

Vance wanted to leap into the air and hug his comrades but he managed to resist the compulsion. For one, his Minbari brethren did not seem the type to appreciate such a gesture, and two, they certainly weren't out of danger yet.

'Sit-rep,' said Vance, looking to Jerklenn who was already checking her console.

'We have life support for two hours if I shut down all other systems. We will be a sitting duck if there is another attack.'

'Did we get a signal out?'

'Yes, but there is no way to tell if it got through.'

'We don't really have a choice then do we,' said Vance, gingerly slipping from his chair and sitting on the floor of the cockpit, his legs crossed. 'Let's assume the position.'

With that, the three meditated and waited to see which would arrive first; suffocation or their rescue.

ANLA'SHOK TULAT

The deck of the Torotha was amazing. Then again, Vance could have been standing on the deck of a Pak'ma'ra sewage ship, and it would have been a welcome relief. His elation was also enhanced somewhat by the anaesthetic he'd been given for his wounds. He hadn't been able to thank the Minbari healer enough for that.

They had only had to wait an hour before the Minbari ship had come to their rescue and somehow Vance knew it would happen. He was not fearful as the three had sat on the cramped floor of the freighter's cockpit, waiting for their air to run out. Rescue had seemed inevitable. After all they had been through, the three fledgling Anla'shok were not destined to die is such an ignominious way.

'There were four of you on this mission?' Vance turned to see the captain of the Torotha looking at him seriously. The Minbari in charge was Hadan, a tall and stern-looking Ranger. His drawn face gave the impression that he'd spent several years with the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders.

'Bakkatt didn't make it,' replied Vance, suddenly feeling the ache in his tired limbs once more. 'He gave his life to save ours.'

'That is fitting. It is how Bakkatt would have wanted his final moments. You should be proud that you served with him, for he was the best of us.' Hadan managed a smile and placed his hand on Vance's shoulder. As the Minbari returned to his duties, Vance wondered if that was what his own future held. Fighting against impossible odds and then dying to save his comrades. Six months ago, the thought might have filled him with apprehension, but now he felt a strange calmness at the prospect, as though that destiny was worth striving for.

Shaking his head, he silently thanked the Minbari healer once more, and returned to the room put aside for him and the other Rangers.

The journey back to Tuzanor was swift. Hadan was a congenial host, treating the three Rangers like the family they were. As soon as they hit orbit around Minbar the trio were guided to a shuttle bound for Tuzanor.

They broke Minbar's atmosphere with barely a tremor, and as the shuttle touched down on the academy's landing platform, Vance felt he was home. He could never have imagined he would consider this place dearer to him than Earth, but his feelings could not be misinterpreted. Earth held little for him now. He had a purpose here, a mission that could not be forsaken. As he left the ship and walked toward the high obsidian building, his head was held high.

Turval greeted the Rangers. They bowed to one another solemnly, and Turval touched the hand of each Ranger in turn. 'It pains us to hear of Bakkatt's passing. His name will go down in the halls of the hallowed. Unfortunately, before this conflict is over, his will not be the last name we engrave there. Rest for now. It is obvious you are exhausted. The Anla'shok Na will speak with you later.'

With another bow, Turval led the Rangers into the academy, where half of the new recruits were waiting. As they passed, each spoke a word of comfort or simply touched the Rangers in a conciliatory gesture. Vance noticed that William was not amongst the waiting Anla'shok. He realised his friend had probably been sent on a mission of his own. Wondering when he would see William again, he continued until the now-welcome sight of his slanted bunk greeted him.

Vance woke to Jerklenn's smiling face staring down at him. 'It is time for us to see the Anla'shok Na,' she said.

His wounds were all but healed. Vance was amazed how the Minbari healers had managed to fix his shoulder and the various cuts and bruises in almost no time. He ran his fingers through his messy hair and stood, flattening the creases in his uniform, which he hadn't thought to remove before collapsing in a heap. Merreck was waiting for them, standing to attention as usual, jaw jutting and chest suitably puffed.

Turval was also in the Anla'shok Na's office when they arrived. Sinclair forced a smile as they entered, but his strain could not be masked. His eyes were ringed dark red, and he looked more ashen than ever. Vance found it hard to believe how much Sinclair had changed, especially since he had seen him a few short days ago.

'Please sit,' said Sinclair. 'This won't take long. Hadan has already relayed most of what you reported, so we just need your take on events. Obviously we also need to make sure you're all okay.'

Sinclair proceeded to question the three Rangers. To Vance, it seemed to be a full debrief rather than an informal chat, but he was happy to repeat details of the entire event. For his part, Merreck remained silent, only filling in any details or correcting Vance's errors in memory when necessary. The Minbari seemed to be able to remember every event with photographic precision, but he allowed Vance to do most of the talking. Vance was also surprised when Merreck pointed out the specific occasions when Vance had shown bravery and initiative during the mission, playing down his own part in events.

'It appears you've all been through the mill,' said Sinclair when they had finished. 'The loss of Bakkatt is one we can barely afford right now, and I'm sorry to say things are only going to get worse before they get better.'

'We are Anla'shok,' said Jerklenn. 'It is our purpose.'

Sinclair smiled. There was a hint of sadness behind his eyes, as though he appreciated Jerklenn's words but wished she had not said them.

'What about the Drazi?' asked Vance. 'We got the impression that Musan Volt's involvement with the Ky'Thain was only the tip of the iceberg.'

'The Drazi, and particularly the Thath Vorak, are being closely monitored as we speak. For now the Ky'Thain have retreated to lick their wounds, and we could find no trace of them or their ships around Zhabar.'

'Do we know who the Ky'Thain are? I've never come across anything like them before in any texts or data crystals.'

'Little is written about them, even in our oldest manuscripts,' said Turval. 'They were wiped out by civil war, and we had thought them extinct. It appears the Shadows must have found the remnants of their race. Appealing to their base nature, they have seduced the Ky'Thain to their cause. It is a talent of theirs we will have to learn to deal with. Many more long-forgotten races may be working for the Shadows in secret, with powers and skills we are unable to prepare for. At least now we have intercepted one of their targets. The Drazi will be tough to subvert into a Shadow servitor race. Especially with the Anla'shok monitoring their every move.'

'Are we to be part of that monitoring team?' asked Vance.

'For you, we have something different planned,' said Sinclair. 'You all worked well together, overcoming stacked odds despite the loss of your leader. I've therefore decided to keep you together, working as a team.' He paused as though waiting for a reaction. The three Rangers remained silent in their seats. 'If there are no objections, you will be given your own ship. I trust you will have no problem with that. Due to your background, Vance, I want you to lead the team.' Yet another pause. Again no reaction from the Rangers.

Vance was surprised at his appointment, considering how short a time he had been a Ranger, but he realised the order was desperately short of members, and it was not something that would have happened had they the numbers and resources of a thousand years past. Mostly he worried about Merreck's reaction, considering he'd had just as important a role in the mission and even saved Vance's life.

'Tomorrow you will be sent to the Outer Rim. Your mission remains classified until you reach your destination. Unfortunately that's the way we have to work from now on. It's not a matter of trust. You've all proven yourselves beyond reproach. It's just the way it has to be for the protection of the Anla'shok and our mission.'

'We understand and obey, Anla'shok Na,' said Merreck. It was the first time Vance heard him speak directly to Sinclair when unprompted. The stout Minbari must have finally come to terms with having a human as his commander.

'You will leave tomorrow,' said Sinclair. 'Get some rest, for you have a trying time ahead of you. And good luck, all of you.' The Rangers stood, bowed to Sinclair and Turval and left the room. They did not speak as they made their way back to their quarters. Vance waited for Merreck to show his true reaction to his appointment as leader, but it never came.

More silence surrounded them as they ate in the dinner hall. None of the Rangers made eye contact in the all-but-deserted room. It appeared that since their arrival, even more new recruits had been sent out on missions of their own. Afterward, Vance headed off toward the Chapel to see if he could recapture any of the serenity he had previously felt there. The prospect seemed shattered when he heard a deep voice behind him. 'Vance!'

He turned and his heart immediately sank. Here we go, he thought. It was only a matter of time. Merreck stood for some seconds, as though unsure of how to begin. Vance almost spoke himself, wanting to hurry Merreck up and get this all over with. 'Greetings from the earth to the stars,' said Merreck, and Vance recognised the words of the Star Rider ritual immediately. 'As far as you ride may the light guide your way and your mount remain steady.'

'Fire burns for my clan,' Vance replied. 'Rain slakes our thirst and we prosper. Who wishes to share the fortune of the Star Riders?'

'Merreck of the Anla'shok.'

'Then kneel, Merreck of the Anla'shok, and tell why you should be honoured thus.'

'I honour as the Star Riders honour,' Merreck began. As he continued, he looked into Vance's eyes, speaking as though he really meant the words and wanted Vance to believe them too. 'I fight as the Star Riders fight. I worship as the Star Riders worship. Together we can roam the plains and watch the stars, and you will know my friendship is unmatched. Our joining makes us stronger until I sunder it.'

When Merreck had finished Vance held out his arm. Merreck grasped it and rose to his feet. 'Now we are as brothers, and our lives belong to each other. May the feud of our fathers be forgotten. Our futures are bonded in blood, Vance, and you have shown that you are worthy of trust – and respect.'

'I owe you my life, Merreck. I intend to repay the debt.'

'I am sure you will get the chance.'

Vance smiled and was surprised when a small grin crept onto Merreck's lips. As they released each other's arms, Jerklenn appeared behind Merreck. The big Minbari turned, wondering what Vance was looking at. Vance felt immediately uncomfortable, despite the conciliation they had just shared. Merreck turned and approached his sister. Silently they embraced, burying themselves in each other's arms. Vance suddenly felt something in the corner of his eye. He turned and entered the Chapel, not wanting the two Minbari to see him removing it.

Jerklenn and Merreck left him alone in the Chapel. Vance understood; naturally they had much to talk about and years to catch up on. Besides, this was one of those occasions when Vance felt comfortable in his own company. He had no idea when he would get the chance to be alone again.

Footsteps echoed down the passage to the Chapel, and Vance stood as a Minbari Ranger entered. 'Someone is here to see you,' said the Ranger. 'He is waiting in the observatory.' With that he bowed and left the Chapel.

Vance was not surprised about his visitor. Deep down he knew who it was and, when he entered the observatory, he greeted his father with the respect he felt was due. 'Colonel,' said Vance, bowing in the appropriate Minbari manner.

'Sinclair told me you've just returned from a mission. A success I hope.' The Colonel was smiling and seemed almost ebullient. Vance was curious as to his motives.

'We lost one of our brothers, but the mission was otherwise a success, yes.'

'Good. That's good. You're looking well, although the uniform's a bit drab.'

'Was their something specific you wanted to see me about, Colonel?' Vance was feeling increasingly uncomfortable, especially with his father's uncharacteristic behaviour. Although recent events had changed Vance's opinion of the Colonel, he still felt a barrier between them.

'Yes. Well, you know I have contacts at EarthForce, and this was only meant to be a temporary appointment. You've served your purpose. Hell, you've even been on a successful mission after just three months of training. The Minbari now know that human recruits are vital to the coming war effort. There's no reason for you to stay.' He produced an envelope and handed it to Vance. 'Papers for your transfer to the Rasvedchiks, just like you wanted.'

Vance looked down at the envelope, his name emblazoned across the front. He looked back to his father's smiling face. 'When I started here, I had the same attitude as you,' said Vance. 'But there's a Shadow coming, and we all have to do our bit. You think you've done your bit now, Colonel? Did you give up your son for the effort, or did you just pick the best man for the job?'

'I had to show that we were serious–'

'We are serious, Colonel. I am Anla'shok. I am a Ranger. Anla'shok tulat. Entil'zha Veni.'

'I understand what you have seen and been through has made you sympathise with this group, but there is no need for you to stay. There will be plenty more recruits. You're EarthForce, son. You're not one of them.'

'You're wrong, father. I am one of them. Until I die.' Vance walked past the Colonel and realised that for the first time in more than ten years, he had called him father. As he headed toward the door of the observatory, he stopped. 'The Shadows are coming, father. And I will be waiting for them alongside my brothers.'

The Colonel made no attempt to follow when Vance left.

The balcony overlooking the landing pad could never be called the most peaceful place in the academy, but Vance now found it almost as soothing as the Chapel. Men working on their ships, people coming and going, movement, life. It was somehow comforting. It made Vance feel much less alone.

He watched a cargo freighter float in to land, its thrusters flashing on intermittently as the pilot guided the cumbersome ship onto the landing pad. Expertly, he brought the ship down, the clank of its landing gear on the hard ground belying the gentleness of the landing.

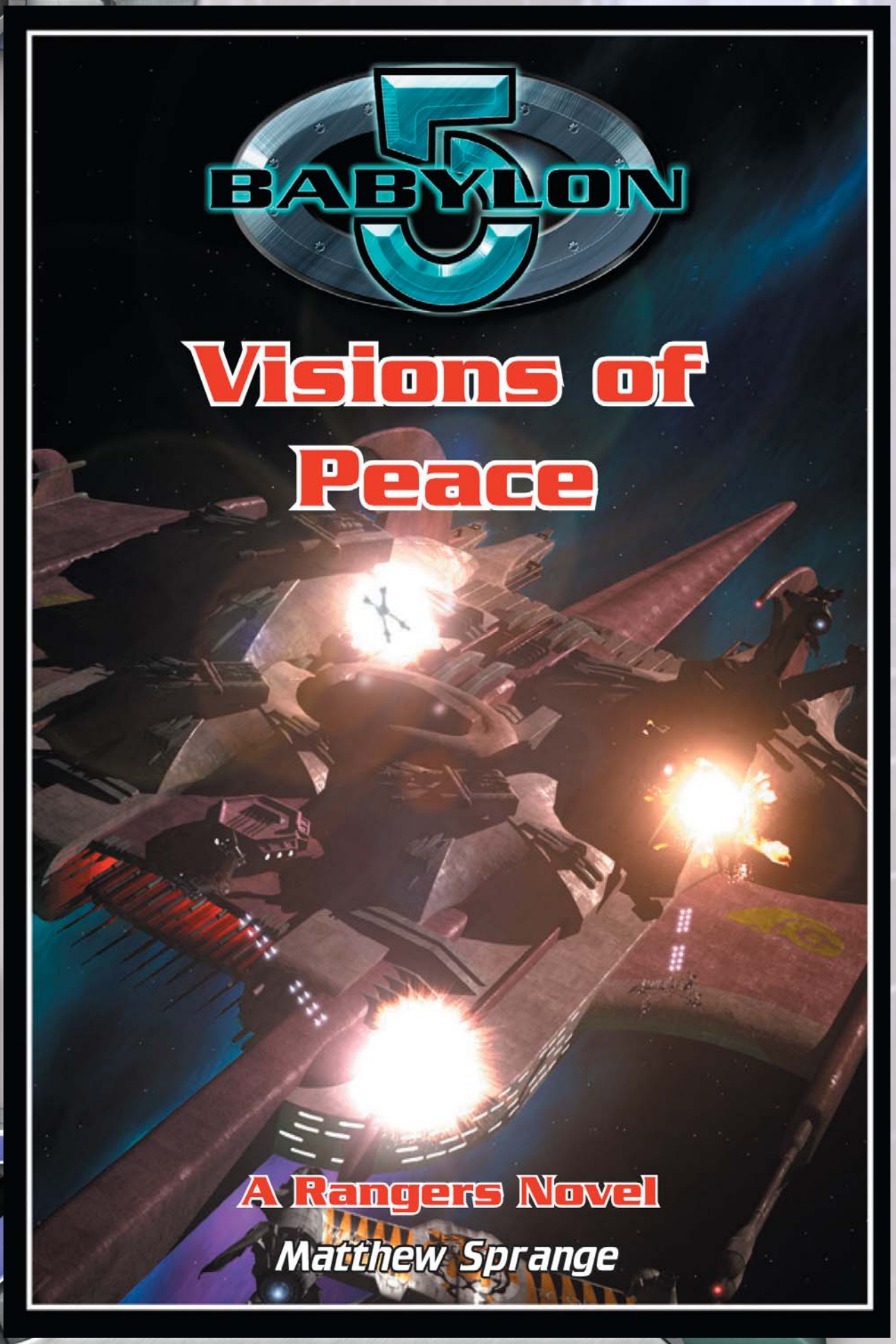
As the rumbling of the engines died away, the landing platform dropped and several figures exited, guided by two Anla'shok. A mix of human and Minbari stumbled off the vessel, and Vance guessed these were new recruits ready for the next training cycle.

They filed towards the academy, and Vance saw that one of the recruits had a very familiar gait. Looking closer he saw the unmistakeable bulk of Randell drawing nearer.

Vance leaned forward and raised a hand. The look on Randell's face as he saw his old friend was priceless.

You're in for more than you know old friend, thought Vance, as he made his way through the academy and out into the streets of Tuzanor.

He walked aimlessly until he eventually came to the wide square at Tuzanor's centre, and the four small gardens. There he saw the bent figure of the old Minbari gardener. Kneeling beside the old man, he silently picked up a pruning tool and began to trim one of the bushes.


BABYLON 5
Visions of Peace
A Rangers Novel
Matthew Sprange

PROLOGUE

October 12th 2232, Omelos

The *EAS Potemkin* thundered out of the expanding jump point vortex, the cross-dimensional energies shimmering pale blue on its hull. Across the dark of space behind the massive dreadnought, hundreds more jump points winked and flickered as the ships of a gigantic multi-race fleet emerged from hyperspace, setting course for the main planet of the invaded system. Today, the Dilgar War would come to an end.

Nearly three billion miles away on board a shuttle in high orbit above her homeworld of Omelos, Warmaster Jha'Dur seethed as she watched the incoming contacts glow orange on her tactical display. She cursed the lesser creatures that invaded her system, that even now raced toward her planet, each eager to be the first to bombard her cities and her armies. For four years, she had dreamed of a great war, a mass attack that would sweep the inferior races of the galaxy aside and allow the Dilgar to reign supreme. How could it have come to this, her ships routed from alien space and now unable to protect her world against this fleet? Her hard feline-like features tensed as she systematically blamed the weakness of others in the Dilgar military and the fickleness of fate.

The war had been hard fought, and there had been little that could halt the Dilgar fleets as they overran the systems that formed the League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Her people had fought with a tenacity born of the knowledge that their own world was doomed, its unstable star about to give its last gasp. One by one, the weak fleets of the League, never expecting to fight a serious war, gave way to the Dilgar strike forces, even as their planets' defences were overwhelmed by superior firepower and technology. Jha'Dur could not help but smile at some of the memories of those invasions, all masterminded by her. The scientific advances her experiments on the populations of those worlds had achieved were immeasurable in their scope and depth.

The sensor telemetry from scout ships on the furthest edges of the system confirmed her expectations. The massed fleet was spearheaded by ships of the Earth Alliance, an alien race the Dilgar had never declared war on and whose space had never been invaded. What possibly drove such creatures to become involved, she could not fathom. True, they might fear the Dilgar would not stop at conquering worlds of the League – and the humans may have been right – but that would have taken years. They seemed almost eager to jump into this war. What deal had been made? What could the League have possibly offered the Earth Alliance in exchange for the massive resources committed?

Jha'Dur recognised the signature of the lead ship, an Earth vessel that had led fleets against her forces several times in the past few months. Now it led a far grander fleet of Drazi, Abbai, Hyach, Markab and many other races, all with orders to kill her and smash her world. They would get the chance at only one of those objectives.

She imagined Warmaster Ta'Loka, the oldest member of the Dilgar Council, now responsible for Naval Command of their homeworld. He would now be attempting to counter the attack, reeling out defence orders in his usual monotone. However, Jha'Dur knew it was useless. As much as it angered her to admit it, she knew Omelos was lost when their long-ranged hyperspace probes detected the fleet massing within the Abbai Matriarchy.

Jha'Dur had made her own plans and quickly set them into motion. She would survive this attack, that was a given. What was just as important was that a strike would be aimed at the heart of her enemies, something large enough to bring them down and reduce their own world to the ashes hers would inevitably become. Perhaps the Earth Alliance saw themselves as messiahs, leading the beleaguered races of the League to a better future. Well, if she had to bear witness to the destruction of her homeworld, then so too would the humans.

She thumbed the communications channel on her display to a pre-set secure link directed at the three ships hanging motionless in orbit just ahead of her shuttle. 'Captain Nil'Bak, are the Stratis devices fully loaded?'

'Confirmed, Warmaster. Loaded and online. We are ready to depart on your order.'

'The order is given. Do not fail me, Captain.'

'Confirmed, Warmaster.'

The massive hulls of the three ships, advanced Ochlavita destroyers that she helped design specifications for some years ago, blocked out Omelos' blue sun as it rose above the planet's horizon. As one, they fired their ion engines, faint streaks of light trailing behind them as they accelerated for the edge of the system. Jha'Dur had arranged for a cordon of ships to funnel the invading fleet away from the destroyers, ensuring no Earth or League ship could attempt an intercept before they entered hyperspace. Captain Nil'Bak faced a long and complicated journey, the furthest ever attempted by a Dilgar ship, but his fierce loyalty to Jha'Dur had been proven many times the war. The crew beneath him had all been selected carefully for this mission and approved by Jha'Dur herself. They knew better than to fail.

For just a few seconds, Jha'Dur savoured the scene that would play out on the humans' homeworld when her new weapons were activated. A world she had never seen and a moment she would never witness. Nevertheless, Jha'Dur could almost *see* it. Her area of science was primarily biological, but with so many League worlds under her heel, the Warmaster had taken the opportunity to. . . expand her interests. No longer limited to developing new machines that controlled the thoughts of her victims or releasing planet-wide plagues to gauge their effects on different races, Jha'Dur had begun to expand her fields of study to entire ecospheres and their delicate balance. So easily shattered, she mused. The three Stratis weapons now on their way to Earth were capable, if properly positioned, of working together to reshape the entire surface of a

planet into something desolate, violent and bleak. As a happy coincidence, they would also wipe out all lifeforms larger than the most primitive of microbes. Maybe even they would not survive. Wryly, Jha'Dur considered herself cheated that she would never have the chance to monitor the effects of her new weapons and analyse just what could survive them – and for how long. These details were largely irrelevant, as their purpose was to strike back at those who had brought her own dreams crashing down. The loss of all that scientific data was the true shame. However, the Dilgar would inevitably lose the war and then be destroyed when their star finally lost all stability and went nova. The humans, in return, would mourn the loss of their own homeworld and the deaths of billions. Perfect symmetry.

Jha'Dur herself would go on. She consciously touched a pouch at her belt, feeling the reassuring bulk of a medical case. The serum it contained, a product of her own scientific genius, would ensure she could return to the galaxy at large later to fulfil her designs. Much later.

The tactical display winked an alert as the two fleets began to engage. Huge wings of small fighters fired first, but the big guns of the capital ships soon opened up, gouging holes in their opponents. Even within these first few seconds, Jha'Dur could see the Dilgar fleet was surrounded and outgunned. She also knew the Navy would not surrender under any circumstances.

Sparing no further thought for the rest of her race or their future, Jha'Dur switched views on her display to retrieve navigation routes. A long journey lay ahead, but she was confident her small shuttle would evade the enemy fleet and eventually carry her to a new hiding place. Tapping in the convoluted hyperspace route designed to throw off would-be pursuers, Jha'Dur pressed the symbol of her final destination.

Minbar.

November 6th 2232, Sol

Breathing a sigh of no little relief, Captain Nil'Bak barked for status reports from his three crewmen on the cramped bridge of the Ochlavita. It took seconds to confirm that all three destroyers had survived the long voyage and were in position to begin their run to Earth. Jumping into realspace just above the plane of this system's asteroid belt, the three Dilgar vessels had completed a voyage of epic proportions through hyperspace and certainly broke many space travel records. Not that it mattered – Nil'Bak knew this was a mission he would not return from but, given skill and a little luck, it might just shift the course of history. After serving Warmaster Jha'Dur faithfully for the past years, no better reward could be hoped for.

Within the destroyers, the Dilgar crews responded to their orders with a discipline born of well-practised drills. Positions were manned, bolters and pulsars charged and then, finally, the Stratis devices loaded into the hastily modified mass drivers that hung beneath the dark green hulls of the ships.

'Captain, we are detecting a system wide alert with responses from multiple locations. Locking in their positions. . .'

'It's the humans' Early Warning Network. Similar to our own, I have been told. Order the squadron into battle formation and increase to maximum thrust. We must not be delayed.' Captain Nil'Bak was aware that though his destroyers might be fast enough to slip past most of the defences of the Earth Alliance, if the squadron became bogged down in combat, more ships would quickly vector onto their position until they were overwhelmed.

Minutes trickled past until his tactical officer registered a solid reading from his display. 'Contact. Three cruiser-size ships bearing down on us from bearing 348 by 22. From their ion signatures, Hyperion-class.'

'Hyperion?' Nil'Bak asked for confirmation. The bulk of EarthForce's warships had been presumed to have led the attack on Omelos, leaving only a skeleton defence fleet around Earth. Nil'Bak had faced a Hyperion before and had not savoured the experience. Relatively new additions to the Earth fleets, they could match his destroyers for speed and easily overwhelm them in firepower.

'Confirmed. They are now launching fighters.'

'Change heading to 12 by 72. Bring us within range of the asteroid field, we might be able to scatter their sensor readings.' The relative weakness of sensor technology within the Earth Alliance had been quickly noted by the Dilgar in their initial engagements, and many captains had devised various methods of using this to their advantage in battle.

'Contact. Multiple readings dead ahead, looks like five wings of fighters – Starfuries!'

This gave Nil'Bak cause for pause. Did EarthForce have a carrier in the vicinity, perhaps lying in wait within the asteroid belt? If so, did this mean they had detected his squadron while they were still in hyperspace?

Individually, Earth Starfury fighters were little to worry about, the Dilgar destroyers massing greater by several orders of magnitude. However, gathered in co-ordinated wings, they could cause real damage if allowed to set up solid attack runs. Nil'Bak had no intention of giving them the chance.

'Open fire when in range, maximum spread.'

'Confirmed. Hyperions have changed vectors and are now closing in.'

This was going to be close, Nil'Bak knew. His aim was to punch through the gathering Starfury wings with bolters and disruptors blazing. Those the destroyers did not annihilate would hopefully be shattered and left in disarray, unable to launch an effective counterattack. Meanwhile, he could allow the Hyperions and

their fighters to engage in a running battle that would last all the way to Earth. Less than a minute passed before the dim red lighting in the bridge of the Ochlavita flickered, power surging to the main weaponry. A mixture of spheres and fast-cycling pulses of energy flashed through space, reaching out to the swarming Starfuries. Nil'Bak leaned forward to see his tactical officer's displays for himself. Several Starfury contacts had winked out of existence, but this salvo had by no means taken the human pilots by surprise. The Starfuries immediately spread out their formation before reacquiring the Dilgar ships.

Fire continued to pour out of the Ochlavita destroyers, but as the fighters closed range, the Dilgar's weaponry began to lose track of the fast moving targets. Nil'Bak was thrown into his hard-backed seat as energy bolts from the Starfuries thudded into the armour of his destroyer.

As the Starfuries passed their targets, the pilots used small manoeuvring jets mounted on the wingtips to spin the fighters around their axis, allowing them to keep firing as they flew down the flanks of the Dilgar ships without breaking off for another pass. As the destroyers sailed past, the Starfuries continued their axial spin until they faced the direction they had originally been travelling. Activating powerful afterburning engines, the Starfuries first cancelled out what was now their backward motion and then began to accelerate after the fleeing destroyers. Their hail of withering fire did not cease throughout this manoeuvre, and multiple explosions across the hulls of the Dilgar ships began to blossom into ever-larger concentrations of fire and burning metal. They again closed upon their enemy, constantly twisting to avoid the rearward return fire of the destroyers and the chunks of debris that flew off their crumbling targets.

The three Dilgar destroyers adopted a looser formation and dove low over the slowly spinning rocks of the asteroid belt, heading for a dense section where they might break the lock-ons of the pursuing fighters and gain precious distance. The continuous attacks from the Starfuries began to falter as their pilots were forced to break off briefly in order to avoid an asteroid that spun dangerously close, but concentrated fire from one flight was rewarded by a huge explosion as the engine section of one destroyer blew apart under the pounding. The ship slewed to one side from the force of the blast, desperately firing manoeuvring thrusters in an effort to remain level.

Given a chance to close range, the three EarthForce Hyperion cruisers announced their presence in the fight by opening upon the stricken destroyer with their massive plasma cannon. Large globs of pure energy flashed through space, utterly consuming the Dilgar ship. Raw plasma burned through the destroyer, instantaneously incinerating the Dilgar within and burning through to the ship's fuel cells which promptly exploded with a force that tore the vessel apart and rattled the cockpits of nearby Starfuries.

The three Hyperions, never breaking formation, surged forward as they closed on a second destroyer forced to slow down by the constant attacks on its rearward engine section by the chasing Starfuries. Another salvo of plasma fire peeled away the armour of the Dilgar ship, exposing vital systems and crew to both the savage energies of the attack and the cold vacuum of space. Debris rained from the ship, leaving a metal trail behind, before flights of Starfuries lined up for a final attack run on the drifting hulk. Once again, fuel cells were struck, destroying the ship in a billowing explosion powerful enough to shatter several small asteroids.

The last Ochlavita destroyer had obviously learned the lessons of its allies' demise, and it ploughed deep into the asteroid belt, allowing smaller rocks to bounce harmlessly off its armoured hull while the Starfuries flying after it were forced to divert their course to avoid the potentially devastating impacts of even tiny asteroids. The Hyperions kept pace but refused to enter the asteroids, their captains instead choosing to track the Dilgar ship and open fire whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Small bolts of plasma streamed down from the Hyperions, impacting the destroyer's hull, flaying armour plating but causing little serious damage. No reply was forthcoming from the Dilgar, and it seemed as if either the Starfuries had managed to offline its weapons or its crew were kept busy manoeuvring past the larger rocks among the asteroids. Most of the Earth fighters had now left the asteroids themselves, forming up behind the Hyperions to prepare a co-ordinated strike should the Dilgar emerge from the cover of the rocks, though a few diligent and skilled pilots remained in direct pursuit in order to keep the pressure on.

The Ochlavita attempted a hard turn to quickly change vectors and surprise its pursuers as it left the denser field of asteroids, but the destroyer seemed sluggish and unwilling to respond to commands. The EarthForce ships did not miss their chance, changing course as one before unleashing the full weight of their plasma cannon. Once again, pure energy tore past armour plates as if they were tissue paper. The destroyer jinked harshly in a pitching motion it may never have been designed to perform, but the desperate move caused much of the Hyperion's fire to overshoot. Starfuries now swept down and poured their own fire into the failing ship, now unafraid of possible return fire. Out of control, the Ochlavita descended once more among the asteroids.

Captain Nil'Bak heaved himself back into his seat, choking on the smoke filling the bridge. Cables and structural supports hung from the ceiling where they had been blasted clear of their anchor points and his crew lay on the floor, the life blasted from them by the explosion that had wrecked the bridge. Nil'Bak hammered at his consoles but nothing responded to his commands. Despite the constant rocking from attacks by the Earth fighters, he was finally able to summon a close-ranged sensor display to life. He stared at the information being updated on its screen. Though he had no viewport on the bridge of this warship, he could imagine the massive asteroid looming in front of the gunship, its gigantic size only hinted at by the tiny icon that steadily registered as getting closer and closer.

Nil'Bak's fists clenched as he fervently wished he had but one weapon with which to respond to the attacks of his enemy. The ranging information on the asteroid reached zero on his display and then he wished for nothing more.

CHAPTER ONE

May 1st 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Buried deep within the ISA Headquarters in the Minbari capital, Tuzanor, the Anla'Shok Intelligence Gathering Centre was a perpetual hive of activity. With offices clustered around a central chamber, often jokingly referred to as the 'war room' by human staff, it still retained the brand new feeling of a recent construction despite having seen heavy use in the past six months. With the timelessness inherent in all Minbari buildings, from humble abodes to their greatest millennia-old temples, it would likely maintain that atmosphere for centuries to come.

The eclectic mix of races now spreading through the Anla'Shok had yet to reach the innermost sanctums of the organisation, including the Centre, and the bustling staff consisted mainly of Minbari with a scattering of human specialists. While the public image of the Rangers was an heroic individual pledging to place his body in harm's way for the sake of the entire galaxy, a lone agent of peace dedicated to eradicating evil, a giant support mechanism aided those Rangers in the field. Some might say it was a less glamorous duty, but few working within the Alliance's headquarters felt that way, and all understood how decisions made here could affect the lives of thousands, even millions, throughout the galaxy. Anyone who did not understand this would not last very long under the watchful eyes of the senior Anla'Shok.

Unconsciously rubbing the back of his bony headplate, Tuthenn's eyes flickered over the data streaming across the three displays in front of him. Ranger-Analysts were invariably Minbari, and though the duty was both feared and shunned by those in training with the Anla'Shok, Tuthenn wore the title with honour. Even among Minbari there were few who could register, analyse and retain information with the speed necessary to consolidate intelligence from across the galaxy. Only he and the fourteen other Minbari located in the Centre could fully appreciate the amount of information requiring analysis that flowed in from the entire Interstellar Alliance daily. Computers aided the Ranger-Analysts, indeed, they were essential for the work but a sentient mind was still required to bring meaningful interpretation to the endeavour.

Due to the cunning and toil of President Sheridan, the Interstellar Alliance nearly spanned the known galaxy, with very few races choosing not to sign up to receive the mutual benefits offered. True, there were always governments, particularly within the former League of Non-Aligned Worlds, that played fast and loose with the rules of the ISA, but Sheridan's dream of intergalactic peace was actually taking form.

When a government signed up to join the ISA, they received access to lucrative technology and trade treaties, as well as a guarantee that should they be attacked, every government within the ISA was duty-bound to assist them. Of course, this also meant that if they should desire to war with their neighbours, the ISA and its peacekeeping Rangers would ensure that every other government would learn of their treachery. From the outset, it was hammered into new entrants that diplomacy was always the best policy. Most behaved themselves, more or less, and infractions were minor. Long-standing border disputes aside, peace reigned and the spilling of blood was kept to a minimum.

As a senior among the Ranger-Analysts, Tuthenn was able to pick his own areas of specialisation, and he included the borders of the Minbari Federation among them. When he had first started, he had made this choice in the hope that, one day, intelligence might flow from the old Vorlon Empire towards the Rim, but so far no ship had successfully returned from expeditions into the abandoned territory. The old defences seemed to be working most efficiently, and Tuthenn feared he would have long turned to dust before the secrets of the Old Ones were finally revealed.

During his years of service, Tuthenn had gradually become an expert on the interpretation of intelligence emerging from that other great civilisation bordering the Minbari – the Centauri Republic. Ostracised from the rest of the galaxy because of their aggressive war against neighbouring races in the early days of the ISA, the Centauri were a cowed and broken people, conveniently forgotten by history for the time being while they were forced to pay heavy reparations to those whose ships had been attacked.

Tuthenn knew better. In fact, he knew better than most, as he spent many of his days analysing every piece of information that could be squeezed from the Republic, gathered from White Stars patrolling its borders, smugglers willing to talk for a few extra credits and the few travellers that made a habit of visiting Centauri worlds. Tuthenn knew how Emperor Mollari ruled his citizens, he knew the resources the Republic still had access to on its own worlds, and he definitely knew just how large the Centauri fleets remained. He was all too aware of the massive potential that still lay within the Republic that had once spanned this entire region of the galaxy, subjugating many worlds within its empire. When the Centauri once called their Republic the Lion of the Galaxy, they had been speaking a lot of truth.

Data continued to stream in front of Tuthenn's eyes, and his fingers deftly manipulated controls that allowed him to zero in on pertinent information before summoning ancillary data pertaining to anything unusual on his side screens. He had developed the knack of constructing a web of information on his screens that, when scanned, formed patterns within his mind. These patterns would then lead him to conclusions or new information as he continued to bury himself in the process.

Tuthenn was following a trail of Quantium-40 mined on one of the Centauri's border worlds,

tracing its progress through the Republic in order to determine where it was used, what strategic implications this might hold and, just as important when dealing with Centauri politics, who benefited. He flagged an item that caught his eye and transferred it to a side screen, automatically invoking a search-and-scan process even as he returned his attention to the main display. His eyes flicked back to the side screen, focusing on the first item retrieved, and his fingers held steady over the controls. Vocator Merak was being reported as having died in a manner befitting his ancestors. Tuthenn gave a brief shake of his head and reflected that this euphemism was becoming all too frequent in the current Republic. Dying as an ancestor tended to mean assassination, usually by poison – a return to the old ways of the Centauri. As more information was retrieved and displayed, Tuthenn continued to analyse.

The head of House Kaado, Vocator Merak had been a somewhat stabilising influence in the Centaurum, the Republic's governing body, keeping many hotter-headed leaders of Houses restrained from more radical ideas. Tuthenn recalled that Merak had been forced to discipline nobles in his own House on occasion, and they certainly had much to gain by his death. One of them would now be head of House Kaado. The House itself rooted its power in several mining interests, most of them along the Centauri/Minbari border but this was not unusual, as a House did not elevate itself to the heights Kaado had achieved without substantial finances. However, this in turn meant that the actions of House Kaado could have an effect on the entire Republic, at least to some degree, and it would only take a leader of a certain ambition to expand his House's financial interests. With money came power, and if someone had risked the assassination of a House leader, they would have planned their next moves carefully. So, what was he witnessing here, Tuthenn wondered? Mere personal ambition? A bold challenge for the throne of the Emperor?

Tuthenn quickly found himself at an informational dead-end. Without knowing the identity of the new head of House Kaado, it was impossible to predict the ramifications of this assassination. He created a quick report for his superiors requesting specific intelligence and then went back to his data streams.

May 1st 2263, Imperial City, Centauri Prime

Idly playing with the trimmed velvet seat lining the passenger compartment of his skimmer, Veneta Kaado relaxed, enjoying this one quiet moment of solitude. With the skimmer's driver audio-silenced and his communications system temporarily disabled, Veneta mentally prepared himself for the forthcoming address. True to form, his mind soon drifted, and he watched Imperial City flashing past below the skimmer. The clouds of smoke left after the destructive attack by the Narn and Drazi fleets of the Interstellar Alliance had blotted out the sun for weeks, but clear skies now held sway over Centauri Prime. The devastation, however, remained. As far as Veneta could see lay shattered buildings, roads blocked with sprawling masonry and massive craters where the lasers and missiles of the aggressor fleets had rained down with indiscriminate violence.

Veneta's mood turned darker as he reminded himself of his focus. That fool of an Emperor had done so very little after the attack to bring his people back on their rightful path, accepting the reparations demanded of the Centauri from the Interstellar Alliance without question even as their capital lay in ruin. Certainly, here and there throughout Imperial City, Emperor Mollari had ordered the rebuilding of a museum or a hostelry to house the multitude of homeless that eked out a living amidst their broken and roofless homes. It was criminal neglect. A better leader would have organised construction gangs, brought in more slaves and introduced a massive public works programme designed to rebuild Imperial City into a vision for the future, far mightier than ever it had been. That was what the Centauri needed right now: vision. A sense of what they could and should be, as well as a leader who did more than pay lip service to his people as he skulked in the Royal Palace.

Veneta was never calm in the hours before a speech but always found himself peaceful once he finally took stage, a trait he had possessed for as long as he could recall. He had always found himself constantly distracted by the whirlwind of aspirations, possibilities, plotting and politicking that streamed through his mind. He knew others among the Centauri nobility called this duty but, in truth, Veneta had been preparing himself for a life spent in the pursuit of his personal ambition since adolescence. Perhaps even before then. He could not recall the last time he had relaxed or taken a vacation for the sole purpose of rest. Every moment, it seemed, had been spent furthering his position in at least some way.

It was beginning to pay off. This skimmer, the best money could buy in this time of hardship and recession (for others), used to be his uncle's. Now it belonged to Veneta, along with everything else his uncle had once owned, passed on as tradition demanded to the heir of House Kaado. Veneta had long passed the stage of self-congratulation, which consisted in the main of one drunken gathering with his most trusted conspirators. It had been a masterful move, to be sure, not just for an assassination that was unlikely to be traced back to him but, more importantly, the manoeuvring of his own position from relative obscurity in the House to one where it became obvious that he *should* be its head. That had taken skill, a lot of favours and more work than Veneta thought possible to achieve in mere months. It could not be denied though, if his personal ambitions were to bear the fruit he felt he deserved, those efforts would pale before the toil that lay ahead. Personal wealth was never Veneta's sole aim. Wealth was relatively easy to attain, and he had never doubted that it would be his. No, he wanted something far more intoxicating – power. The kind of power that could not be granted by mere financial reserves, no matter how vast. Veneta wanted absolute power over the life and death of his people, and he wanted adulation. He wanted to lead. Now that he was

head of House Kaado, he possessed the vehicle needed to begin achieving his aims.

All this at the tender age of 28. Even the seer present at his birth had not foreseen a rise so meteoric. More fool her. Having no use for wastage, Veneta had ensured she had met her death at the same time as his uncle.

An alarm chimed in the rear cabin and Veneta roused himself from the luxurious couch, irritated that he had distracted himself from his speech. No matter, he had learned it by rote a day ago. The skimmer was touching down in front of a small theatre owned by House Kaado in Imperial City, one of the few to almost completely escape the destruction that claimed its peers. The skimmer's door whined open smoothly, and a royal guardsman stood rigidly at attention, eyes fixed ahead, determined not to notice any social infraction in Veneta's behaviour, be he drunk, high or mad. All three had been true of the heads of House Kaado in past history, but Veneta prided himself on being far more disciplined than his ancestors. Still, the guardsman was a good touch, and he congratulated himself. In theory they served the Emperor alone, but ways and means existed for those in the Centaurum who wielded enough power to claim a few royal privileges. Besides, having a royal guardsman follow him into the theatre created the right impression, like many of the arrangements he made before this engagement.

Sweeping from the skimmer and up the stairs of the theatre, Veneta entered the small building past bowing servants and climbed the stairs to an audience chamber he ordered for this meeting. He made a mental note to reprimand the skimmer's driver for having brought him here too promptly, as only a few nobles of small standing were seated, waiting patiently for both him and more powerful members of Centauri society. Most of them seemed to be of House Kaado.

Nodding briefly to those in the front rank of seats to acknowledge their presence (it never hurt so long as it was not made a habit of), Veneta had not taken three more steps before he was intercepted by a gaggle of assorted relatives and hangers-on who, he knew, had all requested favours that he had not had time to fulfil. Getting support among the Centauri nobility was a relatively simple process in concept, and much could be achieved with the right mixture of threat and promise. It was just so time consuming. He noted out of the corner of his eye that Minister Kallafa of House Verlime had just arrived and was taking a moment to select an area of seating that would suggest good position and standing. Verlime would have to try hard, Veneta mused cattily, as his entire House was in decline. Still, even the smallest of Houses had something a canny politicker could use, be it finances, connections, resources or even just raw weight of numbers. Sometimes it all came down to the numbers to create political momentum. In the case of House Verlime, however, Veneta was hoping for a link to House Mollari, the ruling House of the Republic. He held no illusions of bringing the Emperor into his schemes, at least not just yet, but a solid connection to House Mollari could bring an influx of money and power that Veneta could use very well. There was also another service he had in mind for Minister Kallafa.

Permitting himself a slight smile, Veneta ignored the prattling of the animated minor noble in front of him, no doubt fishing for some favour, as he viewed others gradually filing into the audience chamber. A good turn out, perhaps the best yet. The venue's intimate nature suggested more participants than were actually present. With the leverage the new position as head of House Kaado granted, Veneta was clearly attracting greater interest and support. Those who had once shunned him had now begun to listen to his opinions, and he was building up a steady supply of favours. His star was rising.

The noble before him tripped over words, trying to simultaneously congratulate Veneta while sliding in a request for reduced tariffs on his leased cargo ship. Veneta could not even remember his name. He brushed the noble aside and strode to the elevated podium, feeling a flush of power as he raised a hand, and the mumbling of the crowd ceased almost instantly. Not all that long ago he would have been forced to start by talking over the constant politicking of his peers. Rank hath its privileges indeed.

'My fellow nobles,' he began, voice low to suggest a mutual conspiratorial interest. While no master of psycho-linguistics, Veneta paid close attention to those in his service who were. 'Our glorious Republic, the Lion of the Galaxy, faces its darkest hour.' He noted several nods of agreement throughout the small crowd. Good, there were enough like-minded nobles here.

'We are in an intolerable position,' he continued, slowly raising his voice. 'Where we once stretched forth our hand across the stars, we are now a broken and destitute people. The humans, the Minbari, yes, even the Narn are crippling us under the so-called authority of the Interstellar Alliance. Blockaded and separate from the rest of the galaxy, denied the opportunity for competitive trade and burdened by unjust reparations, we have been robbed of our sovereign right of self-determination.' No nods now, just rapt attention.

'For every step we take forward, the Interstellar Alliance throws us two steps back. We have no opportunity to develop economically, culturally or scientifically. The ISA runs frequent spy flights through our border systems, violating our territory at will. The reparations, which our weak-willed Emperor meekly accepted, are ruining any chance of recovery.' Veneta was now skirting treason, but he knew he was in good company. Besides, these were hardly the days of Emperor Cartagia. Perhaps more was the pity.

'This cannot go on. How can we permit it? We are Centauri, and our destiny has always been written in the stars. How can we allow animals like the Narn jurisdiction over us? We still have the resources of our many worlds.

We still have our fleets. All we need is the light to lead us from this time of darkness.

'Who will lead us though? How can we strike at those who have cheated us and built the walls that now surround our Republic? That, my friends, is what we are here to discuss. Together, we will unite to shine a beacon that will lead every Centauri to reclaim our rightful place in the galaxy – and we will break our enemies. This is what our people hunger for. It is our duty to feed this hunger and safeguard the future of our entire race and way of life.'

May 3rd 2263, Asteroid Belt, Sol

'Goddammit, you can't be serious. Again?' Tim Aston was not getting the best of things, and he badly needed a break. Cramped in the tiny cockpit of his one-man survey shuttle for over a week now, he had already noted the ancillary power generators were losing efficiency daily, his asteroid motion charts were woefully out of date, and his communications system had a disturbing habit of fading out whenever close to a stellar object massing more than his own vessel. All of which would require him to pony up some serious credits to remedy. Now Mayfield was declaring his 'sure hunch' was nothing more than a trace reading.

'Yeah, sorry mate, it's just another iron rock. Not worth the time or effort. Damn, I should stop listening to those transport captains – what do they know about prospecting?' Mayfield's voice was distorted slightly by static, causing Aston to manoeuvre out of the shadow of a nearby asteroid, an action that was fast becoming an automatic habit. He sometimes likened it to turning an antique radio to aid reception.

'You sure you got the right co-ordinates here? We looking at the right rock?'

'Sure as I can be. Look, we've been out here a week with no luck. Let's get back to Ganymede, refuel, pick up the latest rumours and try again. We can't strike out twice in a row, eh?'

Only twice, thought Aston?

'Go ahead. I'm going to do a few random sweeps. You never know.'

'Ahh, are you certain? You shouldn't be out here alone. Shouldn't be fooling around among these rocks.'

'I can handle it. Besides, you know the state this heap of junk is in. If I put into port now, it may never take off again. I need the creds. No two ways about it.'

'Alright. You holler if you run into trouble though. See you back on Ganymede. Over and out.' Mayfield seemed resigned, and Aston knew he was reluctant to be away from Ganymede for too long, a desire as much to do with a pretty postal clerk on the mining outpost as much as not coping with zero-G for extended periods of time. Aston's own romantic interests had dissolved quietly some time ago, apparently because of a combination of his general mood and the time he spent in the three bars on the outpost. He was rapidly forming the opinion that all long-term relationships with women were too demanding for someone with his lifestyle.

He leaned forward to stare out his starboard viewport, watching Mayfield's shuttle fire its manoeuvring thrusters as it set a course towards Jupiter and its moons. Accelerating gently, it soon disappeared from sight, but his sensor display kept updating the shuttle's position. That system, at least, worked without fault. Sweeping aside a food wrapper stuck to the edge of the main console, Aston considered a spring clean of his cockpit that, by now, had several wrappers, papers and other assorted objects hanging in the zero-gravity. His workspace might seem a lot less cramped if he did. Would probably be safer too.

He promised himself a professional valet when he returned to Ganymede. Hell, why not? If he had the credits to fix his other problems, he would have no trouble forking out for that. If he did not strike a find on this trip, then the matter quickly became academic. He plotted a course that would sweep through several likely (for that, read 'just maybe, possibly') candidates among this rocky hell and hit the autopilot.

For the next six hours, Aston slouched in his seat, one leg hooked over the main console. The autopilot took care of the manoeuvring and collision avoidance, leaving him free to monitor sensor and mineral sweep displays, watching for the tell-tale signs of a rich strain of ore that could be mined. Or a fast-moving asteroid the autopilot would not be able to react to in time. Those were rare but, he reflected, might solve his problems if he could not react quick enough either.

A green alert light began flashing on his console, accompanied by a faint but shrill tone. Irritated by the noise, Aston cancelled the alert and then strained tired eyes to read the incoming data analysis.

'What the hell is. . .'

He was trying hard to understand what his computers told him. They just did not make sense. A high concentration of rare materials had been detected on a nearby asteroid, along with an accompanying energy source, faint but definitely present. More interesting was that several of the materials were listed as unknown. Slowly he began to realise that could only mean they were alien in origin. Sitting bolt upright, he focussed his attention on the incoming scans and instructed the autopilot to move closer.

Aston was soon close enough to see the asteroid out his main viewport. At first, it seemed like any other large rock here slowing spinning on its axis, but he soon spied a large impact crater that was obviously not created by another rock. Dark ejecta spanned its centre, and he spotted the blackened, hard-edged shapes that indicated wreckage.

It began to dawn on him that not only had he found the remains of a crashed spacecraft, but that it was an alien vessel at that. There had to be something of worth around but he could not fathom what had happened here. Was it just an alien trader who had jumped into system at the transfer point off Io and got lost en route to Earth? Could it be Minbari, a remnant from their genocidal war against humanity? That would be a rare find. Of course, there had also been plenty of League ships involved in the fleet Sheridan had led against President Clark a couple of years ago.

Filtering out background noise to locate the energy signature, Aston found it again near the edge of the crater. Switching to manual control, he carefully manoeuvred his shuttle to match the asteroid's spiralling motion and then descended slowly. He brought his exterior cameras online and focussed them downwards. It was not long before Aston smiled in delight at the oddly shaped capsule he found within the crosshairs of the signature reading, apparently still intact. Continuing the shuttle's descent to the asteroid's surface, he watched his altitude reading tick away the distance until he was just a couple of metres above the capsule. Extending the shuttle's loading claws, he skilfully snatched the alien object on his first try and retracted it into his hold.

Performing a further sweep to ensure nothing else immediately worthwhile was present in the crash zone, he moved the shuttle away from the asteroid. He noted the rock's position and motion in his personal log but registered nothing official in his flight record. Though he could claim salvage rights on the crash site, he knew that would do him little good once the other desperate shuttle pilots on Ganymede heard about this discovery. By keeping quiet he risked the unlikely chance of someone else finding the site and staking a claim. On the other hand, he could always return for a thorough search beneath the crater in the hopes of finding more valuable items. With the credits he hoped to get for alien technology, he might be able to afford equipment that would make such scans easy. This might even mark a turning point in Aston's career, from prospector to salvager!

As his shuttle manoeuvred out of the asteroid belt and began the long journey back to Ganymede, Aston unbuckled himself from his seat and floated to the hatchway at the rear of the cockpit. Passing through, he continued to float down the shuttle's main and only corridor to a hatch in the floor that led to the cargo bay. Lowering himself downwards, Aston ducked his head under the low ceiling as he pushed off again and floated towards the capsule.

That the alien object was dark green and of a very smooth metal, was as much as he could tell. There were no obvious controls or entry points, though dark markings down one side might well have been writing of some description. Aston shook his head as he slowly realised he could not even begin to understand what the scrawls meant. Several smooth but short humps were dotted around the capsule like blisters, and one end was slightly flattened and elongated, suggesting an arrowhead shape to him. Aston knew he was out of his depth in trying to determine what this object was, not to mention what it might actually be used for.

He dared not try brokering a deal on Ganymede itself, as he would get a mere fraction of what it was worth. Whatever the capsule was, it had to be worth a fortune – it just had to. Aston had paid his dues of bad luck lately, and now it was his turn for a break.

If Ganymede was not the place for business, Aston had a vague thought of where else he could go. Mayfield had family scattered throughout the Earth Alliance. Perhaps he could help Aston get in touch with the kind of person needed to fence this alien cargo.

CHAPTER TWO

May 14th 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Walking purposefully down the corridors of the Tuzanor spaceport, Michael Shaw felt ten feet tall. He had been wearing the Minbari-woven robes of the Anla'Shok for some time now, but today he truly felt right in them for the first time. The morning had seen his graduation, and he now bore the title 'Ranger' with some considerable pride. Not ego, he reminded himself. After the year-long training regime, one encompassing the very limits of his physical, mental and spiritual capabilities, he had more than earned the right to wear the robes. People on the outside, civilians, might idolise the Rangers as he once did, but only those who had been through the same training could truly understand what it meant to be one of the Anla'Shok. He just hoped that his dark hair, recently cropped almost to the skull, did not make him look like a raw, untrained recruit.

This new appearance followed the eradication of his facial hair that Shaw had maintained throughout Ranger training. It seemed like a whim this morning, but as he thought about it, Shaw had come came to believe it was an outward expression of the spiritual change he had undergone upon graduation. Then again, maybe the insistence of Minbari tutors to consider the spiritual aspect of all actions had ingrained itself into his psyche, and he was in fact simply tired of spending more time grooming than simple hygiene demanded. He certainly hoped that, by this time, vanity was behind him.

Karen had mocked his new look that morning, saying he gave the impression of a Ranger just about to enter training, not one who had graduated. She left less than an hour after that last meeting, bound for old League space, though she had not known exactly where.

Intimate relationships between trainees in the Ranger programme were not encouraged and, in fact, tutors

seemed to do everything they could to dissuade them. The Anla'Shok were not a monastic order by any means, but the training process was very intensive, operating on all levels of body and mind. The effect of Anla'Shok training on his personality and outlook had stunned Shaw – who would never have thought a year ago he would be able to speak Minbari, allegedly one of the hardest languages in the galaxy to master? However, the insular training for the Anla'Shok tended to turn amorous feelings towards other trainees. Karen was not the only human female in his group, but she was the one he had come to admire the most, at a very early stage. Quick-minded, she always had a comical turn of phrase whenever the training began to wear on the hopefuls, motivating the others without becoming the group clown. Her chin-length dark hair framed her face beautifully, though it was always tied up during training hours, and her high, well-defined cheekbones lent an air that Shaw considered classical.

However passionate they became in the quieter moments, and there were few enough of those, Shaw knew it was not love. But it had been welcome. They had promised to keep in touch, though with a galaxy this large and a Ranger likely to see most of it in his life, it was possible they had said goodbye for good.

Minbari paced this corridor, going about their solemn duties whatever their caste, but few fellow aliens were present. Even now, when Minbar had become became the centre of Sheridan's Interstellar Alliance, the spaceport was less eclectic than those on other worlds. The Minbari might be one of the leading governments of the ISA and, by their standards, have become more open in their dealing with alien races, but they still enjoyed a healthy separation from the rest of the galaxy. Shaw knew of the bond between human and Minbari that led to the two sharing the duties of the Anla'Shok during the Shadow War, but it had taken a move of unbelievable proportions, once Minbari culture was understood, to open the ranks of the Rangers to other races. The change was necessary if the Rangers were to act as peacekeepers throughout the galaxy, and in Shaw's own class there had been two Brakiri and an Abbai, though Minbari and humans still formed the bulk of entrants. Even after more than a year of this new open policy, the older tutors struggled to cope with the needs of species other than their own.

Finding the terminal station, Shaw turned from the main corridor and walked briskly to the waiting area. Between two stained glass windows commemorating the battle of Coriana 6, the main window looking out onto the terminal's landing area towered above him. On other occasions, Shaw had marvelled at Minbari architecture and their willingness to build structures for creatures a thousand feet tall, but on this very special day his attention was wholly consumed by the craft that lay motionless on the landing pad. Even stationary, it looked fast and poised for action.

As a trainee, Shaw had endured long lessons designed to familiarise him with the control systems and capabilities of the White Star. Today was different. He would enter this ship, White Star 31, as no mere trainee but a fully fledged Ranger. He would be second-in-command and well on his way to a White Star of his own. He had dreamed of that day for some time. His heart raced to think of it, roaming the galaxy in command of one of the most advanced vessels in existence, righting wrongs and bringing peace wherever he travelled. That, above all else, was surely what it meant to be a Ranger. Karen would have understood.

Shaw knew that other Rangers, particularly Minbari, would spend this time in quiet meditation until they were summoned aboard the ship. He shrugged to himself. There would be time for meditation later. Instead, Shaw continued to gaze at the ship, idly fiddling with the retracted Denn'Bok fighting pike at his belt. His eyes swept across the graceful lines of the White Star, from its sharp spearheaded nose containing the powerful neutron laser, back across its curved hull. He continued past the double wings that held molecular pulsars capable of shredding the heaviest armour, then on to the tapered aft section containing the gravitic drive systems that gave the vessel its unprecedented manoeuvrability and speed, as well as comfortable artificial gravity for the crew without the rotating sections that Earth ships still tended to use. Everything about the White Star spoke of potential. Potential speed, potential destruction, potential power. As a Ranger, Shaw would be tested to the limit when commanding a ship such as this, concentrating that power into the most critical points where it would do the most good. This ship could alter the course of history – and had done so already, several times.

Shaw had no idea how long he had been staring at the ship before a chime sounded and a female Minbari voice announced that he was expected on White Star 31 immediately. Taking a deep breath, Shaw turned and headed toward the landing area. The time to prove his tutors' faith in him had arrived. Time to prove he was worthy of the Anla'Shok.

The boarding ramp at the front of the White Star beckoned him into the belly of the ship and a female Minbari, wearing the grey robes of the Religious Caste, waited patiently for him at its foot. Returning the slow bow of respect, Shaw followed the Minbari up the ramp and through the corridors of the ship, climbing higher as they made their way to the bridge. The White Star was not a large ship by most military standards, but the designers had considered crew comfort an important factor. A heavy degree of automation eliminated the need for extra crew, allowing more room for those who did serve on board. A White Star could be piloted by a single well-trained individual even in combat situations, though the ship would never be at its best. The overall benefit was that White Stars could remain on station in the remotest areas of the galaxy for months at a time without crew fatigue setting in. With gravitic drive systems, artificial gravity for the crew further extended the time that could be spent on board without constant returns to a base station. Shaw had heard stories of older warships in the Earth Alliance that lacked even rotating crew sections to provide gravity, and entire missions were once flown in zero-G with crew either strapped to their stations or floating freely from one section to another. The entire Dilgar War had been fought in this way. It had

to have been hell serving on those ships, Shaw thought. Funny how history can give such perspectives. Personally speaking, he was glad to be living in the here and now.

The bridge was just as Shaw remembered from his field examinations and countless hours spent in the simulation suites in the ISA Headquarters, though most of his training had taken place in a Rangers' camp on a remote world in the Mofaka system within the Drazi Freehold. Two helmsmen sat at the forward-most point of the bridge, just below the main viewport. Behind them in the centre was the Captain's chair, flanked by the weapons control and interior systems stations. To the rear and sides of this central area were scattered other stations: sensors, analysis, navigation and communications. All were arranged in slightly off-centre and off-line positions that seemed at first strange to human eyes, but which became oddly pleasing in an aesthetic sense over time, as did much that was built by Minbari. Most positions on these ships were crewed by Minbari of the Religious Caste, a state of affairs that had arisen from politics within the Federation during the Shadow War, with a single senior Ranger in command as Captain. White Star 31 was no exception, and Shaw's Captain, Ranger Sabine Badeau, turned from where she stood in front of the viewport to receive him.

Sabine Badeau was short and well proportioned with the physical toning common to smaller women. Her lengthy dark hair was tied up and descended well below her shoulders. Shaw was struck by her face, which even with her current neutral expression, seemed to imply both open friendship and mischief. Not that he was fooled in the least, for Shaw had studied her record as soon as he learned of his assignment earlier in the day. She was a veteran of the Shadow War and had taken took part in the great battle at Coriana 6, the system that had seen the exodus of the Old Ones from the galaxy. This was a woman who was extremely capable, and she had his immediate respect.

'Mr. Shaw, welcome aboard,' she said in a quiet but steady voice that carried across the entire bridge. 'I trust you will find everything you need once you have a chance to settle in.'

'Thank you, Captain. I am honoured to have been assigned to a ship like White Star 31.'

'The *Intrepide*. You will find most human captains give their White Stars ad hoc names. The Minbari numbering system is efficient but lacks soul. You are familiar with your orders?'

'I believe so, Captain,' he replied. 'I am to assist you in all missions undertaken by White Star 31 – the *Intrepide* – following your direction at all times.'

Badeau looked thoughtfully at Shaw for a brief second, appearing to consider something before speaking. 'I will be setting a variety of tasks for you throughout our missions and will monitor your behaviour accordingly. All actions of merit and incompetence will be noted in my report to the Anla'Shok.'

She caught a brief look of worry on his face. 'You thought you had graduated and were now a full Ranger, eh?' she asked, a small smile on her face. 'Well, that is mostly true. Your training has earned you the right to call yourself a Ranger, and the crew of this ship will treat you as such. However, my report will determine how you serve the Anla'Shok in the future – if at all. Now, if you have gotten this far, can I assume it is your desire to work in the field and gain a command of your own?'

Shaw nodded mutely.

'Then that will depend on how you perform under my instruction over the next few months. You can still *fail*, Mr Shaw. Understand that. You might not necessarily be ejected from the Anla'Shok, but the rest of your days may be spent performing valuable administration duties here in Tuzanor. I get the feeling that you would regard such a fate as failure.' When he did not reply, Badeau smiled and said, 'So would I.'

She let a pause linger between them, which prompted Shaw to speak. 'So, Captain, what is our first mission?'

'Well, let us first dispense with the formalities. Officially, you and I are equal in rank, if not in fact. So, from now on I will be Sabine and you will be Michael. As for the mission, we have something you will no doubt consider a treat, a possibility of real excitement.' She turned to one of the Minbari at a station toward the rear of the bridge. 'Tallier, call up the system map.'

A shimmering hologram descended from the ceiling in front of the viewport, shaking briefly as the images coalesced into form. A system map showed several worlds orbiting an orange star.

'This is Quadrant 37, ostensibly a Centauri system, but one which is in the process of being handed to the Narn – lock, stock and barrel – as part of the reparations the Republic must pay to the Regime. We are to take the *Intrepide* to this system and monitor the handover. We are quite sure the Centauri will not do anything stupid, but officially we are there to ensure everything proceeds in good faith, that all equipment is accounted for and no booby traps are left for Narn civilians to trigger.'

Badeau turned back toward Shaw and beckoned his Religious Caste guide forward. 'Bethall will show you to your locker. As you should already know, you do not get your own quarters on a White Star, just space to keep any personal belongings. The sleeping area is communal and very Minbari in style, if you take my meaning.'

Shaw was familiar with the beds the Minbari favoured, angled at forty-five degrees in the belief that to lie prone was to tempt death to come to the sleeper. Many humans integrating themselves into Minbari society had tremendous problems getting used to these sleeping arrangements,

but Shaw never had any difficulty. After a typical day of intense Ranger training, he could never understand those who did.

'Bethall will also give you a quick tour of the *Intrepide* while we prepare for take-off and leave Minbar. While on duty, and you will always be on duty while you are not sleeping or eating, you'll man the weapons. Let's see if your sharp-shooting in a real battle is as impressive as your graduation scores suggest. Any questions?'

'Uh, no, Captain. Sabine.'

'Very well. Bethall, you know what to do. I'll see you back on the bridge after your familiarisation tour. Feel free to ask Bethall anything. I want you clued up and ready for duty on your return.'

May 14th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

'Well, that brings us to the Centauri question once again, Senator.' President Susanna Luchenko had been sitting in this meeting scheduled for an hour for at least three times that long. The broad windows flanking the conference room looked out on a placid Lake Geneva, set amidst scenery that made her home city of Moscow, for all its majestic architecture, pale in comparison. The advantages to working within EarthDome, the centre of government for the entire Earth Alliance, went beyond the trappings of power. But chairing a meeting of galactic policy was not one of them.

Senator Wahid, a portly man elected from the Indonesian block, sighed and sat back in his chair. 'Perhaps, but I have to disagree with Senator Cognomi,' he said, indicating with a brief hand movement the greying but ever-alert European senator opposite him. 'It may take years for galactic trade to become stable once more. We have faced wars both here and abroad, and though the ISA promises peace there are just too many interests at stake for stability to continue. I cannot see that we have any choice but to adopt protective trade policies for our industries here on Earth and the colonies.'

Luchenko pressed an earlier point. 'It does not matter whether we consider the position of Earth nations alone or our relative position within the rest of the galaxy, the principles of capitalist economics remain the same. A protective trade policy has often led directly to recession in the past. Senator Wahid, we have four hundred years of our own history to demonstrate this.'

'At least,' agreed the European senator. 'The Earth Alliance has never seen such a boom in its economy as when we freely opened trade between ourselves and the Centauri Republic. Now that we are blockading the Centauri, under the authority of the ISA, this trade is impossible. All our current economic troubles stem from the cessation of trade between our two peoples. We must lobby the ISA to at least begin opening trade routes between the Centauri and the rest of the galaxy.'

Senator Wahid shook his head. 'We gain too much from the ISA. Our fleet has always been one of the most powerful in the galaxy, and the new technologies we are receiving from the Minbari are cementing that position. As for trade, the ISA has opened more doors than it closed, especially among the former League worlds – and in the past we thought we had already exploited the most lucrative opportunities there.'

'That is true as far as it goes, Senator,' Luchenko replied, 'but the entire League cannot match the trading power of the Centauri. They cannot even come close. Of all the other governments in the galaxy, the Centauri are most similar to us economically. They also possess a certain pragmatism in such matters that our diplomats have always found easy to work with. Without constant trade between our two peoples, Earth will never regain the position it once had in the galaxy. Indeed, we may find ourselves sliding backwards to become no more prominent than any within the former League. Would you like to see the Earth Alliance become just another non-aligned government, Senator?'

The room fell silent at that question, and more than one senator shuddered at the thought. These were men and women who were used to wielding a certain level of power on the galactic stage, and that the Earth Alliance could be anything other than a major player among alien races was an unacceptable proposition.

'There is another matter to consider, however,' continued Luchenko. 'Again, we can look to our own history for guidance. Our economy has taken a blow from cessation of trade with the Centauri. The danger to and from the Republic could be much worse. Cut off from the rest of the galaxy, the Republic could turn in upon itself and fester. Can anyone here imagine Hitler on a galactic scale? We should not risk Londo Mollari turning into that, driven on by his people who are themselves desperate to regain their former position among the other governments. However, this is precisely what the ISA is risking with their very own version of the Versailles Treaty. By bowing to the demands of the Drazi and, in particular, the Narn, it may seem they are serving justice in these reparations. But are the Narn, like France in the early 20th century, now motivated not by the need for justice but the desire for punishment? Are they not serving their own vengeance rather than what is in the best interests of the entire galaxy?

Luchenko paused to let the weight of what she said sink in. 'I see great danger ahead of us. The Centauri still have a large military, one that could possibly outmatch that of every member of the ISA. They have the resources of over two-dozen colonised systems and a level of technology that, whether we like it or not, probably still exceeds our own. They once dominated a huge swathe of the known galaxy within the greatest empire ever seen, and they know how to both conquer and rule. Just what is it we are risking by siding with the current ISA position without comment?

She turned and nodded to the politician representing the Indonesian block. 'Senator Wahid, I acknowledge your points, but I do not believe we can stand by while our allies create a monster so close to our own borders. If we can trade with the Centauri, we not only solve our own problems but theirs as well. By making them rich, we can ensure they are able to keep making reparations for their war without breaking their economy. By forcing them to become reliant on this trade, we can bring them around to our way of thinking, to our methods of government. We might even, eventually, be able to bring them back into the fold of the ISA and then maybe, just maybe, President Sheridan will finally realise his dream of galactic peace. I, for one, will not be disappointed in that future.'

CHAPTER THREE

May 23rd 2263, Babylon 5, Epsilon Eridani

Little had changed on Babylon 5 since the newly formed ISA left the neutral station to take possession of its new headquarters in Tuzanor on Minbar. Faces were different, but people tend to remain the same. Captain Lochley had proved to be a competent commander and military governor, thwarting the organised criminals who viewed the arrival of a new commander with interest, seeking potential weak spots that might aid their business. There, at least, nothing had changed since the transition from Sheridan to Lochley.

Nor had the predicted drop in traffic to the station taken place. Given its history, no one was surprised when critics of the station began, once again, to predict its downfall. They said the same thing every year. First it was believed the construction of the station would never be completed, giving way to accident or sabotage like the first three. Or maybe it would simply disappear on commission, as had Babylon 4. Then the threat of the Great War of '59 was said to make the station redundant in purpose. Other crises followed: the attempted assault on the station by President's Clark's forces in '60, its secession from the Earth Alliance, the Shadow War, the Earth Civil War in '61, Byron. Through it all, Babylon 5 endured. These days, the ISA was gone, taking everything it stood for with it, leaving the station without purpose, it was said. The truth was, despite Babylon 5 now lacking the higher-minded notions for which it had been originally built, it was still a hub for commerce, a gathering point for races across the galaxy and the only true neutral port in existence. Despite the Earth Alliance's control and the other races's vested interests, Babylon 5 was still regarded as impartial and unaligned. Even with the ISA monitoring events across the galaxy, the station's importance as a meeting place for governments, corporations and less reputable individuals never flagged.

The Zocalo, one of the main trading centres of the station and certainly the most famous, provided all the evidence supporters of Babylon 5 needed. It thrived. Big business and the major deals tended to be struck in the quieter cafes along the perimeter of the marketplace, but the smaller traders and merchants could always find a way to turn a credit in the Zocalo, even if they had to pay higher tariffs to legally trade on the station instead of their homeworlds. Most visitors to the station, which still numbered in the millions every year, passed through the Zocalo, and a clever trader could always persuade a tourist or relaxing businessman to part with their credits for the right souvenir. Babylon 5 security monitored this area almost as closely as it did customs, for nefarious dealings would likely start here. Petty thieves and pickpockets struck from time to time, but under the watchful eye of Security Chief Zack Allen, few criminals lasted long before being thrown into the brig and then deported. Rumours circulated that the notorious Thieves' Guild had taken up residence in the station's Brown Sector, but if they were here, the organised thieves were laying low.

Tim Aston was uncomfortable. Though the voyage from the transfer point off Io to Babylon 5 could not be considered long by any stretch thanks to the ever present jump gates, his shuttle was not designed for anything but interplanetary travel, and at times Aston thought he might spiral down into a gravity well within hyperspace and never be heard from again. He did not relish the thought of the return journey.

He also considered himself at odds with the general environment of the Zocalo and, with growing unease, sipped the hot liquid the trader claimed was some kind of Brakiri tea. The crowds milling around the Zocalo bothered him. It crossed his mind that he had spent too much of his life alone in the depths of space on board his shuttle, with no human contact other than a voice on the other end of a comm link. He thought of Mayfield as one of his better friends, but he doubted they had spent much time in each other's company over the years. At times he struggled to recall exactly what the man looked like.

Now he was stuck here on Babylon 5. He had never been this far from Earth's own solar system, and he found much of what he saw simply strange. Sure, he had seen aliens on Ganymede, Mars and Earth – hell, if the more right-wing news networks were to be believed, those aliens owned more real estate on Earth than humans did. Right from his entry through customs, Babylon 5 had taken his breath away. He couldn't believe so many different alien species inhabited the galaxy. After all, the galaxy seemed so small on the galactic maps. The major systems could fit onto one page in a travel guide, and hyperspace certainly belied the vast distances between them. During his bewildered walk from customs to the Zocalo, he lost count of the different aliens. Narn, Minbari, a few he recognised from the old League and many, many more he had never seen, heard or believed in. The Zocalo itself seemed to be a magnet for them, and while humans were in the majority, a sea of skin, scales, fur and feathers confronted him at every turn. He had to admit it. Life was simpler when prospecting floating rocks in space. He was out of his depth here.

Aston dreaded the thought of some alien beast walking up to him, barking in a strange but insistent tongue. He had no idea of the correct etiquette or response. He tried his best to look as if he belonged but could not stop fidgeting with his right foot.

'Mr. Aston?' The voice made him jump, and he quickly set down his tea.

'Ah, yes. Mr. Shiritori?' Aston evaluated the fair-headed man of medium build who seemed to be of European descent, despite his name. He certainly seemed more comfortable here than Aston. They shook hands and the newcomer took a seat opposite Aston, waving away the Brakiri waiter who had materialised to take his order.

Shiritori had been recommended to Aston on Ganymede by someone who promised to set up a meeting, though it had to take place out of the Earth system. After all, men like Shiritori could not be expected to roam the galaxy meeting bitter-sweat prospectors. Actually, Aston suspected Shiritori was not known to his friend on Ganymede at all but had rather been a friend of a friend of a friend. Combined with Aston's unwillingness to disclose the details of his discovery, he was frankly amazed that this man had kept the appointment. Perhaps this was the next stage of his changing luck .

After a few brief seconds of silence, Shiritori prompted him. 'Well, Mr. Aston? I was told you have something I might find interesting.'

'Well, I hope so,' said Aston. He reached into his jacket to retrieve a datapad, hoping it had not fallen through the hole in the inside pocket, forcing him to root around in the lining. He activated the flat instrument, found the right file and slid it across the table for Shiritori's inspection. The man scrutinised the screen, and Aston found himself staring hard, trying to gauge any change in expression that might betray his interest. After punching a few buttons to query the datapad, Shiritori breathed out a little too heavily for Aston's comfort. After another long pause, Shiritori set down the datapad and shook his head.

'Sorry. It's worthless.'

Aston slumped back, his shoulders low. 'Damn,' he muttered. 'Do you know what it is? Is there someone else who might be interested?' He caught Shiritori's stare. 'I really need to make this work. Without some attention my shuttle might not even make it back to Earth, and I am all tapped out from the docking fees here.'

Shiritori pursed his lips. 'It's Narn. No idea how it ended up in the asteroid belt. Probably some trader who suffered a navigational malfunction and flew into a rock. Can happen.' Aston had suffered enough mishaps in his own shuttle to know the truth of this. Through his dejection, he forced himself to listen to Shiritori. 'It's a fuel cell, nothing more. Most of the charge has dissipated. I doubt even a collector would be interested.'

He watched Aston's head lower and, with a thoughtful expression, picked up the datapad again. 'You really cannot get back to Earth without selling this?'

Aston looked up again. 'No. I really thought I had something. Thought my luck had changed.'

'Well. . .' Shiritori considered. 'Did you bring it through customs or is it still on your shuttle?'

'I left it in my hold.'

'Okay. Maybe, just maybe, I might know of someone who could renovate this fuel cell. They are in Abbai space and will be hard to track down. I can't give you much for this, but if you really are desperate I might be able to give you enough to get back to Io, perhaps even get some of those repairs you need done.'

Aston perked up immediately. 'Really?'

Raising a hand, Shiritori said, 'Now I don't do this for everyone, but I have been where you are. I was once stuck on this station for six months before I could raise enough money to leave. Had to live in Downbelow and everything. Wouldn't wish that on anyone. I can't have others knowing about this soft spot though, or everyone will want a favour. If you promise to keep our arrangement quiet, I think I can see my clear to giving you, say, four thousand for it?'

Four thousand? Now that was real money. Not as much as Aston had hoped for but more than he had expected. With four thousand credits, he could do at least most of the updates and repairs needed on his shuttle. Maybe even pick up a new sensor array that would make Mayfield envious.

'I give you my word. No one will know. I told no one up to now and can keep quiet after this.' He did not notice the man's extra attention on him as he said this. Shiritori smiled sympathetically and, after keying an instruction to the datapad, slid it across the table, keeping his thumb on one half of the registration interface.

'Give me a thumb print and the money will be deposited into your account immediately.'

Aston could not do that fast enough.

'Good to do business with you, Mr. Aston. I hope you get to back to Earth space safely. I'll send some people to your shuttle to pick the fuel cell up within the hour.'

Shiritori stood with a hand outstretched, and Aston clumsily copied his actions as they shook on the deal. He sat back down as Shiritori walked away and rapidly disappeared among the crowd of the Zocalo. Waving the Brakiri waiter back over, he ordered a beer to go. After all, he could afford it now.

Hastening back to his rented quarters in Red Sector, Shiritori immediately crossed the living space of the none-too-spacious room and sat down in front of his universal

computer link. He first sent an audio-only message to his ship's crew in the docking port of the station to arrange the pickup of the device he had just bought. He had clocked Aston before they had exchanged more than a few words. One of countless millions in the galaxy trying to scratch a living in space and failing spectacularly. Now the man had thought he hit the big time. In a way, it was a shame he had run into a fence like Shiritori. Still, Aston's poor luck and judgement might well be Shiritori's fortune. Literally. He had been right in suggesting that Aston might have ended up in Downbelow, but it had not been charity that moved him to make an offer. Not by a long shot. Shiritori had never spent more than a few hours in Downbelow, and then only to track down a debtor or someone who could not travel freely around the station for 'legal' reasons. Still, the story had seemed right. He called up the interstellar comm links on his screen and, engaging his personal encryption system, sent a text-only message to his contact in the Centauri Republic.

Have something interesting. Strange but extremely strong energy emissions. Presumed to be Dilgar design. Two million credits.

June 4th 2263, Quadrant 37

Using a Centauri naming system that had not been repeated since the Republic sprawled across the known galaxy, Quadrant 37 endured a short but violent history. No sentient species had developed on any of the system's six planets, and only one of the stellar bodies held both an atmosphere and enough mineral resources to make colonisation worthwhile. Its chief value, however, was as a strategic conduit between the Narn Regime and Centauri Republic. Whoever controlled Quadrant 37 had a tangible advantage over the other in the event of war.

Quadrant 37 was first officially claimed by the Centauri as they began to spread across the galaxy to create their great empire. The Centauri all but ignored it as a worthless system, and they never settled or attempted colonisation. As their empire faltered and began to contract from pressures of other emerging races, the Narn became ascendant, throwing off the shackles of their Centauri oppressors and stretching forth their own hand across the stars. The shrinking of the Centauri Republic hastened as the Narn made war against them, and it took many systems to bleed their raw fury. The Narn finally stopped at Quadrant 37, claiming it as theirs and constructing an outpost – along with what they called a civilian colony. This colony was little more than a listening post, and the Centauri took every opportunity to vigorously complain about its existence. Their empire was crumbling, their voices little more than the impotent cry of a great civilisation long past its time. The Centauri would certainly not risk going to war over a world with so little to offer no matter what the Narn used it for.

The balance changed in 2258 when the Centauri finally began to find the will to strike at the Narn. Quadrant 37 was the first system the Centauri struck, harnessing a powerful and ancient alien race known as the Shadows, wiping out the Narn colony within minutes. After the death of Emperor Turhan and a further attack against another planetary system in Quadrant 14, Centauri forces flowed into Regime space to enslave their age-old enemy once more. Even when the Narn forced invaders from their homeworld for the second time in history, the Centauri were able to retain possession of the strategically important but otherwise fairly worthless Quadrant 37. Wait long enough, however, and everything changes. On this day, Quadrant 37 was being returned to the Narn as part of the reparations the Centauri were being forced to pay the governments of the ISA. It had been an easy system to let go, as it represented billions of credits of reparations that the Centauri government no longer had to pay.

Shaw considered the system's brief history as he gazed at its second and 'main' planet, steadily growing larger as the *Intrepide* sped through space towards its rendezvous with Narn and Centauri politicians on its surface. He started slightly as Badeau's voice floated up from close behind.

'Strange, isn't it?' she asked. 'A planet so dead and yet so valued by some. Is it, I wonder, worth the blood that has been spilt here?'

He turned to face his Captain. 'Well, the Narn certainly think so. I heard they gave up billions of credits for this place.'

Badeau looked directly into his eyes. 'But why? Why do you think it is so precious to them?'

'Well, not for the resources. . .'

'Certainly not. Barely worth the effort when you have as many systems under your control as the Regime does.'

'Its strategic position then.'

Badeau gave a small sigh – a little sadly, Shaw thought. 'Yes,' she said. 'Even now, the Narn are considering the day when they will fight the Centauri once more. I have heard it said that both the Narn and Centauri are lost people, that the galaxy should just blink and let them pass. I have no doubt it would be easier for everyone concerned, and yet how can we take that seriously?'

'There is some argument to suggest that the Narn have rights to this place. Both sides have agreed to swap Quadrant 37 for a portion of the reparations due to the Regime . This may help keep the peace between them.'

'Will it?' Badeau raised an eyebrow and then shook her head. 'We are here as peacekeepers, but I fear we are doing nothing more than giving the Narn a position of advantage for the future. They will either use it or the Centauri will fight against it. I believe that when the Centauri pulled out of the ISA, we lost our last, best hope for peace between them and the Narn.'

'Captain – Sabine. You seem. . . at a loss. You think this is, what, a fool's errand?'

'I don't know. We all do what we can and, as Rangers, we are here to make sure the transfer takes place smoothly and the present peace is continued. I do not know what evil we serve in the future. Give me the squabbles among the old League, the hunger for technology of the Earth Alliance or any one of the galaxy's other perpetual problems. I genuinely believe the ISA is a force of good and that it can resolve them all. Except for this. Except for the enmity, no, the raw hatred the Narn and Centauri have for one another. It has gone beyond a racial thing. It has become bred into them, at a genetic level possibly. I don't know how to even begin solving it. I *do* know that if a galaxy-spanning war ever begins again, it will start on this border. Perhaps even in this system.'

The two Rangers stood in silence, lost in their own thoughts as they watched the brown and lifeless planet move ever closer. The Minbari crew worked calmly at their stations, decelerating the *Intrepide* and manoeuvring it into low orbit. When one of the helmsmen reported that the lone Centauri outpost had been located, Badeau gave the order to begin the landing cycle and returned to her Captain's chair.

Retreating to his station, Shaw performed routine checks until one of the Minbari behind him reported that two contacts had been detected, also in orbit. Both the Narn and Centauri had sent warships to monitor the transfer of ownership and, true to their eternal rivalry, neither had bothered sending a frigate when a much larger ship would serve just as well. The Centauri Primus-class battlecruiser and Narn G'Quan-class heavy cruiser hung in space above the descending White Star, motionless but facing each other with, it seemed, barely contained malice. Shaw could tell from his console that neither had powered up their weaponry, but he felt it an ominous sign that both governments had felt the need to send warships of this size. Few vessels in either fleet were larger or more powerful and yet, when all was said and done, this was a simple diplomatic exchange.

The *Intrepide* rocked gently, buffeted by the atmosphere of the desolate world officially called Quadrant 37/2 by the Centauri. The crew on board felt little disturbance as the White Star's gravitic drive worked to smooth out all bumps and shimmies. The helmsmen worked skilfully to slow the *Intrepide* to a crawl as it approached the outpost's landing bay, circling once before deploying the landing gear and making a soft touchdown between two shuttles.

Badeau stood from her seat and turned to face Shaw. 'Well, we are here. Let's see what good we can do.' Giving her normal standing orders to the Minbari crew, she left the bridge with Shaw following close behind. As they walked down the boarding ramp, they spied a Narn and Centauri waiting for them by the outpost's landing bay entrance.

'Remember, we are officially here to ensure the Centauri do nothing to harm the Narn cause during this transfer,' Badeau whispered. 'However, don't trust either of them completely. There is too much at stake for the Narn, the Centauri *and* us.'

The Centauri stepped forward first to extend his arms. 'Welcome, my dear Rangers. I offer you the Hands of Friendship. I am Principal Turquon, representative of the Centauri Republic.'

A Principal, thought Shaw. A low-ranking official intended as a calculated insult to the Narn? That might not bode well, but if the Centauri could limit themselves to a minor slight, this mission might still go according to plan.

'Thank you, Turquon. I accept the Hands of Friendship,' Badeau said as she clasped the Centauri at the forearms. 'I am Sabine Badeau of the Anla'Shok, and this is my assistant, Michael Shaw.' She turned to the Narn and saluted in his race's fashion, two fists drawn against the chest while performing a slight bow of respect.

The Narn returned the salute and bow. 'I bring the greetings and gratitude of the Narn Regime for overseeing the lawful transfer of Quadrant 37. I am Na'Quil, Third Circle. May we offer you refreshments after your long voyage?'

'Thank you, no. We ate just before we jumped in-system, and there is much work to be done,' replied Badeau.

'Of course. Please, follow me and I'll give you a tour of the facilities.'

As the large reinforced door to the outpost swung slowly open, Shaw noticed the Centauri staring quite openly at the *Intrepide*. As Turquon turned to follow the party into the outpost, he caught Shaw's eye and smiled.

'That is a nice ship. I have never seen one up close. I don't suppose a reciprocal tour would be possible?'

Shaw was a little startled by the Centauri's directness and cast a look at Badeau, but she was already inside the outpost. 'I, ah, don't think that will be possible, Principal.'

Turquon shrugged. 'Such is my luck. Sent light years away to sign away an entire system, and I don't even get a close look at one of the most beautiful ships flying.' He smiled once more. 'Don't worry, Mr. Shaw. We Centauri are not here to take advantage of anyone, despite our decision to leave the ISA. I am not going to cause you any trouble.'

After the Shadows' assault on Quadrant 37, nothing had been left of the original Narn outpost but rubble. Having little to gain by picking over twisted metal and broken Narn bodies, the Centauri simply built their own outpost when they recovered the system. With a full war raging at the time, few resources were diverted into making the place little more than a relay station for communications between the invading fleet and Centauri Prime. A nod had been paid to the Centauri's love of creature comforts but, at its heart, the outpost was little more than several

spartan living quarters, a maintenance bay and a power station bolted to an operations centre. Even hydroponics were lacking here, and it soon became obvious to the Rangers that all consumables had been regularly shipped to Quadrant 37 from more prosperous worlds. For a system that held little importance beyond the strategic level, and with the Republic apparently reluctant to start a war any time soon, the Centaurum must have seen this as an expensive luxury. Perhaps here was a clue as to why the Republic had been so quick to relinquish control of Quadrant 37.

The Rangers' orders were to ensure the peaceful transfer of the system from Centauri to Narn hands, but this mission carried the implicit instruction to prevent any disturbance in the future too. This secondary goal merely called for a studious attention to detail while they were in the system, until the treaty of transfer was signed. The first would be a little more problematic, Shaw guessed, if the Primus and G'Quan high in orbit were to open fire upon one another. The White Star was the most powerful ship of its size in the galaxy, but a single vessel could do little if the two frontline warships engaged each other.

Fortunately, that seemed unlikely. Badeau was pleasantly surprised that the Narn and Centauri delegates refrained from snide and pointed comments aimed at the other, though there was clearly no love lost between them. While she performed an extensive sweep of the outpost for potential booby traps, Badeau ordered Shaw to check personnel manifests to verify that all Centauri present were actually leaving. Suicide troops were more the style of the Narn back when the Centauri occupied their world, but nothing could be left to chance between these two governments. Anything could be used as an excuse for war later.

Shaw's duty was no more glamorous than Badeau's, and he thought more than once that all those months training with the Denn'Bok might have been wasted if this is what Rangers in the field spent most of their time doing. Still, it was his first mission, and he had no intention of disappointing the Captain. No matter what duties she placed before him, no matter how dangerous, odious or just plain boring, he resolved to approach them all with the same zeal that had seen him through training. The personnel check first took him to the operations centre, where he downloaded the outpost's records onto a datapad. Cross-referencing the records with those given to the Rangers by the Anla'Shok analysts on Tuzanor raised no alarms, though he was aware that the ISA's intelligence on Centauri personnel could not be regarded as complete. He then arranged for all remaining Centauri in the outpost to funnel through the access corridor to their shuttle, identifying each one in turn, then crossing them off his datapad.

Halfway through the task, Shaw grew uneasy. As he checked off the last few Centauri workers, he knew his suspicions were justified. With all Centauri in the outpost now on their shuttle awaiting the Ranger's permission to depart, six names remained unchecked on his datapad. At first he doubted himself, thinking he *must* have missed something, made a rookie's mistake. However, a review of the process revealed no error on his part. According to the records provided by the analysts, six Centauri were missing. Perhaps the information provided by the analysts was incorrect? He headed back into the outpost to find Badeau and Turquon.

Intending to look first among the living quarters, where he had last seen his captain and the delegates, he caught the sound of laughter coming from the operations centre and changed course. He found the trio engaged in light conversation, Badeau evidently having finished her sweep of the outpost. She and Turquon were smiling at some shared joke. Na'Quil looked a little. . . smug would be the word Shaw would choose. Then again, his government was gaining a world they had bled hard for in the past with no more effort than the signing of a treaty. Badeau looked up as he entered.

'Everything check out?'

'Er, well almost. Principal Turquon, I have just one query.'

'Of course,' purred the Centauri. 'Anything to help our friends among the Rangers.'

'I've checked and double-checked the personnel here against the records, and it seems there are six missing. Namely Danallis, Maladi, Caius, Kolonar, Nandra and Varga. Your records indicate they were all scientists.'

'Let me see that,' said Badeau, suddenly serious. She studied the datapad as Turquon spoke.

'Yes, I remember. A tragic incident.' Turquon had adopted a sorrowful tone. 'We were looking at the possibility of terraforming one or more worlds in Quadrant 37 in the hope of establishing a more permanent colony. Those were the scientists directed to begin research here, but their ship met with a hyperspace accident, and they were lost en route.'

'So why wasn't this recorded?' asked Badeau.

'An oversight on the part the outpost's clerks, I would imagine. They must have recorded the ship's destruction in the very least. Let me see.' Turquon moved to a console and begun punching buttons on a display. 'Yes. Here it is. Ah, sorry, let me translate it to English.' He typed in another command and moved aside for the Rangers to see.

Shaw scanned the text in front of him and, indeed, the names of the scientists had been recorded as those lost on board a transport bound for Quadrant 37, the *Valance*. A malfunction of the jump engines had destroyed the ship as it attempted to enter realspace. A rare accident these days, but it did happen. Perhaps all the more likely if stories of the Republic's ailing economy were to believed, he surmised. He glanced at Badeau, and she gave him a quick nod.

'Everything seems in order gentlemen. Unless there is anything either of you wish to bring to our attention?' she asked.

As one, the Narn and Centauri delegates shook their heads. Badeau produced her own datapad and called up the treaty that would formerly hand over Quadrant 37 to the Narn Regime, then placed it on a nearby work surface. Turquon and Na'Quil placed their own next to hers.

Badeau spoke first. 'I witness the transfer of Quadrant 37 from the sovereignty of the Centauri Republic to the Narn Regime. I hereby declare all resolutions of the treaty have been observed by all parties involved.' With this, she pressed her thumb on the registration interface of first her datapad, then the Narn's and finally the Centauri's.

Turquon was next, but his words were simple. 'All resolutions have been observed, Quadrant 37 now belongs to the Regime.' He pressed his thumb to all three datapads.

Finally, Na'Quil spoke. 'I bear witness to Quadrant 37 being returned to its rightful and lawful owners. All treaty resolutions have been observed.' Shaw glanced at Turquon as the Narn added his thumbprint to the treaty, but the Centauri did not seem to even notice Na'Quil's less-than-diplomatic words. In fact, Shaw thought he looked resigned.

'Gentlemen, I thank you for your part in making this transfer of sovereignty quick and peaceful,' Badeau said formerly. 'Na'Quil, your people can begin landing as soon as Principal Turquon's shuttle has docked with his ship. I hope you enjoy your duties here.' She gave the Narn his salute and, once again, it was returned. 'Principal Turquon?'

'After you, my lady, please,' he said gallantly, sweeping an arm to indicate she should lead the way out of the outpost.

Na'Quil did not follow them out, and Shaw heard the operations centre's main computer systems being re-initiated as they walked down the main access corridor. At the landing bay, both Badeau and Shaw exchanged the Arms of Friendship with Turquon.

'It was a pleasure to meet the two of you,' the Centauri said. 'I never met a Ranger before today and heard many things about you, both strange and terrifying. Working with you today gives me hope that one day the Republic might once again consider joining your Alliance.'

'The door is always open, Principal,' replied Badeau. 'Perhaps you ought to talk to the others in the Centaurum.'

'I fear they would pay little attention to me, my dear. Do you think they would send anyone important to a world the Great Maker himself has forsaken?' Turquon smiled. 'No, I am afraid the Republic and your Alliance must clash a little while longer yet. Politically, certainly – hopefully not militarily. I am sincere in my hope for closer relations, but it won't happen in our life times. I would bet a lot on that.'

He nodded to Badeau and then turned to walk to his shuttle.

'Come on,' said Badeau. 'It would be an insult to the Narn if we gave close escort to that shuttle, but we can at least keep within striking distance.'

'Trouble?' asked Shaw.

'I don't think so, but it would be stupid to let something happen now. And I think we need more Centauri like that in the Republic.'

They hastened aboard the *Intrepide* and took off quickly, shadowing the Centauri shuttle at a distance until it cleared the atmosphere and made its approach to the Primus battlecruiser. Within moments, it had docked with the huge warship, which soon made a slow turn before firing up its immense engines and heading away from the planet's gravity well, where it could make the jump to hyperspace safely. Soon after, the White Star's crew began to detect several shuttles leaving the G'Quan, all carrying personnel to re-staff the outpost. No doubt more than one of them also carried advanced intelligence gathering equipment that would soon be penetrating deep into Centauri space. Their mission complete, Badeau ordered the *Intrepide* to break orbit and open a jump point itself.

The White Star was not long in hyperspace before Badeau called Shaw forward. 'So, how do you think that went? And how well do you think you did?' she asked.

'Well, the mission was a success,' he said and paused to gauge Badeau's reaction. When she continued to just look at him, he felt forced to continue. 'We were charged with ensuring a peaceful handover, and that is what we achieved. Neither party seemed aggressive towards the other, and the treaty was signed. The Centauri left and the Narn took over.' He paused again as he considered the day's events. 'Still. . .'

'Yes?' she prompted.

'Well, I didn't say anything else while we were down there, as you just glossed over it. I figured you had your reasons. But those missing Centauri are bugging me. It's a loose end.'

'Ah, yes, you have it precisely,' she encouraged. 'Now, what do you think is happening?'

Shaw thought hard. With just the information they had seen today, few solid conclusions could be formed. He had been trained to speculate, however, though it had also been hammered into him not to rely solely on those speculations. Imagination was not a trait that was knocked out of Rangers during their training, but it was something to be tempered. Did Sabine have information he lacked? Possibly, but he knew he wasn't expected to act on that, merely put the pieces he did have together.

'Well,' he began. 'Sending scientists to terraform the system makes no sense. That takes years, decades even, and they must have known months ago that Quadrant 37 was being

handed back to the Narn. These things do not get agreed overnight. So that was a lie. The scientists were intended for something else. The ship destroying itself as it activated its jump engines is a possibility, given how much we have heard about the state of Centauri shipping since the reparations started. On the other hand, if an assassination was planned, sabotaged jump engines would not be the first time it had been attempted in the Republic. Na'Quil did not push the matter, so either he believed the Centauri, which is unlikely, or he assumed it was something relatively harmless. Or, he thought it was a purely internal matter for the Centauri – feuding Houses or something.'

Badeau nodded slowly as she leaned back in her seat and propped her chin with a hand. 'Good. You found the essential truth – that Turquon, however pleasant he seemed, was lying. Your speculations are more or less on course as well. You missed one item of information which would push you in one direction but then, you weren't primed to look for it.'

Shaw frowned. 'What did I miss?' he asked, beginning to curse himself for being inattentive. As a Ranger, he had been trained to pick up any pattern during analysis. Coming consistently near the top in Denn'Bok training was no excuse for not concentrating on more cerebral lessons. Of course, for the Minbari, they were both much the same.

'All six came from House Kaado. Two were using an alias of House Ardo, which is what threw you off. However, I am confident that when checking begins on Tuzanor, we'll find those aliases confirmed.'

'I am not sure I was supposed to have known that,' he said, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

'As I said, you had not been primed to spot it. In my briefing before we left Minbar, I was told that intelligence was being sought on House Kaado from all Rangers operating near the Centauri border. It was a minor thing, and you'll find we get dozens of such requests with every mission. This time it might have paid off. Anyway, now you know that, what are your conclusions?'

Shaw felt he was on firmer ground now. 'It has nothing to do with the Narn. It is a feud between Houses. Intelligence must be watching the rivalries between the Great Houses of the Republic. These scientists were assassinated by enemies of their House.'

'I'll go you one better. It still makes little sense for scientists to be sent to an outpost to start a project when the entire system is being handed over to another government. Consider this – suppose those scientists are not dead?'

Pursuing his lips, Shaw was silent for a few seconds. 'Wow' was all he said at first. Finally finding his voice, he said, 'Kidnapped, maybe. Probably not as hostages but for what they know.' He stopped, considering another possibility. 'Or House Kaado themselves made the scientists disappear. Which means whatever they are doing, the House wants kept secret from the rest of the Republic.'

'Personally, I don't like either possibility,' said Badeau. 'Oh, I don't know which it could be, if it is either. I have no details on House Kaado. I was simply handed the request for more information. Still, it means that as well as completing our mission, we may have picked up something the Ranger-Analysts can use. If so, we can consider that a bonus, though we may never know the final result.'

She sat up straight and crossed her legs. 'Despite the 'great' galactic ramifications, it was a simple mission. You did well enough, but let's see if we can get you doing something a little more complex next. Get some rest for now. I'll transmit our mission briefing to Tuzanor and see where we are to head next.'

Walking to the White Star's sleeping quarters, deep in the belly of the ship, Shaw was suddenly surprised at how tired he was. The Captain was right: the mission had not been especially complicated, but he had been on edge all day, not wanting to make the slightest mistake. He had managed to perform his tasks without any errors. Without stopping to grab something to eat, he simply lay back on one of the angled Minbari-style sleeping couches and closed his eyes. Within minutes he was asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

June 17th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

If viewed casually by the average Centauri noble, Veneta Kaado's manor would seem the same as it always had done. Certainly, a few more royal guardsmen were in evidence, patrolling its gardens and outbuildings, but then the new head of House Kaado was given to vulgar displays of power and influence. Some might say his flaunting of both was even more distasteful recently and that Veneta Kaado might be advised to take more care in what he displayed to the outside world. After all, Centauri society would only tolerate so much self-indulgence. The same nobles given to these musings, however, would just as likely put the flourish of guardsmen down to an overenthusiastic display of celebration for Veneta's good fortune. Or perhaps they might surmise he truly needed them. After all, he gained his position as head of House Kaado through circumstances which, if not overtly suspicious, certainly gave rise to many rumours. They might assume Veneta's hold on his House was weak and he feared other rising nobles with the will and ambition to steal his position. So, Veneta Kaado could be considered strong and able to display frivolous indications of his power, or maybe he was weak and desperately trying to ward a strike against his position. Which would it likely be?

Such were the vagaries of Centauri politics.

Nestled between rolling hills outside of the capital, Veneta's manor was another of his uncle's possessions, perhaps the one he coveted the most. Close enough to Imperial City to make journeys

there convenient and yet far enough away to have escaped the bombardment of the Narn-led attack on Centauri Prime half a year before, the manor reflected Veneta's new power. Some estates were wiped off the map by the tremendous energies that were unleased on the Centauri population, unintended targets and collateral damage in the attack. The deaths of those influential Centauri nobles caught in the strike caused a scramble for power in the Centaurum, and many benefited from the misfortune of others.

The extra royal guardsmen were a condition laid upon Veneta by his visitors today, and he suspected the demands were as much a test of his political power as a security measure. Here, in his personal home, he conducted his most critical meetings. Veneta could call upon support and influence others into his way of thinking here and be reasonably sure that word would not immediately get back to the Emperor.

But today was different. His meeting today was not with followers or sycophants, no matter how much he might inwardly enjoy the presence of both. Instead, he was meeting with his peers, other heads of Houses and high-ranking members of the Centaurum who shared his views on the Republic's future – and were willing to do something to change their own fates. All had vested interests, of course. In Centauri politics, that went without question. The difference here was that each had been personally affected by either the Republic's isolation from the galaxy or the reparations Emperor Mollari had agreed to. What had begun as a few whispers in the shadowy corners of banquets and official gatherings had grown into a full-blown conspiracy.

In terms of raw power, Veneta Kaado was a relatively small player in august company. He expertly played to the vanities of each member present and, more importantly, was willing to take the risks others were keen to avoid. If their meeting today were discovered, for example, the others would no doubt make some suitable excuse as to how they had been duped. Because the gathering took place on his property, however, he would be labelled as the head conspirator and pay the price. Veneta had no illusions that the others were doing anything but minimising the risk to their own necks, but his bold moves allowed him to conspire with them as an equal, and some here might even defer to him. Conspiracies had their own set of politics, and Veneta quickly learned them all. Taking these risks would confer real power on him in the larger world of the Centaurum, even if not everyone he dealt with understood quite why.

Getting the three other members of Centauri nobility currently sitting in his boardroom to meet without guards or flunkies present was difficult but necessary if the conspiracy was to continue. Veneta gazed out of the large tinted window that overlooked his extensive gardens, watching the low sun play across the leaves of Taafa trees and Starlaces fluttering in the gentle breeze. These and other exotic plants flanked a sculpted lake that extended out of view. Veneta allowed himself to dream of the Republic reaching forth across the galaxy once more. Then, perhaps, things would regain a sense of normality, and the money and power would flow freely once more.

Veneta looked up as Minister Kallafa of House Verlime began talking again. Despite House Verlime's relatively poor standing in the Centaurum, he was allowed into the conspiracy to perform an act that even Veneta had been forced to defer on. Every conspiracy had a weak point, and Verlime was it for this one. It had not been spoken aloud, but every other member present knew that should anything go wrong, it would be House Verlime that acted the scapegoat. If everything went according to plan, Verlime would have a chance to reverse some of his recent misfortunes and set his star rising once more. That, and being forced to listen to his opinions, seemed a small enough price to pay.

'Under Kaado's directions,' Verlime nodded at Veneta, 'I have arranged for transports to be in the Coutor system every other week, ready to transport the, ah, device whenever it is ready. Anyone checking the manifests will see only the new supply treaty signed by our Houses.'

Kallafa Verlime was a skinny and rakish man, his greying hair arranged into the large, wide crest that nobles seeking to grasp power adopted, the style being reminiscent of the current Emperor's. Naturally, it was common in the royal court as well. For all their faults, the rest of the nobles present, Veneta included, wore the more restrained crest that simply extended upwards and not out. They were confident in themselves and certain of their power.

'Has the egress route from the Republic been determined?' asked Minister Territt, a noble who clearly enjoyed the vices his position granted and was certainly the most overweight Centauri that Veneta had ever seen.

'Yes, Minister,' said Verlime, a little too smoothly, as if he were trying too hard to ingratiate himself into his present company. 'We have human smugglers prepared to take the cargo from my transport into the Narn Regime, and then route it through several different systems and ports to Babylon 5. With new shipping documents, it will be relatively easy for our people to send it into the Earth Alliance.' He seemed suitably pleased with his work though, in truth, his part began and ended in Republic space. Veneta's own smuggling contacts had allowed the Narn to be used in this way, and Minister Territt's people stood ready on Babylon 5.

'I am still a little uncomfortable sending something so valuable so close to our greatest enemy.' Minister Tannama spoke up, a noble who favoured the heavy gold-braided clothing fashionable a century or more ago when the Republic had been at its greatest. It was a fashion few others chose to adopt. This was also not the first concern that the minister had raised for their plans.

'Our strategy has never been without risks,' Territt reminded him. 'The Narn have the technology least likely to detect the cargo as it passes through their worlds. And it need not remain there long on its journey.'

'It is also necessary if we are to implicate the Narn should anything go wrong,' Veneta said. 'We have little choice. Would you prefer to send it through the Minbari Federation or on a long hyperspace voyage to the League, where we may never see it again? Discovery by either route would surely be inevitable and make it harder for us to force everyone's hand in the right direction.'

'How goes the work of your scientists, Kaado?' Territt asked.

Veneta took a breath before answering. 'In theory, we could go now. We know how the device is activated and have already adapted it to fit a fuse dependant on both time and galactic co-ordinates. What we don't know is how effective the device actually is, as our intelligence on the Dilgar and what they were capable of was never extensive. We believe this device was one of several, each capable of linking to the others to magnify their effects. Together, they might have been capable of destroying an entire world. On its own. . . we don't know. There is a lot of power in that device, and my people believe it is designed to attack a planet's crust. The area of effect is probably measurable in hundreds of miles. Maybe more. Given where we intend to place it, however, I would vouch for it being enough. Given more time, I would like to continue the development of duplicates.'

Minister Territt shook his head. 'That is a luxury. If this device fails to get through to the target, we cannot guarantee that others will. Given your assurances for its effects, I believe we already have what we need. You mentioned before that duplicates would likely require materials only found on the Dilgar's homeworld?'

'It looks that way. As you pointed out then, we have no reasonable way to get to Omelos safely, and there is no certainty that those materials can still be found there after their star went nova.'

'Agreed. You'll take care of your scientists and anyone else who came into contact with the device?'

'Consider it done.'

'What about escalation?' This was probably the first pertinent question Veneta had heard Verlime ask since he had first met the noble.

'I will use a favour owed to me by someone I have in the military,' replied Territt. 'We'll have a state of mobilisation throughout our border worlds. It will look as though the order came from the Emperor himself.'

'That's the bit I always enjoyed,' said Veneta. 'Once an attack is made, the Emperor *must* go along with it. If he denies it, he looks weak and unable to control the Republic.'

'Indeed,' answered Territt. 'However, I long ago ceased relying on Mollari to do the right thing. Therefore, my contact will have a full squadron of battlecruisers under his direct control and, for the right price, is willing to start direct hostilities. At the very least, Earth starts sending fleets to our borders, preparing to retaliate. If our own ships are close enough, combat is inevitable.'

'Agreed,' Veneta nodded.

'I actually prefer that scenario,' said Territt. 'It gets our fleet into play early. Our people must become used to not just war again but *victory*. If we can mobilise our fleet and claim early successes, there will be a landslide of opinion in the Centaurum that even our idiot Emperor won't be able to ignore. That, I think, is where we can withdraw safely to the shadows and let events take their course. The revenue of dozens of newly conquered worlds, let alone the increased contracts from our own military, should strengthen our Houses for the next century. We need never reveal our part in things.'

Veneta smiled at this. 'Unless it should become politically useful, of course.'

'Of course.'

A thought crossed Veneta's mind. 'Has Durla been successfully isolated from all of this?'

Durla was a minor noble who recently leaped over the heads of many of his peers when the Emperor appointed him as Minister of Internal Security. An odd appointment, many thought, and there were whispers of some hold the Minister had over the Emperor. He had yet to make his presence felt within the Centaurum, but many considered him a man to be watched, as he obviously possessed unseen political strength.

Minister Territt nodded. 'Durla is an unknown quantity in our plans, but he has only been in play for a few months. By using our own people and calling in only the most solid of favours, I cannot see how he can interfere with what we are doing. In any case, events will soon be elevated beyond his position when the military becomes involved. We only need be concerned if things go wrong,' he finished with a wry smile that only Veneta shared.

The conspirators were silent for a few long seconds before Tannama coughed. 'I would like to raise one matter again.'

Territt raised his head slightly to acknowledge him. *Great Maker, don't do it*, thought Veneta. He was half expecting the objection but believed that not even Tannama was as naive as this.

'Our ultimate goal is to reverse the fortunes of the Republic and, with it, our own. I don't believe we should go to war to achieve this. We risk much, and war is a costly business.'

'No, Tannama,' said Territt. 'You fail to grasp the realities of the position of the Republic in the galaxy. We still have the largest active military force outside the Narn Regime, and our fleet is far superior. You also fail to understand internal economics. War is indeed costly for the Republic, but we will be the ones who benefit

from that spending. That is the point. Someone always gets rich from war, and it is our turn now.'

'But with our knowledge, we could be at the forefront of any trade negotiations we wished. Perhaps if we began lobbying the ISA to open trade again. Even if that did not work, there are many within the League who might be sympathetic to our position – they would certainly have plenty to gain.'

'No!' Territt slapped his hand down on the arm of his chair, silencing the now humbled Minister. 'We talked about this before and we agreed – you agreed – to our current course of action.'

'I did not think things would get this far,' mumbled Tannama. 'I am sorry, gentlemen. I do not think I can countenance the loss of life we are discussing, on either side. I believe there are better ways and, in good conscience, I cannot continue with this.'

A palpable silence hung over the group , and Tannama fidgeted nervously.

'That is understandable, Minister,' said Territt. 'No one is here against their will. However, I must insist that you leave now and no longer be party to our plans. I also advise you not to discuss this with anyone.'

'Of course!' Tannama seemed relieved. 'You have my word.'

He stood up and bowed to the three other nobles. Veneta smiled at Tannama as he turned and walked to the door. It opened automatically and the two royal guardsmen outside stood rigidly to attention. Veneta caught the eye of one and gave an almost imperceptible nod. The guard closed the door behind Tannama before the quiet of the room was shattered by two impossibly loud PPG blasts. Veneta heard Tannama's body hit the floor, followed by the scraping sounds of him being dragged down the hallway.

Verlime had jumped up in shock, his eyes nearly bulging out of his skull, an almost comical effect when combined with his huge hair crest. Territt and Veneta remained seated, their eyes fixed upon one another as they both smiled. They had known Tannama was weak, but his presence had been required during the preliminary phases of their plan, as he brought many people in high places necessary to them. Gradually, they usurped his position by making offers to those same people, persuading them to work for the conspirators rather than Tannama. Verlime was beginning to gibber slightly at his comrade's sudden exit from life, but he was incidental, useful only for his ability to ship the Dilgar device across the galaxy – and to act as a scapegoat, should they need one. The stage now belonged to Veneta and Territt, and both recognised something familiar in the other. Veneta did not have any great personal feelings toward Territt, but he knew the man was a political soulmate, someone he could work very closely with, just as he knew that, one day, Territt would have to be removed if he was to realise his ambitions. No doubt Territt thought the same of him. That was a power play to take place later, however. For now they both had too much work and too much to gain.

June 17th 2263, Coutor

There was a harsh glory to the second planet in the Coutor system, just two jumps from Babylon 5 and yet considered to be a frontier world in the Republic. An ancient race had once ruled this world, millennia ago, but they were gone and their legacy was a terraforming attempt gone awry. Instead of a verdant, trackless wilderness, arid deserts covered the world, the permanent dry heat creating huge expanses of desiccated forests. Coutor briefly enjoyed some importance in the Republic when archaeological expeditions unearthed ruins holding technological secrets of the older race, which the Centauri greedily plundered. Such treasures were thoroughly pillaged, and the world was now only plundered for a mineral wealth considered hardly exceptional. House Kaado retained mining rights, but Veneta was more interested in the distance Coutor stood from the better-travelled regions of the Republic.

When the conspirators purchased their Dilgar artefact from a fence on Babylon 5, House Kaado took possession of it, transporting the device to a wild region of broken rock in the northern hemisphere. Officially, this tiny outpost was a central base for prospecting in the area, seemingly a desperate attempt by House Kaado to wring a little more profit from the almost worthless planet. No one in the Centaurum would pay it any heed.

Pressed for time, scientists of House Kaado worked hard to uncover the secrets of the Dilgar, but their progress was only marginally successful. Like so many others in the galaxy, Veneta Kaado was not wholly interested in how things worked but was eminently willing to use them.

The order for the device to be shipped off planet to a waiting transport in orbit did not surprise the scientists. Their profession was often taken for granted in the Republic, and a society that accepted the products of science but rejected its methods rarely held its practitioners in much regard. Resolved to this course of action, the six scientists and their assistants began to gather their belongings to prepare for transport, hopefully to the better climes of Centauri Prime. Leaving Coutor was reward enough in itself.

Their surprise was somewhat complete when a team of royal guardsmen arrived by shuttle and, upon entering the outpost, began to fire at anything that moved. Most of the scientists and workers did not even have time to scream. A few tried to run but were quickly cut down as they fled, terrified, through the small complex. One managed to gain entry into the air ducts and power conduits that ran behind the walls and above the ceilings, a design common to most Centauri structures of temporary design. He lasted nearly an hour before the guardsmen finally traced his progress and shot him as he left a duct near the guardsmen's grounded shuttle.

June 17th 2263, Transport Malachi Victus, Hyperspace

Only the Captain and first officer of the transport *Malachi Victus*, flying under the registration of House Verlime, witnessed the arrival of the Dilgar artefact in their cargo hold as they orbited Coutor. They did not know what they were carrying and, truth be told, they did not want to know. Knowledge was indeed power in the Republic, but most Centauri quickly learned to play to their own level. Both knew that the package from House Kaado was far above their heads. They did, however, have orders to follow and knew how to carry them out very well.

The artefact, sealed within a container designed to diffuse scans, was placed in a larger version to form two layers of protection. This was then placed in a yet larger container packed with mechanical parts of Narn design for agricultural vehicles. Satisfied that the cargo would withstand all but the most stringent of customs checks, the standard electronic tracking tags on the side of the container were then falsified to suggest the contents originated from the Narn Homeworld, though it would never get within ten light-years of that system.

Riding hyperspace waves off-beacon, the *Malachi Victus* would then take a well-plotted though still dangerous short cut across the Republic to Nefua, where a deep-space transfer of the cargo would place it in the hold of a smuggling ship run by a human crew. No questions were to be asked, and the smugglers were going to be paid well enough that they would uphold their agreement not to break the seals of the cargo they had received. In all, twenty-eight similar containers were to be taken on board their ship, all destined for the Earth Alliance and yet all registered to take different routes at different times. Most were to reach Babylon 5 at some point in their circuitous voyages, but some would enter Earth Alliance space via the Coriana system, others through the Vree Conglomerate.

The container carrying the Dilgar artefact, its fuse already primed to start a countdown once it detected that it had reached a specific point on the surface of Earth, was to be passed to another smuggling outfit along with a huge amount of credits paid by House Kaado, though it would take an incredible amount of perseverance to uncover the credit trail. This second smuggling ship had been chosen for reasons of respectability on Babylon 5. The ship looked like one of a hundred tramp freighters that regularly plied their trade between the Earth Alliance, Narn Regime and other governments in the same region of space.

All this would be achieved flawlessly, and by the time the container reached the Babylon 5 diplomatic station, it would be virtually impossible to backtrack its progress from the Centauri Republic. As far as anyone was concerned, it would be just another shipment from the Regime that proved Narn labour would always be cheaper than Earth labour. The container would be as legitimate as any being used for trade among ISA members.

June 21st 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Though his shift had ended more than an hour ago, Tuthenn continued his sweeping analysis of information flowing from the Centauri Republic. His experience in the position of Ranger-Analyst often led him to make leaps of logic in the interpretation of data, and he could tell he was close now. Theoretically, shift periods for Ranger-Analysts were strictly monitored, as a tired and weary operative was of no use to anyone in the ISA, but Tuthenn's superiors also became experienced in their own field of management, and they learned long ago to trust Tutheen's judgement of how long should be spent monitoring incoming intelligence and how long should be spent at rest. As far as Tuthenn was concerned, he would get no rest anyway while the patterns of data swirled around his head, refusing to coalesce into a clear pattern. He knew the stories of Rangers in the field defending themselves against superior enemies, and he often imagined his work was not so different, in its own way. Tuthenn was locked in mortal combat with the information on his screens, and they would fight until he broke it down into a logical order or dropped from exhaustion.

Focussing on any report to emerge from the Centauri Republic concerning House Kaado, Tuthenn already discovered the identity of its new leader and went on to identify an unusual pattern of travel on both Centauri Prime and other worlds. This, in itself, was not a surprise, as a newly instated leader of a Centauri noble House would have much to consolidate and new directives to enforce. However, Tuthenn's instincts were aroused, and he believed something a little deeper was in Veneta Kaado's mind.

A new House leader sought to form new alliances and strengthen old ones, as Tuthenn had observed in the past, but unless Kaado was literally meeting and greeting potential allies in person only, the Ranger-Analyst had been unable to find a trace of increased politicking. *That* was unusual in a Centauri whose star was rising. A report from White Star 31 regarding missing Kaado scientists supposedly en route to Quadrant 37 piqued Tuthenn's interest, and he agreed with the field Ranger's belief that their presence on a world soon to be handed over to the Narn made no sense. Or, rather, it defied analysis – Tuthenn was well aware it made perfect sense to someone. He just lacked all the pieces of the puzzle.

Seeking more information to complete the riddle, Tuthenn instituted an ongoing search into the activities of House Kaado's various interests across the republic. None were particularly large, given some of the operations other Houses had in their pockets, but they were reasonable enough. Kaado built its foundations, in the main, on mining operations which were solid, though never spectacular; a healthy interest in the arts on Centauri Prime (no House ever lost money in that area), financing ventures of smaller Houses, and a small but growing concern fulfilling military contracts, mainly supplies of raw materials and basic components. Tuthenn knew that simply looking for 'odd' behaviour seldom resulted in solid intelligence, so he narrowed

his searches to relationships between Kaado's financial interests and new agreements with other Houses, hoping to reveal something about the House's plans for expansion which could reveal much about its new leader's intentions and personality.

His automated search soon found old information from the Coutor system, near the Minbari/Centauri border. He thought he already collated all relevant information about House Kaado's mining facilities in this system, knowing they were cast-offs from larger Houses who exploited the main planet long ago for its wealth of alien technology and then grown disinterested in the region. It was a common pattern in the Republic, with smaller Houses forced to grab the scraps left by those more powerful.

House Verlime had become a factor in whatever Kaado was attempting to do, an unusual choice as Tuthenn had assumed Verlime was passing into obscurity. Sweeps of the system recently revealed that a Verlime transport ship arrived in the Coutor system once every few days, never staying long enough to deliver or collect any serious amount of cargo. Furthermore, all transports promptly left Coutor to travel a well-used jump route to Beta 3 and from there a circuitous route before reaching Centauri Prime. A regular trade route, probably, and one consistent with his information on Verlime's trading habits. When the last transport, just four days before, left Coutor on a hyperspace vector that would lead it away from the usual jump routes for a direct path to Nefua, it rang alarms in his mind. Ship captains and Centauri Houses alike did not change their flight plans on a whim. It was far too expensive.

He knew that intelligence from Nefua was unlikely to arrive in any good time, as the further into Republic space a system lay, the harder it was for the ISA to make accurate sweeps. The Narn could possibly be drafted in, as Nefua lay closer to their region of space but, not known for their subtlety, Tuthenn understood his superiors would make such a request only if an absolute priority. Therefore, he could only ask for a closer investigation on Coutor, a task which Rangers in the field would be well trained to perform. He guessed that White Star 31 would be en route in hyperspace close to the system, and he preferred to have the same Rangers assigned as those who first discovered the anomalies surrounding House Kaado. However, it was not his call to make, and he simply submitted a standard intelligence request before retiring from his post.

CHAPTER FIVE

June 22nd 2263, White Star Intrepide, Hyperspace

The flash of Tilanna's bare white legs beneath her robe made Shaw glance instinctively upwards before more... spiritual reflexes kicked in. He chuckled to himself and shook his head. For all his Anla'Shok training, for all the rituals of self-discipline, for all the time his tutors had forced him to think more and more like a Minbari, he felt a little proud that a strong trait of red-blooded humanity remained.

Keen on Shaw learning the inner workings of a White Star, Badeau assigned him to the company of Tilanna, a young female Minbari who led the maintenance crew of the *Intrepide*. All the maintenance crew were Religious Caste, but while Shaw had spent a great deal of time alongside this section of Minbari society in his training, he had never before found himself in this truly unique position. Conducting regular preventative maintenance on the ship's molecular disruptors, Tilanna decreed they would replace the plasma conduits that formed the main power feed to the weapon system. Hence the two working in a narrow service tube that extended upward at a sharp angle. Balanced on rungs built into the surface of the tube, Tilanna worked on the conduits while Shaw remained just below her, passing tools and parts as required.

Tilanna called his name and handed down a spent flexible magnetic pipe. As she did not look down while doing this, her focus already on the next problem, Shaw allowed himself the luxury of a longer stare as he grabbed the pipe.

Well, if Minbari women were good enough for the President of the ISA, why not?

Sabine's voice over the ship's intercom broke into his meandering thoughts. 'Michael, get up here. New orders.'

'On my way,' he called out. He rapped on the side of the service tube to get Tilanna's attention. She scrambled down, then looked at him with the unflappable serenity that members of the Religious Caste seemed to be able to summon at will.

'Captain's orders, I have to go.'

'Of course, Mr. Shaw,' said Tilanna. 'I can summon someone else to aid me here. However, I will postpone the next phase of preventative maintenance, allowing you to examine the deeper mysteries of the neutron laser when you return to my supervision.'

Shaw shaped his fingers into a triangle before his chest and bowed, a gesture that was instantly returned by Tilanna. 'Thank you,' he said. Despite any physical attraction he might feel towards this slightly built Minbari, he was genuinely interested in learning more about the White Star's main weapon system, said to be more powerful than those fitted to Minbari Sharlin warcruisers, though shorter ranged. 'I look forward to that.'

On the bridge, the holographic display shimmered with a planet Shaw did not immediately recognise, as orbital information scrolled alongside it. Sabine turned in her chair as he entered.

'Ah, Michael, witness our next mission. We just received orders from Minbar. This is Coutor—know anything about it?'

A not-so-subtle test of his galactic knowledge, but Shaw rose to it. 'Err, well, it's a Centauri world, near Minbari space. I remember stories of an ancient alien race disappearing, leaving their technology behind. Which the Centauri

promptly scavenged. Oh, and I remember a report on nomads living in the southern hemisphere, something about abandoned slaves.'

'Good enough,' Badeau nodded. 'We are not interested in slaves today though. Our old friends in House Kaado have a few operations here, and Intelligence wants us to do a sweep of the planet to detect any new activity since our last reconnaissance of the system. If we see anything unusual, we are to get as much information as possible, landing planet-side if need be. We are to avoid contact with Centauri military forces. Then it is on to Babylon 5 to escort the new Ipsha ambassador to Minbar.'

'All in a day's work.'

'Just so. We will be jumping in-system within three hours. Use that time to plot the optimum entry point and course to the second planet. Assume a full defensive spread of Centauri mines and a battlegroup within an hour's reach of the planet.'

Shaw turned from the display to stare at her. 'I didn't know Coutor was heavily defended. I thought the Centauri had all but forgotten this world.'

'They have,' she said, smiling. 'This is a test.'

'Aye, Captain.' Feeling slightly foolish, Shaw relieved the Minbari at his station and began integrating known data on Coutor with likely scenarios for an aggressive defence. Accounting for the gravity wells that existed in the system and the current orbital positions of the planets, Shaw soon worked up three likely entry points and ingress routes before spending the next two hours refining his plans to come up with the single optimum flight plan.

When he felt ready, Shaw presented his plans to Badeau, who insisted he forward it to the holographic screen. After answering a few pertinent questions without consulting his data, the Minbari helmsmen were ordered to make a few corrections and the flight plan programmed into the *Intrepide's* computers. Badeau made no outward comment, but Shaw felt she was at least satisfied with his work.

A blue jump point blinked open in the Coutor system, and the *Intrepide* flew straight toward the second planet. While the White Stars lacked the full stealth suite of most Minbari warships, it was still difficult to detect, and Shaw's flight plan did much to maximise their cover. This would only work up to a point though, and every crew member on the *Intrepide* knew that the Centauri would detect them sooner or later.

The sleek White Star crossed the gulf of space between the jump point and the second planet orbiting Coutor's star in minutes. On the bridge, every crew member was alert as the planet grew in the viewport. A desolate place of reds and browns, patches of dark organic matter stained vast areas of the surface. As they closed, they witnessed volcanic eruptions concentrated around the equatorial region visible to the naked eye.

Badeau called to the Minbari working at the stations behind her. 'Work quickly. We only want one pass. Scan for all structures in the northern hemisphere and compare it to our records. Highlight anything new and send it to the main display immediately. Michael, with me. Within seconds of any sites being displayed, we must determine if the *Intrepide* is to land or not. Any hesitation and we'll be out of low orbit and have to make another pass.'

The holographic display shimmered down in front of the main viewport once more but remained blank for several minutes as the White Star began to decelerate and enter low orbit around the planet. Shaw was aware of a great deal of activity behind him and did not envy the Minbari who had to detect, record and process the scan in time to meet Sabine's orders.

Then a list of inhabited sites began scrolling up the right-hand side of the display, all those that matched the previous reconnaissance flight into the system. They were colour-coded to denote whether they had expanded or contracted, but none had changed to a degree significant enough to gain their immediate interest. As the list began to reach the top of the display, new information started to appear on the left side, recording data from the scanners marking a new development. Shaw began to read the salient information aloud.

'Outpost, 48 miles from magnetic pole, small, standard pre-fab design, pulse generator, no subterranean network detected, life signs. . . nil.' Shaw frowned. 'Captain, if this is a new site, why is nobody there?'

'And 700 miles from the nearest settlement as well. I think we have it,' said Badeau. 'Scanners, any other sites on our horizon?' Upon hearing a negative, she ordered the helmsmen, 'Take us in.'

Not wanting to give any passive Centauri scan a chance to home in on their position, the helmsmen spared no thought to comfort as they changed course and plummeted towards the surface like a meteor. The White Star's gravitic drive managed to flatten the worst of the atmospheric buffeting, but Shaw retreated to his station in order to have something solid to hold on to. Even Badeau held the arms of her chair tightly during the descent.

As the White Star neared the small outpost, the helmsmen bled off speed by pulling the nose of the ship upwards in a high-g manoeuvre that would have pulverised the crew of an Earth ship. Still shedding speed, they swung the *Intrepide* around, allowing other crew to scan the outpost and verify no obvious dangers before beginning the landing cycle. Though the hull of the White Star would have seared naked flesh as it dissipated the heat generated by atmospheric friction, the ship still settled on its landing gear with a grace few other vessels in the galaxy could match. Waving her hand to indicate Shaw should follow, Badeau leapt from her chair to make her way to the boarding ramp.

Though the atmosphere was unpleasantly breathable to Centauri, it

contained traces of sulphur heavy enough to incapacitate a human within minutes, forcing the two Rangers to wear face-hugging filter masks. They walked cautiously, alert for any automated defence systems or guards hidden from their scans.

Shaw noticed a great deal of similarities between this outpost and the one on Quadrant 37, constructed from similar pre-fabricated sections. This one, however, was much smaller. Given the Centauri's love of comfortable dwellings, he could not imagine any more than a dozen working here at any one time. They approached an entry port, and Badeau nodded to Shaw. He fished his datapad from within his robes and, sliding a maintenance port open, connected it to the outpost's exterior security systems via a universal interface. He quickly deduced that if anything important occurred here recently, the Centauri relied on the outpost's remote location rather than expensive security hardware to maintain secrecy. Within seconds, he cracked the code and sent a command to unlock the hatch. It slid open with a hiss, permitting entry. The two Rangers found themselves in a tiny airlock.

'Good,' said Badeau, a little muffled. 'If everything is still working, we can pressurise this airlock and get rid of these damned masks.'

Shaw had no problem with his mask, reflecting that he endured far worse in recent training sessions, but he quickly hooked his datapad to the airlock's systems and began the pressurising cycle. Checking the atmosphere beyond the second hatch as cool air swirled around him, he nodded at Badeau and removed his mask. Within a minute, they had the inner door open and stepped into the outpost proper.

The outpost's systems were turned off or disabled, but emergency lighting gave an eerie feel to the place that was matched by the silence. The only sounds were the footsteps of the Rangers themselves. The spotlessly clean main access corridor terminated just thirty metres ahead. Shaw took a step forward, but Badeau caught his arm.

'Take another look, ' she warned. 'What do you see?'

Shaw felt a growing sense of unease, which Badeau's words had done nothing to quell, and he studied the corridor once more. The grated floor allowed easy access to the distributed power and information networks that threaded the outpost, the ceiling bland and featureless aside from the emergency lighting fixtures interspersed between their more powerful but darkened neighbours. Nothing seemed out of place. Then his eyes focussed on a small patch of soot at the end of the corridor.

'PPG blast!' he exclaimed. 'And another, there,' pointing to a few metres away on the floor.

'Stay alert,' Badeau ordered. 'We'll sweep this place room by room. I don't want to be here any longer than necessary.'

As Badeau took her datapad and connected a small sensor array to its top bracket, Shaw unclipped his Denn'Bok fighting pike but did not extend it. The heavy metal shaft felt comforting in his hand and did much to alleviate his nervousness. With a single shake of his hand, the four-inch cylinder would instantly expand into a five-foot staff – and he ranked highly in Denn'Bok lessons.

Sweeping the access corridor with the sensor array, Badeau noted they had missed another PPG blast on the inner airlock hatch when they entered. There were four exits from the corridor, two on each side, which they searched one at a time. Shaw entered first, senses alert while Sabine followed with a thorough scan. The first exit led to sleeping and living quarters, the second to kitchen and waste facilities. On the other side of the corridor, they found the power station and a small laboratory. They quickly noted that nothing valuable remained in the outpost. Throughout each tiny room, the Rangers found signs of combat, PPG blasts matched with the occasional spray of blood across a wall or fixture.

'Must have been a hell of a fight,' Shaw remarked as they left the kitchens to cross the access corridor once more.

Badeau shook her head. 'This was no fight. It was a massacre.' She paused to adjust the sensitivity of her datapad's array. 'The PPG blasts are mostly focussed away from the main entrance. Someone entered this place and opened fire. I am guessing the blast on the airlock either came from a defender who managed to get a single shot off or, more likely, someone trying to escape who got shot in the back as they ran.'

In his mind's eye, Shaw tried to picture the scene as an unknown invader entered the outpost with murderous intent, slaughtering unarmed civilians. The Centauri had a bad reputation in the galaxy at the present time, but he was wise enough to know not all of them matched the stereotype. As they entered the laboratory, Badeau increased the intensity of her scans, guessing this was the chamber that governed the overall purpose of the outpost. For his part, Shaw began to consider the perpetrators of the massacre.

'The Narn?' he ventured. The Regime had always been enemies of the Centauri. The Narn had, after all, been among the last attack force to devastate huge regions of Centauri Prime.

'I don't think so,' Badeau said, her mind obviously elsewhere as she studied her readings. 'This is odd. . .'

'Found something?'

'Not sure. The datapad is reading 'unidentified'. Some kind of residual emission in this room. It is marked as harmless – though that is relative, of course. Not sure I trust a computer telling me something is harmless when it cannot identify it. Still, I'm not a scientist.'

'No clues then?' he asked.

'Well, there may be plenty, but damned if I can tell what they are. With the equipment stripped out, no doubt by the attackers, all I am left with is this energy signature. I am getting readings from the walls, ceiling and floor, and only in this room. We can only presume it's some sort of

leakage or by-product from whatever they were working on. The analysts on Tuzanor will make more of it than I can.' She adjusted her array, took a few more readings and then said, 'Come on, I think we have all we need. Let's get out of here.'

'So what do you think hap-' Shaw's question was cut off by the simultaneous chimes of their comlinks. He reached down to his belt and activated it. 'Shaw, report.'

'Contact, low orbit, approaching fast,' came the reply from the Minbari on sensor duty.

'Come on,' said Badeau, buckling on her filter mask. They pounded down the corridor and hit the release for the airlock. Not having time to override the system's standard safety protocols, the Rangers spent an impatient half-minute waiting for the air system to cycle. Badeau interrogated the *Intrepide's* crew for more information on the contact but, struggling to get a clear reading of a fast-moving object so close to the horizon, they had yet to ascertain its signature. As soon as the airlock's outer hatch hissed open, Badeau and Shaw sprinted across dusty wasteland toward the White Star, its gravitic drive whining into full power

Badeau shouted through the ships internal communications system the order to take off as they ran up the boarding ramp, and it began to close even before Shaw left its gridded surface. By the time they entered the bridge, the *Intrepide* had already left the planet's surface, and the viewport was full of empty orange sky as they rocketed toward space. Their course was taking them directly away from the contact, and as Badeau took her Captain's chair, a Minbari crewman reported that the signature had been identified.

'Show me,' ordered Badeau, and the holographic display shimmered in front of them once more, this time showing a Centauri warship skimming the atmosphere of the planet as it sped toward their position, its purple and gold livery glinting in the light of the system's star as it moved out of eclipse. Shaw instantly recognised its distinctive cross-shaped silhouette and wide fins.

'Vorchan!'

'This is not good,' said Badeau. 'Vorchans operate in squadrons, never alone. Scanners ahead, I don't want to walk into a trap.'

'Contact, two, Vorchan-class!' came the immediate response. The holographic display changed to a three-dimensional tactical view. The Rangers could see their current position above the planet with the first Vorchan closing range behind them. Two more were just clearing the horizon of the planet in front of them.

'Yup, there it is,' Sabine nodded, and Shaw noted how calm her voice was, a trait he knew White Star captains were required to possess. Panic spread quickly on a ship if the captain appeared jumpy.

'High energy turn,' she ordered the helmsmen. 'Reverse course, make an oblique pass on the single Vorchan. All power to engines!' She turned her head to Shaw. 'Heat up the weapons. If he so much as twitches, take him out. His plasma accelerator we can likely dodge, but those bastards carry a very heavy particle battery that could cause us some serious problems.'

Shaw called up a tactical display on his own station, prepping the molecular disruptors in the *Intrepide's* wings and the devastating neutron laser in its nose. All displayed green and ready. He paid a brief thought to Tilanna and her maintenance work on the weapons earlier and knew he was in good hands. Now all he had to do was shoot straight if the Centauri warship proved hostile.

'Standby,' said Badeau. 'We can't fight all three so we mustn't get bogged down by this one. They are nearly as fast as us so let's not get into a running battle. Shaw – you have discretion to fire only if they provoke us. You'll only get one salvo at this rate of closure, so make it a good one.'

The range counter on the tactical display rapidly counted down as the White Star and Vorchan skimmed the atmosphere toward one another. Through the translucent display in front of the viewport, Shaw caught a speck of a white light low to the horizon, rapidly growing in size and definition. He returned his attention to his own station, aligning the weapons on the target, leading slightly with the molecular disruptors. All around him, the Minbari crew went about their duties with a calm and quiet efficiency. Aside from various alerts emitted by the ship's computer, the bridge was nearly silent – until shattered by the Minbari monitoring the *Intrepide's* sensors.

'Energy spike!'

Already reacting before Badeau gave the order to fire, Shaw activated the neutron laser and a thick beam of pulsing green light streamed from the nose of the *Intrepide*, across space, to make contact with the Vorchan. Making a mockery of the Centauri warship's armour, the beam sliced cleanly through the Vorchan's top fin and continued downwards to cut through its port weapon batteries. The ship immediately began to list amid a blinding array of secondary explosions that pummelled it further. Shaw then unleashed multiple blasts from his molecular pulsars. The fast-moving white bolts of energy smashed into the main hull of the Vorchan, but the salvo was cut short as the helmsmen jerked the White Star upwards. The Vorchan's powerful plasma accelerator, mounted on the hull in front of the trademark fins, tracked the *Intrepide* and opened fire once in range.

Combining the dodge with an axial spin to throw off the Vorchan's aspect trackers, the Minbari helmsmen jinked the White Star as globs of thick yellow energy poured past the ship. One, by luck as much as anything else, found its mark just behind the bridge of the *Intrepide*, and the force of this blast rolled the ship onto its back and sent some crew on the bridge sprawling.
Fortunately, the adaptive armour

held, and the *Intrepide* blasted past the crippled Vorchan as the helmsmen regained control.

Unable to reverse course quickly enough to chase the White Star, the first Vorchan was effectively out of the fight, but the other two, using the gravity well of the planet to slingshot themselves into position, continued to chase the Ranger ship. Seconds later, a Minbari reported that the Vorchans were out of range.

Badeau breathed a sigh of relief. 'Scan the area ahead. I don't want to get caught like that again. Damage report?'

'The armour dissipated most of the energy of the blast,' volunteered a Minbari crewman. 'Self-repair systems already engaged.'

'Good,' answered Badeau. 'Initiate jump engines once we are clear of the gravity well. Set course for Babylon 5 and open a channel to headquarters when we are in hyperspace. I believe we have a potential diplomatic crisis to report. Oh, and Michael?'

'Yes, Captain?'

'Good shooting.'

July 3rd 2263, Babylon 5, Epsilon Eridani

Human smugglers cautiously took delivery of the innocuous container carrying the deadly Dilgar artefact as planned, the abundance of credits received ensuring their curiosity would not get the best of them. Inside the container, Centauri-made electronics clicked automatically, calculating and verifying each jump into hyperspace as the pre-planned route was followed. By the time it officially passed through a Narn checkpoint in Quadrant 14, forged documentation proved its origin on the Regime's Homeworld — one of several similar containers bound for the European continent on Earth. In the past three years, the Narn made great inroads with certain industries in the Earth Alliance, typically in sectors that required hard-wearing machinery whose owners looked for durability above all else. Few races could compete with Narn durability in any field, as the Centauri had found to their great cost.

From Quadrant 14, a simple and very well-travelled route to led to Epsilon Eridani, a system in neutral space between the Narn Regime, Earth Alliance, Centauri Republic and Minbari Federation – most notable for being the site of Babylon 5, the infamous station credited with having changed the destiny of the entire galaxy. While historians might later say people not places influenced the future, few could deny that even though the ISA had now moved its headquarters to Minbar, its cradle was Babylon 5.

Nothing suspicious was noted as the container passed through Babylon 5's customs along with other, similar containers from the same free trader. The Earth Alliance knew the station's security around its docking bays was a little more lax than desirable due to an overworking of the dockers, a problem that had plagued Babylon 5 since it first went online in 2257. A reduction in hours staved off any more strikes but little was done to enhance efficiency in security scans. Veneta Kaado's conspiracy could have been far less thorough in its misdirection and the container would still have rattled through Babylon 5 unmolested.

Spending no more than a few hours on Babylon 5, the container was soon loaded on a fast transport that would take a large haul straight past Sector 49 and, stopping briefly at Proxima 3 for refuelling, continue to Sol, humanity's birthplace. Most merchant traffic in Earth's system funnelled through the transfer point off Io, though a small but increasing percentage flowed through the newly independent Mars colony. Customs sweeps and general security on Io was regarded as being second only to that of Earth itself, but by this time the container had amassed a veritable galactic atlas in its tracking records, and the customs officer scanning its manifest codes saw nothing to arouse suspicion of anything other than legitimate cargo from the Narn Homeworld. Signing off on the container, he watched it and several others transferred from his care into a short-ranged transit shuttle. The shuttle's captain had just one destination on his flight plan for his entire load of cargo—EarthDome, Geneva.

CHAPTER SIX

July 3rd 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

Tuthenn received the anomalous scans taken from the outpost on Coutar by the crew of White Star 31 as a matter of course. The information came from a source he instigated, and he was permitted to share in its fruits on the chance it might lead to a breakthrough in intelligence. He reviewed the data dutifully, but he was no scientist and nothing aroused his suspicions. Leaving it to Rangers and civilians better skilled in the area, Tuthenn continued his investigations. If nothing else, the machinations of the Centauri Republic kept him gainfully employed.

When he received the full analytical report of the scans, verified and confirmed by the ISA's own system of checks and balances, he gave it his full attention. Memorising the salient facts, he integrated them into his own intelligence analysis to make something meaningful of the information.

The first striking fact was that the origin of the energy signature was Dilgar. The emissions were the suspected by-product of certain minerals only found on Omelos, the Dilgar's homeworld, and so far believed to be impossible to reproduce elsewhere in the galaxy. As it was, these minerals were only theoretical, as no one had taken samples before its star went nova. Little exploration took place in the years since, as commercial ventures had little interest in a world so far from the hub of the galaxy that had been blasted by its sun. No known Dilgar weapon had employed them, and so the only information the ISA's scientists had were the scanning records from ships present during the last assault on the Dilgar at the end of the war.

This made everything too circumstantial for Tuthenn's liking. To provide a complete analysis, he needed firm data, not supposition. Only the sheer strength of the energy signature detected by the Rangers of White Star 31 made the report credible. The best chemists and physicists from the Minbari Worker Caste had tackled this problem and concluded that only a massive quantity of materials could generate enough energy to leave these residual traces, given the likely time frame between the Centauri's work and the arrival of the Rangers.

Their report spoke of energy that could hurl the largest warship through space at unheard of speeds – or of a weapon capable of demolishing entire nations. Given the Centauri's interest in this type of energy and their obvious attempts to hide it from both the ISA and, likely, their own government, Tuthenn received orders of the highest priority to locate the source of this signature and discover what the Centauri intended to do with it.

The Centauri had possibly learned to shield this energy source from detection, but Tuthenn nevertheless initiated a search of records that would reference scans made throughout the galaxy in the past month. This would require a massive amount of computer resources, but his priority orders gave Tuthenn the authorisation he needed to start an automated process that would check scan records made during reconnaissance sweeps, boarding reviews, customs inspections, trade negotiations, technology transfers and many others. He concentrated the search on records made in the Centauri Republic and neighbouring worlds, but even this encompassed more than two-dozen inhabited systems, and the search might have to be widened if nothing conclusive was found. Precious hours would be wasted as representatives of the ISA negotiated with governments such as the Narn, Lumati and Golians for free access to their security records, and their co-operation was not assured. Already, too many variables existed in a potentially catastrophic situation. This was not Tuthenn's first high-priority assignment, and the importance and urgency of his mission focussed and narrowed his mind every time.

While waiting for the results of his interstellar search, Tuthenn concentrated on reviewing his information about the Centauri Republic and House Kaado, and he began to synthesise potential scenarios. Since the reconnaissance run on Coutar, Tuthenn learned more about House Kaado, but many questions remained unanswered. Veneta Kaado was entertaining and meeting with many influential nobles, particularly on Centauri Prime, the centre of political activity in the Republic. However, Tuthenn had yet to project exactly what Kaado's aims were. Taking into account recent developments, Tutheen tried to approach the problem another way.

He had no way to predict how House Kaado could have obtained Dilgar technology or materials but, for the immediate future, that was less relevant. What would the Centauri do with it was the question of the hour. Engineer a new type of reactor that could meet the power requirements of an entire world? Produce a new type of drive that would enable the Centauri fleet to strike at any system they wished? Design a new type of weapon? The latter two were clearly worst-case scenarios, and so Tuthenn decided to concentrate his initial analysis there. Whittling them down to a single choice was an easy matter. The movements of the Centauri fleet were, by and large, well known to the ISA, and any extensive refits would have been detected. Tuthenn also understood the nature of sentient life: almost every race, on discovering a new type of energy, concentrated development on its destructive qualities before any other application.

With the resources of the entire Republic, the Centauri might be able to reproduce the Dilgar technology – they were certainly one of the few races in the galaxy capable of such a task. However, everything Veneta Kaado did implied covert activity. Of course, this might be nothing more than an attempt to give the Republic as a whole a certain level of deniability but, following the worst-case analysis, it made a degree of sense. Engineering a new weapon and then manufacturing it in quantities sufficient to arm a fleet took time. A single prototype could be brought to bear on an enemy much more quickly.

Who would it be aimed at? Tuthenn had an instinctive answer but, as always, he subjected himself to analysis of hard information rather than pursue what he had heard human members of the Anla'Shok call a 'hunch'.

Veneta Kaado had been meeting with nobles from a wide range of backgrounds. Some were simply skilled politickers, others had weak Houses he no doubt wanted to take advantage of, and still more had trade or other financial benefits to grant. By no means a majority, but at least a significant portion, shared the common trait of being outspoken against Emperor Mollari and his handling of the ISA isolation of the Republic, which had cut deeply into the Centauri economy. Every Centauri bore resentment, Tuthenn knew, and these individuals not only railed against their Emperor but also displayed an intense hatred of the alien races that forced them into their present position. Some races they blamed more than others.

This led Tuthenn to consider four possible targets for a weapon. In reverse order of likelihood as he judged it, this would mean the Drazi Freehold, the Earth Alliance, the Narn Regime and, finally, the Minbari Federation.

The Drazi had fought alongside the Narn when they bombarded Centauri Prime and were instrumental in encouraging the Narn to proceed with the assault. As far as the Earth Alliance was concerned, the most prominent figure in the ISA was its President, John Sheridan, a human from Earth. If the Centauri wanted to strike at the man, they could do far worse than hit at his homeworld. The Narn Regime was always a target for Centauri hatred and oppression, and the assault on Centauri Prime now gave them more reason than ever. However, the organising body of all these races was now the ISA. He sat in the headquarters of the Alliance, in the capital Tuzanor, which was also the personal home

of John Sheridan and Delenn, the founders of the ISA. There was truly no better target, and Tuthenn gave the possibility of an attack on Tuzanor within the next month an 84% probability. Calmly, he sent this brief analysis to his superiors. Forewarned, they would increase the alert status of Rangers within the Minbari Federation and vastly reduce the possibility of a successful attack.

This was all conjecture, of course, and Tuthenn greatly disliked sending any report based on anything but complete and solid facts. However, if an attack were likely, time would also be a factor. With the preliminary analysis complete, he could now review incoming data in greater depth to either strengthen his original hypothesis or dispute it and form a replacement.

He spent several hours studying existing data surrounding House Kaado for more clues to their intent. A chime indicating new information interrupted Tuthenn's meditations – his long-reaching search had managed to return a positive. Fingers rapidly sliding over the controls of his three screens, Tuthenn was eager to see if his original analysis could be confirmed.

The same energy signature had been detected in a customs checkpoint in, of all places, the Narn system of Quadrant 14. This surprised Tuthenn a little, as it meant the Narn had been unusually speedy in answering the ISA's requests for information, but he also knew they were eager for certain technology concessions from the Alliance. The unique signature was indeed noted by a Narn customs officer but, as the container emitting it had legitimate transfer records from his own Homeworld and they were not registering as dangerous, he passed it with no other comment.

Tuthenn expected a customs checkpoint to react this way when dealing with strange but non-dangerous readings on a container with legal paperwork. What troubled Tuthenn now was that if the container had come from the Narn Homeworld (and he knew it had not), it would likely have followed the normal trade route to Quadrant 14, which would mean that the container had passed through the Dross system. He read the container's manifest stating that it had cleared a customs checkpoint on Dross, but the standard scan did not feature the unique energy signature he expected. This meant it was probably forged. The last item on the incoming record stated the container had been loaded onto a human-run free trader called the *Gilded Lilly*. Unfortunately, a quick scan of the ISA's comprehensive ship records indicated no such vessel existed. That, in turn, led Tuthenn to believe the container he was attempting to track had been taken on board a smugglers' ship.

Tuthenn revised his original analysis to indicate the Narn Regime was now the likely target, probably their Homeworld. However, he was keenly aware that Quadrant 14 was just one jump away from Babylon 5. He now considered the diplomatic station to be a possible target as well, for President Sheridan had served there for three years as its captain and military governor, and the station acted as the headquarters of the ISA for a year before the bureaucracy transferred to Tuzanor. To complicate matters, Babylon 5 was also a single jump away from Earth space and not much further away from the Minbari Federation. Infuriatingly, the Earth Alliance had yet to provide a full return of the sensor scans and sweeps he had asked for, limiting his ability to predict the next sequence of events.

With no other choice, Tuthenn filed his latest analysis, knowing that he was putting the ISA on the highest alert across light-years of space.

July 3rd 2263, White Star Intrepide, Hyperspace

'Incoming signal from Tuzanor,' reported the Minbari crewman on the communications station.

Sabine Badeau ordered it to be shown on the main display. She raised her eyebrows as the holographic display shimmered down from the ceiling of the bridge and the bearded image of President John Sheridan loomed in front of her.

'Mr. President, what can we do for you?'

'Miss Badeau, we have a potential situation.' Sheridan's calm demeanour belied what he was about to tell the *Intrepide's* captain, but Sabine knew the President rarely spoke directly to Rangers in the field unless there was a serious problem.

'We have reason to believe that a rogue faction within the Centauri Republic is planning a terrorist attack on one of the members of the ISA, likely the Narn, Minbari or Earth. Babylon 5 is also a potential target.' In the background of the display, a Minbari aide whispered something to the President, and he nodded before continuing. 'We are hoping to eliminate Babylon 5 as a possibility before you reach the station. If it is clear, I need you to divert from your current mission and proceed with all speed to Earth.'

'Yes, Mr. President. What are our orders when we arrive?'

'Your work on Coutar yielded an energy signature we're now chasing across the galaxy. We're attempting to track a device of Dilgar origin, possibly a bomb of some kind, but the bureaucracy I learned to loathe when I was in EarthForce has returned with a vengeance, and they are stalling with the sensor logs we need to confirm where this thing is going. We may have to let them do their own searching, but that could cost valuable time.

Sheridan paused for a moment, then continued. 'Our best analysts indicate the device is targeted at the Narn, but we cannot dismiss Earth as a possibility, due to my links with the place. By the time you reach Earth, we'll have your clearance to see President Luchenko. Liase with her and help track this device, reporting to me with any new developments. With any luck, you'll find this is a false alarm, but we could be dealing with a very powerful weapon and we can't afford to take chances. I'm sending a file containing everything we know about the device. Any questions?'

'What authority do we have in this matter, sir?'

'Standard Ranger protocols only, Miss Badeau. You will be working under Earth's jurisdiction and, ultimately, you will have to do what they say. However, I don't want that device detonating in Earth space, you understand me?'

'Yes, sir, I believe I do. Anything else?'

Sheridan sighed. 'Just godspeed. And pray our intelligence is wrong. I don't like where this is going.'

'Agreed, Mr. President. White Star 31 out.' The display automatically shimmered back into the ceiling. 'Plot a new course for the Sol system, full speed.'

Shaw, standing just behind Badeau's right shoulder at the weapons station, cleared his throat and asked, 'Why divert now, Captain? Why not continue directly to Babylon 5?'

She turned in her seat to face him. 'Speed. If we need to resume our original mission, the White Star is fast enough to get to Babylon 5 without losing the Ipsha ambassador too much time. If this thing is real, then every extra minute may count.' She gave a half-smile. 'If you have never seen a White Star at full speed, you are going to be surprised at just how quickly we can get to Earth from here.'

'Do you think it will be a false alarm?' he asked.

She snorted. 'I have learned to accept the galaxy at its worst. Prepare for the balloon to go up and be pleasantly surprised when it doesn't – a reasonable philosophy in the Anla'Shok.'

They fell into silence for a few minutes, and Badeau stared ahead at the swirling red clouds of hyperspace that coalesced and dissipated in the twinkling of an eye. Distance was very hard to gauge by eye in this otherworldly realm, but even so she could tell the *Intrepide* was moving very quickly, virtually eating the light-years in realspace. A thought occurred to her, and she turned back to Shaw.

'Your records say you were born on Mars, is that right?'

He looked up from his station and nodded. 'That's right. You an Earther?'

'After this long in the Anla'Shok, you tend to think of Minbar as home, if you consider it at all. The truth is, I have spent more time on board the *Intrepide* than anywhere else in recent years.' She ran a hand down the arm of her chair. 'Still, you could not ask for a more capable home.'

'When were you last on Earth?' he tentatively asked.

Sabine went silent for a few seconds and then replied, quietly. 'Years ago. Before the Shadow War.' She caught his look of surprise. 'They didn't give you time off for good work back then – far too much to do. After the Shadow War, we were battling Clark's forces. Then the ISA got underway.'

'You were at Coriana 6, weren't you?'

'Yes. With the *Intrepide*, no less.'

Shaw's curiosity was piqued. He had heard the Rangers were far different back then to the multi-racial Anla'Shok of today and, besides, he had never grown tired of the stories the Religious Caste tutors had told of their service in the Shadow War once the day's training was over. To fight against the Ancients themselves. It seemed incredible to him.

'What was it like? The battle?' he pressed but was met with several seconds of silence. He saw Badeau stare ahead at the viewport, her face suddenly emotionless.

'Painful,' Badeau said simply. From the corner of his eye, Shaw saw one of the Minbari look straight at him and give an almost imperceptible shake of the head. Taking the hint, Shaw kept quiet. For the rest of his shift, he busied himself with running a variety of simulations on his station based on their encounter in the Coutar system with the Centauri Vorchans.

July 4th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

Out of view of the President of the ISA on her screen, Susanna Luchenko's fist tightened in growing frustration. She quickly considered the position of her predecessors, earlier Presidents and other leaders who had to manage the concerns of but a single nation. Intergalactic politics should be banned. At times, the thought of a few individuals affecting the lives of billions spread across light-years of space seemed ludicrous.

'President Sheridan,' she stated firmly and formally. 'As a sovereign power within the ISA, we are well within our rights to decide not only what data should or should not be made available to our allies, but also to demand you supply us with any information that affects the security of the Earth Alliance. You said yourself before your inauguration: the ISA is a peacekeeper not a peacemaker. The responsibility of our security falls to *our* government.'

'Susanna, you and I have worked together for more than a year.' Sheridan was not pleading, but Luchenko could tell he was beginning to grow desperate for a result. 'You know I have never lied to you and have kept all the promises we made. We believe there is a very real threat, and Earth is a potential target.'

'Your supposition that the Narn are the primary target seems more likely to me. We were not part of the assault on Centauri Prime, and we were the foremost voice condemning it after the fact.' She did not mention that Earth's condemnation had come some time after the Narn and Drazi bombardment and was motivated just as much out of a need to maintain trade relations with the Republic once it became clear the Centauri were going to be isolated. The subsequent withdrawal of the Republic from the ISA after this protest had done much to bring humans face to face with the fact that the Earth Alliance was no longer the power it had been before the formation of the ISA.

'Anyway,' she continued. 'You are asking the impossible. To collect sensor logs from all over the Earth Alliance? It would take weeks. At best.'

'Susanna,' said Sheridan a little sternly. 'The Narn managed it within hours. You and I both know that Earth has far more sophisticated systems.'

'I can't speak for the Narn. I insist you provide us with the information you have so we can begin our own analysis of the threat. I remind you that our treaty with the ISA supports our right to this. You are infringing our sovereign rights by withholding this information.'

'No we aren't and you know it.' Sheridan sighed. 'The threat is credible enough that we will supply you with the energy signature you need to look for and our current attempts to track it from Centauri space. However, you know the capabilities we have here on Tuzanor. We can process that information much faster than you can. Every second may count here, Susanna.'

'I believe you are overstating the matter now, President Sheridan. However, we will be grateful for any information you give us concerning our security from exterior threats.'

'One more thing.' This time Sheridan had a look that Luchenko did not mistake for anything but determination. Knowing his achievements and single-mindedness, she braced herself. 'We have dispatched a White Star to Earth.'

Before she could begin to protest, he raised a hand. 'The Rangers on board have a good record and have been told to place themselves purely under your jurisdiction. They are being sent to act as liaisons between Earth and the ISA, though you are free to uses their skills as you see fit in connection with this threat.'

It was Luchenko's turn to sigh. 'Okay, Mr. President. I'll grant them clearance to EarthDome.' She allowed a slight pause and then took a new tack. 'We also need to discuss the re-opening of trade relations with the Centauri Republic.'

Sheridan's look was slightly incredulous, but he recovered quickly. 'Not now Susanna, please. If this threat materialises, we will need to ensure it is indeed a rogue faction within the Republic that initiated it. Even if that proves true, I doubt the Narn, Drazi and many others within the ISA will be willing to give the Centauri much leeway.'

'Mr. President, has it occurred to you that this threat may be a direct result of the Republic's isolation?' she said, leaning closer to the screen.

Dropping his head for a moment, Sheridan suddenly seemed resigned. 'Of course it has,' he admitted. 'But at the same time, we need to abide by the majority vote of the ISA. I would also remind you that terrorist action is not the proper response to their isolation from the ISA. You know our policy on that.'

'Of course,' she said. 'But you also know where that policy has taken Earth in the past. Right up to the nuking of San Diego.' Leaning back in her high-backed seat, Luchenko supported her head on one hand. 'You and I both know the realities of the situation and why we can never give in to terrorists. But what responsibilities do you have when you may have created those terrorists yourself? What if terrorist action is the only route left open to them – as large as the Republic's military remains, I doubt it could survive a full-scale war with the combined members of the ISA. What kind of future are you building here, John?'

For once, he looked a little uncomfortable. 'We all do what we can, Madam President. For now, our priority is stopping this attack from happening. We'll deal with the fallout after that.' He smiled sadly. 'We always do.'

July 5th 2263, White Star Intrepide, Hyperspace

'Need any help?' Shaw asked.

'I do not believe there is enough room for two in here,' Tilanna's voice echoed. 'I have almost finished.'

Once again, Shaw found himself staring at Tilanna's rear end. This time, however, it brought little pleasure. His mind was intermittently drifting elsewhere. The young Religious Caste Minbari had her head and shoulders inside an inspection panel as she worked to detach an operations panel so they could both work on it in the open passageway. Wriggling out, an action which would have certainly grabbed Shaw's attention a couple of days ago, she produced the foot-square purple-tinted panel and sat back, cross-legged, so he could see what she was doing. They had spent the morning doing maintenance work on the neutron laser as Tilanna had promised, but Shaw was not enjoying it as much as he had supposed.

Manipulating an oval-shaped Minbari diagnostic tracker, Tilanna glanced up at him. 'You have been unusually quiet today. That was the first question you have asked me, and I thought you would be more interested in the task at hand. Might I enquire to the problem?'

He looked into her eyes and saw nothing but compassion. Shaw considered Tilanna a technician, but he momentarily forgot she had the religious upbringing her caste demanded. Her current position was simply a use of her skills, not what she was. In Minbari society, that was a vital difference that marked them apart from most humans.

'Well. . .' he started. 'It's not really a problem. Just something that's been bugging me.' Not yet starting her diagnostic process, she prompted him with a look. 'It's just something that passed between the Captain and I. We were talking on the bridge, and I started to ask about Coriana 6...'

'Ah.' Tilanna interrupted. 'I presume you did not push the matter?'

'No. One of the bridge crew gave me a look that told me to shut up.'

'Probably wise,' she said. 'The Captain is the most able human Ranger I have served with.'

Still that division between human and Minbari, thought Shaw. How long before that is fully eradicated from the Rangers?

'She rarely rushes to conclusions, cares for her crew and is usually willing to listen to other opinions.' She shrugged, a habit Shaw had never seen in a Minbari and which made him wonder whether she had picked it up from him or Sabine. 'You cannot ask for more in a White Star captain,' Tilanna continued. 'But it is best not to enquire too closely about her past.'

They sat in silence for a few seconds before Shaw asked the obvious question. 'Why?'

'Her husband was one of the Anla'Shok. They joined together, and he was captain of White Star 14. I have heard they were quite a formidable pair when in the same squadron.'

'I would never have guessed she was married!'

'She isn't now. Her husband was killed at Coriana 6. His White Star was destroyed by a Shadow ship,' Tilanna said simply.

'Ah.' That makes a degree of sense, he thought.

'That was not the end for the Captain, unfortunately. Your President Clark discovered she belonged to the Anla'Shok, or Sheridan's army, as he saw it. Her family were arrested and disappeared. They are still presumed dead.'

'That's. . . harsh.' Shaw found the word inadequate, but it was as close as he could find. 'How do you know all this?'

Tilanna smiled, a sight Shaw found quite enchanting, despite himself. 'Human Rangers are not the only ones to 'gossip', as I believe you call it. The information network of the Religious Caste within a closed environment such as a ship is quite efficient.'

Shaw gave a short laugh.

'With regards to our Captain,' said Tilanna. 'I believe she is able to focus all her pain towards the enemies of the Alliance. She has an incredible faith for what her duties demand. I have not seen her fight in battle myself, but I imagine that it would be quite an impressive sight.' She shrugged again. 'She might even give some of our Warrior Caste a run for their credits.'

'Surely not,' he smiled.

Tilanna clicked her tongue. 'Now you are just distracting us from our task. Attend.' She gestured towards the panel on her lap. 'This interfaces with the ship's self-repair systems, tying them into the neutron laser and allowing it to sustain firing even while operating at less than twenty-percent efficiency.'

Forcing his attention to technical matters, Shaw listened to Tilanna's light voice as she delicately described the inner workings of a weapon capable of shattering the hull of a front-line warship.

CHAPTER SEVEN

July 6th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

Sitting beneath the Seal of the Office of Earth President, Susanna Luchenko spent the morning as she often did; receiving visitors, reading reports from her staff, discussing and formulating policy with her best experts and generally ensuring the Earth Alliance would be in the same shape tomorrow as it was today. This office, situated in one of the highest towers within EarthDome, oversaw Lake Geneva, and the placid waters below the rolling mountains could instil a feeling of tranquillity, even after more than a year in office. Though she could, in theory, perform all her duties in EarthForce One while visiting colony worlds, Luchenko rarely felt at ease working during long-distance space flights. There was just something about the artificial gravity, or the recycled air, or *something* that did not agree with her psyche. Far better to stay on Earth and leave space travel to those who enjoyed it. A quiet alarm sounded, indicating a visitor waiting in her secretary's office next door, and Luchenko raised a hand to announce she was ready.

Sweeping past the aide who had opened the door for him, an EarthForce Major strode up to her desk and stood quietly until she acknowledged his presence. Tall with a dark moustache, he seemed to be the very archetype of a senior EarthForce officer, ready to appear on any recruitment poster. Cancelling the report on her screen, she looked up.

'Yes, Major?'

'Madam President, a White Star has just jumped in system and is on course for Earth,' he said.

'It has been given clearance?'

'Yes. Traffic control is routing it here. We are expecting it to land within half an hour.'

'Make sure the Ranger on board is shown to me promptly. Let's see just what 'aid' President Sheridan has in mind for us. You understand, Major?'

'Yes, Madam President.'

'How is the search for Dilgar weapon progressing?' Luchenko enquired.

'The Joint Chiefs agree with your assessment that the Narn are a more likely target. However, the energy signature provided by the ISA has been fed into our systems, and our top counter-terrorism team is monitoring the process. If it is anywhere within the Earth Alliance, we'll find it.'

'Keep me informed,' she said, dismissing him with a nod of the head.

'Thank you, Madam President.' The Major turned and left as smartly as he had arrived.

Susanna Luchenko was vaguely aware that her aide remained in the office, but that was a distraction she had learned to ignore while she had still been a senator. Get into this level of politics and you are never alone – one of the prices you had to pay to serve your fellow man. She reviewed a report from the Joint Chiefs advising her of possible military co-operation with the Narn when the Centauri terrorist attack struck at their Homeworld. A cruiser fleet here, a carrier task force there, and the Earth Alliance would join the other ISA members in loudly condemning the Republic's complicity in the actions of its citizens. Whether or not that was strictly true.

Emperor Mollari had visited Earth after the civil war and was instrumental in the creation of the ISA. Along with G'Kar and Delenn, he had proposed Earth's membership to the ISA, and Luchenko remembered the man well, for he made quite an impression. She could not believe he would strike at any enemy in this way. Indeed, despite his inauguration speech in which he had roused the despondent spirit of his people, recently attacked by Narn and Drazi fleets, Luchenko believed Mollari did not view ISA members as a real threat to his Republic. On the other hand, she could easily see that not all Centauri nobles would feel the same way as their Emperor and, given that many of them wielded a great deal of power within the Centaurum, Sheridan's assessment of a rogue House or conspiracy within the Republic seemed logical. She hoped the Narn would not suffer too heavily in this attack, and that any response they made would be measured. The existence of the ISA, at least, could help with that, restraining the Narn from what would be their first, violent impulse.

She signed off on the report, giving the order that would divert more than two-dozen ships and thousands of personnel from their usual patrol routes to form battle fleets on the edge of the Earth Alliance and, should EarthForce get the permission it expected, within Narn space as well. Luchenko predicted some rogue faction within the Republic would be identified by the Rangers soon enough, and the ISA would lay out rules of engagement permitting limited strikes against any assets they held while leaving the rest of the Republic more or less intact. It would be done in such a way that the attacking fleets would be gone before the Centauri could respond, thereby avoiding direct confrontation, and the risk of war, with their military forces.

Clean and easy is how it always appeared here in her office. However, Luchenko had seen the wreckage of the fleet that had liberated Earth from her predecessor, hulks and wrecks spinning slowly in orbit as they trailed a cloud of human debris. Knowing Earth needed time to rebuild and consolidate itself, Luchenko had avoided military conflict at every opportunity, a process made easier by her agreement to join the ISA. Given a choice, she would avoid the forthcoming retribution against the Centauri altogether, but valuable political capital could be made in demonstrating solidarity with the Narn. EarthForce personnel in the ships she sent were probably not in any real danger during what would effectively be hit and run attacks, if it even came to that.

The alarm announcing another visitor bleated its subdued tone once more, but both the President and her aide were surprised as an EarthForce colonel burst into the office, his bald head glistening from running from the Situation Room. Luchenko looked up in amazement – not out of irritation but surprise at a high-ranking EarthForce officer breaking protocol like this. A slow feeling of dread percolated within her stomach as it dawned on her that no officer would act in this way unless something was very, very wrong.

'We found it,' he said, gasping.

Shocked, it took her a second to respond. 'Where?'

'Here.'

'On Earth?'

'No, Madam President,' he said, a little steadier now. 'It's here. In EarthDome.'

July 6th 2263, White Star Intrepide, Sol

Far beyond the orbit of Earth's moon, a jump point shimmered blue and the vortex briefly coalesced to allow the purple spearhead form of the *Intrepide* to enter realspace. With a brief course correction, it aimed straight for Earth, speeding towards its programmed destination. On board, the bridge crew were aware of the increased 'chatter' throughout the system's communications networks and the elevated level of security that interrogated the transponders of the White Star.

'It's here,' said Badeau. 'They've found it. Get me President Luchenko, quickly!'

The Minbari crew quickly sent out coded requests to EarthDome, negotiating a dozen communications protocols but even so, it took several minutes to receive a reply. Badeau spent the time agonising over the possible targets, and even Shaw felt concern for those in danger – even if they were the same Earthers who had opposed the independence of his own world for so long.

Eventually, the *Intrepide's* main display was activated and, flowing from the ceiling once again, it produced the image of President Luchenko. Badeau immediately noticed her harrowed expression, then realised she was on her feet bent over her own display rather than seated, as would have been normal.

'White Star 31,' Luchenko said, her voice fast and hard.

'Madam President,' said Badeau with a tip of her head. 'You have found the Centauri weapon?'

'Yes, it is here in EarthDome, shipped in as part of a supply run from Io. We have a bomb disposal team working on it now.'

'Have you ordered the evacuation?'

'Already started,' said Luchenko. 'Though it will not be complete in time. Our people have never seen a device like this before, but they have already hacked into the first stage of the Centauri fuse. It will detonate in less than twenty minutes.'

Badeau quickly made a mental calculation. 'We can be there in ten. Give us clearance to land. Do you know the potential damage yet?'

'No,' Luchenko shook her head. 'We have a shuttle on standby though. Stay clear. We'll talk again when this is over, one way or another.'

'Madam President,' Badeau said before Luchenko could end the link. 'I don't imagine you will leave until the very last moment, and there is no shuttle or ship in EarthForce as fast as a White Star. I insist, for your own safety, that you allow us to evacuate you and your staff.'

Luchenko glanced beyond Badeau, apparently listening to someone out of view in her office, and then nodded. 'Very well. We will prepare for your arrival.'

The communication ended and Badeau spoke quietly to her helmsmen. 'All power to engines. Get us there fast.'

July 6th 2263, EarthDome, Sol

Firing manoeuvring thrusters, the *Intrepide* touched down lightly on the tarmac of the landing pad, one of several dotting the towering structures of EarthDome. It shared space with three shuttles, each with all hatches open, ready to accept the stream of personnel that funnelled from the senatorial offices. Badeau and Shaw ran down the boarding ramp of the *Intrepide* and pounded into the tower, their Anla'Shok robes streaming behind them. Inside they heard a cry through the slowly panicking crowd and turned to see an EarthForce officer waving to get their attention. Following the man, they hastened through corridors and a transport tube before arriving at the Office of the President of the Earth Alliance.

Taking in the plush meeting area and wide window with a single glance, Badeau walked straight up to the desk of the President. Luchenko was surrounded by EarthForce brass, an even mixt of both fleet and ground force uniforms evident. She looked up to acknowledge the Rangers.

'You got here in time. Good,' Luchenko said.

'Sabine, Michael,' Badeau said, indicating both herself and Shaw. 'Any progress?'

A fleet officer – an admiral, Badeau noted – turned to face her. 'The Centauri fuse is the only realistic route we have into the device, given time constraints. We can tell it started a countdown as soon as it reached EarthDome, but it is hardwired into what we can only presume is the device's detonation circuits. Our team is trying to separate the fuse from the device to render it inert, but they have been unsuccessful so far. If they cannot defuse the trigger, the device will activate as the fuse is removed. We don't know the effects of the device but concur with the ISA's assessment of its magnitude.'

'How long until detonation?' asked Shaw.

The Admiral glanced at a datapad in his hand. 'Four minutes, forty seconds.'

'Madam President,' said Badeau forcefully, expecting resistance. 'We must leave *now*.'

'There is no more time, Madam President,' said another EarthForce officer, a four-star general.

Luchenko scrolled through a report in her screen. 'How many have we evacuated so far?' she asked.

'Nearly 60%. Madam President, we knew we would not get everyone out in time,' the general said. 'I must insist we leave now.'

'How many senators have evacuated?' she persisted.

'We believe they have all left. Madam President, I am sorry.' The general nodded to two EarthForce soldiers who were standing to one side. With determined purpose, they pushed through the crowd and, firmly grabbing the President, began marching her from behind the desk.

Luchenko gave a strangled cry of anger but quickly relaxed and accepted the inevitable. Her Presidential Guard had performed this drill enough to make her realize she had no option. Sensing her acquiescence, the soldiers released their grip of her arms but stayed close. Seeing the President was ready to leave, Badeau and Shaw led the way to the landing pad, where all but one shuttle had departed. EarthForce soldiers surrounded the remaining vessel, forcing the milling crowd to form orderly queues before being permitted to board. By the time the Rangers, President and EarthForce officers reached the *Intrepide*, a sense of very real urgency sank into even Luchenko, and they all boarded the White Star at a flat run.

Inside, Minbari crew quickly directed the EarthForce personnel to temporary quarters, but they allowed Luchenko to follow the Rangers to the bridge. As she ran to her captain's chair, Badeau shouted the order to leave.

'Get us out of here!'

The violent motion of the *Intrepide*, attitude thrusters straining to vault its mass skywards, was dampened down by the gravitic drive, but Shaw still had to take a step back to steady himself. The Minbari helmsmen held the White

Star on a flatter trajectory than normal, trading altitude for simply putting as much distance between the ship and EarthDome without having to fight gravity.

'Time to detonation?' called Badeau.

A Minbari dutifully summoned the holographic display, charting their progress across a three-dimensional map of the surrounding terrain. A counter on the right hand side of the screen registered 33 seconds and began ticking at what seemed an impossibly fast rate.

President Luchenko, standing at Shaw's shoulder, whispered what the bridge crew where thinking. 'We're not going to make it, are we?'

Hopelessly outclassed, the EarthForce bomb disposal team worked hard on the Centauri fuse until the last second. The three members had volunteered to stay until the end, knowing that EarthDome could never be fully evacuated in time. The regular staff had left as soon as the threat had been revealed, and the docking bay was eerily quiet. In his last moments, the leader of the team, Captain Perry, had time for one last cliché.

'Been a pleasure working with you guys.'

The fuse counted down to zero. Within a micro-second, the Dilgar weapon detonated.

In the blink of an eye, reactions took place within the capsule as it drew upon the Earth's own magnetic field to generate the power it hungrily sought. If the other two capsules had been placed in their precise positions elsewhere on the globe, the weapons would create a grid of energy running through crust, mantle and core. Lacking this boost, the weapon turned in upon itself and a blinding white light expanded from the capsule, vaporising all matter within fifty metres. Captain Perry and his men, along with a sizeable part of the loading bay, simply ceased to exist. For several seconds, a ball of unstable energy roared with deafening effect as, outside, lightning thrashed down into EarthDome, generated by the magnitude of power swirling inside. As the sphere finally lost all stability, it detonated, reaction following reaction to create a shock wave that flattened every building within EarthDome and smashing the life out of every living creature it touched. This was followed an instant later by a slow-moving wave of fire that roiled and grew, pouring out across the country, a hungry beast that consumed everything in its path.

Any building that still stood was scorched to its core as the intense heat of the flames rolled over it. Lake Geneva posed no barrier to the fire and most of its water was vaporised though this, at least, would later be replenished naturally. Satellite images of the disaster later revealed the expanding shock wave travelling for over sixty miles with lethal effect, though the seismic vibrations were felt the world over. The expanding fire wave appeared to move at a snail's pace in comparison, as if it could be outrun, though no one in the immediate area would survive its devastating effects. The reactions that drove it expired quickly; perhaps the Dilgar weapon required its counterparts for greater effect or maybe it had been dormant for too long. The flames finally abated after travelling twenty miles to the east, consuming Montreux, La Comballaz and a dozen other towns. To the other compass points, the effects of the weapon were hemmed in by the Alps, reaching only a few miles and not crossing the mountain range. An area of natural beauty that had remained unsullied for centuries lay in ash.

Shaw opened his eyes and looked up at the underside of his station. Beyond that, he saw a sky darkened by rapidly thinning clouds. That's not right, he thought. A heavy weight lay across his abdomen, but a pain in the small of his back made him consider remaining immobile for the moment.

He closed his eyes again to focus and remember. The countdown on the screen. The President's comment on the inevitability of their situation. Then a resounding smack on the hull of the *Intrepide* as a shock wave struck it with ruinous force. He remembered one of the Minbari crew shouting something about losing one of the wings. The White Star had lurched at that point, and suddenly they were all looking at a looming mountain range growing ever larger in the viewport. Sabine rattled off commands and suggestions to the crew until the last moment and they, to their credit, had obeyed. Everything had been tried. Shaw, with little to offer, had braced himself and the President. He remembered rock flashing past the viewport at incredible speed and then nothing else. He hurt all over.

Raising his head, Shaw looked down at the weight trapping him.

'Ah,' he said, realising what it was. 'Madam President? Are you alright?'

She moaned, giving the indication that she was at least alive. Shaw studied what was left of the bridge. Towards the viewport, hunks of metal plating and crushed parts of the ship's superstructure twisted around one another. He held little hope for the two helmsmen stationed there. Above him was sky, and it continued towards the back of the bridge. Shaw dimly realised the bridge was no longer part of the *Intrepide's* hull. At some point during the crash, the two had parted company.

Movement to his right caused him to stir, and he saw a blackened and scarred Badeau struggling to sit upright, clutching her side as she did so.

'Michael,' she said, wincing in pain. 'You still with us?'

'Never left,' he paused, as he suddenly found the need to swallow. 'The President is alive too.'

'Can you move?' Badeau asked as she lay back to a prone position. Luchenko's stirrings indicated consciousness too.

Shaw moved his extremities one by one to see if anything had stopped working or been torn off. It hurt, but he

decided he was more or less intact. Helping Luchenko, Shaw sat up, groaning as he did. It was some effort, but strength started to return.

After checking the President for breaks and then resting her to one side, Shaw began to fish around in his robes for the small first aid pack all Rangers carried. Pulling out a small syringe from the brown case, he began administering it to Luchenko, hoping to remove any pain, before repeating the procedure for Badeau. He saw immediately that the Ranger was far worse off than the President.

'How are you?' he asked.

Badeau suppressed a groan as she shifted position. 'I don't think it's good. That helps,' she said, nodding at the syringe in his hand.

'Did anyone else make it?' asked Shaw finally.

'I don't know,' said Badeau grimly, after a pause. 'I think most bridge crew were sucked out of that,' she said, weakly gesturing to the open ceiling. 'Or are buried under that,' indicating the crushed forward section. 'Either way, I don't give much hope, even for Minbari.'

Standing a little shakily, Shaw leaned against what remained of his station. Looking towards the rear of the bridge, he saw mountains and little else. He was also aware of his captain's injuries.

'You should look for survivors,' he heard her say behind him.

'I can't. Your injuries-' he started.

'There will be others in the crew worse off than me. I have the President here to help me. We have to get a commlink to EarthForce working – they'll send a shuttle.' She paused for a moment before steeling herself to continue. 'When it arrives, I don't want to report that we are the only survivors.'

Shaw was not sure whether it was loyalty to his captain, a growing bond between the two of them or an outdated chivalrous desire to not leave a wounded woman, but he found himself disagreeing with her and began to shake his head.

'Be back in thirty minutes,' she said flatly, mustering enough strength and determination in her voice so Shaw would not mistake her authority and the direct command.

After a further split second of indecision, Shaw nodded and began to pick his way painfully from the bridge. He began to reach for his first aid kit again, intending to use the same stimulant and pain suppressant combination on himself that he had administered to Badeau and the President. As soon as he put his hand on the pouch, he thought better of it. He could soon encounter someone who needed it far more than he.

Outside, the air seemed burnt, the stench of ozone thick in his nostrils. He scanned the area but his sight was blocked by mountains on all sides. The thin vegetation at the foot of the towering rock faces was either burning or already blackened. What he had taken for clouds earlier was actually thick smoke. It seemed the sky itself had caught fire. What remained of EarthDome and the great lake, he could not tell. The bridge of the *Intrepide* had indeed separated from the main hull, and its ruin had come to rest a quarter of the way up the mountain.

Looking down, he saw scattered wreckage of the White Star, though nothing large enough to be the main hull. Shaw guessed that lay beyond one of the mountains around him, though whether it would be behind the bridge or in front, he could not guess. Seeing a large fragment of purple armour plating a few hundred yards from him, perhaps from the drive systems, Shaw began a painful climb down toward it. He was grateful they had not ended up higher in the mountain ranges, where treacherous terrain and thin oxygen would have added to his difficulties. It did not take long, however, for him to realise that many of the crew might be stranded in just such a place. So long as they were not badly injured, he knew the Minbari would be tough enough to survive for at least a little while, but he did not have such hopes for the EarthForce officers who had evacuated with them.

It took Shaw several minutes to reach his target, but he was rewarded with sounds of movement from behind the wreckage that towered above him. It was from the rear section of the *Intrepide*, he could tell now, where it had broken away from the core of the gravitic drive. Trying not to think of injured crew lying too close to the ship's fusion reactor, he limped round the wreckage, peering inside. He immediately saw a line of Minbari bodies in a shattered corridor, all arranged in a neat row. He did not know whether they were unconscious or dead but his heart lightened as someone had obviously placed them thus.

A groan of supreme effort sounded just beyond the prone Minbari, and Shaw called out. A pause hung between him and the unknown crew member, then a hesitant voice returned to him.

'Mr Shaw?'

A surge of relief swept through him as he recognised the light tone, and he redoubled his efforts to clamber through the twisted supports framing the corridor.

'Tilanna!'

He found the small Minbari just beyond what had once been a junction that split service panels around the drive system. Looking at her, he thought she looked a real mess. She favoured her left arm and the robes around her legs were soaked through with blood. Her face, normally so delicate and precise in its features, had a deep cut running across the back of her head and blood dripped from her bone crest. Still, she had been trying to force open a wedged door with brute force. In spite of the situation, Shaw could not help but admire her Minbari fortitude and resilience. A human in her condition would have been out for the count, if surviving at all.

'Help me,' she said simply, then went back to straining on the door. 'I heard movement inside.'

Shaw cast his eye about, seeing the door was open by an inch or so – either jammed that way or moved through Tilanna's incredible efforts. He spied a loose pipe jutting from the floor and wrenched it free. Stepping up to Tilanna, he wedged it in as a lever, and the two of them strained together. Gradually, an inch at a time, it yielded to their efforts. Finally a pair of hands from the other side gripped the edge of the door and aided them. The work easier now, the door was soon forced open, and they looked inside to see a darkened chamber crushed to a third of its original size. On the floor were three Minbari. The first looked up as the others began to move slowly.

'I thank you,' he said to both Shaw and Tilanna. 'I could not have moved that by myself.'

They both crouched down to inspect his injuries. 'Are you hurt?' Shaw asked.

'Nothing major, I think. I believe, at least, I will live.' He winced as he stood. 'Help me with the others. I think they will live but a little light would help the diagnosis.'

Between them, Shaw and the two more able-bodied Minbari struggled to drag the wounded third to where Tilanna placed the others. She told Shaw some had perished while others might not recover without assistance, as she finally sat down to rest and let him tend her injuries.

He saw her left arm was bruised and a wide, nasty slash across her shin was quickly bound up. No lasting damage would result. He was far more concerned with her head wound but consoled himself that it might not be critical as she was still conscious. Shaw knew the Religious Caste were far more adept at some of the pain management meditations he had learned as one of the Anla'Shok, but even so, he was impressed by Tilanna's strength of will. His task finished, he suddenly remembered his rendezvous with Badeau back in the bridge section.

'We have to go – a shuttle should be coming for us. Sabine is setting up a commlink,' he said to the two Minbari.

The male Minbari smiled at the news that his captain was still alive but refused to go with Shaw and Tilanna. 'I have to stay here. They will need me,' he said, indicating the prone Minbari.

Shaw shook his head. 'You are in no state to survive the cold for long.'

'They will survive a great deal shorter than that if I am not around. Besides, I'll make a fire. It will keep us warm and serve as a beacon.'

'What will you use for a flame?' Shaw asked, looking around the immediate wreckage.

When he did not get an immediate answer, Shaw turned back to see both Minbari looking at him with serious faces.

'Michael,' Tilanna said slowly. 'We Minbari had the capacity to make fire long before you humans did. He'll manage.'

Shaw dropped his gaze and smiled. 'Sorry.'

'Now go, both of you,' the Minbari said. 'The captain will need you.'

Shaw put a hand on his shoulder and said, 'I'll get a shuttle sent down to you.'

'I know you will. I have my duties here. Go and attend to yours.'

Nodding once, Shaw stood up and began the march back up the mountain with Tilanna.

As they approached the wrecked bridge section, Shaw saw Luchenko leaning over Badeau. The Ranger was lying very still now, and Luchenko looked up as Shaw and Tilanna approached.

'Your friend managed to get through, eventually. A shuttle is on its way. I think she needs help very soon. . .' said Luchenko.

Shaw and Tilanna both crouched by their captain, Luchenko stepping back to give them room. Badeau faded in and out of consciousness, probably from the strain of getting a communications link working and contacting EarthForce. Looking over his superior's broken body, Shaw wondered what he should do next. He still had his duty to perform and a mission to accomplish – but without Sabine's guidance and support? Surely the Anla'Shok would have to be informed of her injuries so a senior replacement could be sent to support the President and the Earth Alliance in this time of dire need. But what if no replacement was conveniently nearby? Shaw did not have the faintest clue how to advise a President. She had many years of political experience and was probably twice his age. What contribution could he possibly make?

Luchenko broke through his thoughts. 'How did you get on?' she asked.

This, at least, was something he could answer. 'Didn't find the main hull, if it is still in one piece. But there are injured Minbari down there,' he said, pointing back to the wreckage.

'Shuttles will be scouring the area soon. They'll be okay.' She turned to face Tilanna. 'I carried a beacon outside to direct the shuttle. Make sure it keeps transmitting until they arrive. We cannot spare a second's delay. I need to get to a secure location as quickly as possible.'

It slowly dawned on Shaw what that meant. 'We can gather the survivors in the shuttle that's coming now,' he ventured. Luchenko shook her head and was about to respond when Shaw felt a hand on his leg. He looked down to see Badeau grasping him, an unwavering expression on her face, and he crouched to hear her words.

'We have to get the President to a safe location. That's our priority.' The effort of this clearly pained her and she closed her eyes, relaxing her grip on him.

'Sabine!'

Badeau slowly opened her eyes to look straight at Shaw, and he saw the determined set of her jaw.

'What do you think is happening, right now?' she asked, looking to press her point. When he did not answer immediately, she grabbed him again and forced him to look at her once more. 'Think!'

Taking a breath, Shaw considered the situation. 'Well, there will be those in EarthForce who want to retaliate. They'll want to attack the Centauri. But they won't do that without orders.'

'Until I contacted EarthForce, they were presuming the President was dead, along with the Joint Chiefs. The news she is still alive has not reached every part of EarthForce yet. The senators, those who survived, have been scattered during the evacuation and so, right now, no one knows who is in charge. It will only take one lone admiral or even captain to get the idea that retaliation must take place quickly – and we then have a war on our hands.'

He nodded but Badeau did not let him go. 'Do you understand?' she said through her pain.

'Yes,' he finally said, though he thought of the brave Minbari just a little distance away who might have to survive a night in these mountains. 'Where are we taking the President?'

'A shuttle is being sent down from the *Alexander*, a destroyer in orbit. From there, I imagine she will want to go to a command post, either here on Earth or perhaps Mars. I'm betting Mars. They may fear further attacks.'

'We need to report back as well,' he said.

'Now you are thinking. Yes, damn straight we have to report to Sheridan. Or, rather, you do.' The whine of a craft's engines caused her to glance up as a shuttle bearing EarthForce markings began a landing cycle just a few yards away from them. 'Listen to me, Michael,' Badeau said, ensuring his attention was focussed only on her. 'I don't know how long I can stay conscious, and I think I am going to be out of things for a while. Everything rides on what happens next; I cannot overstate that enough. You are now the conduit between Luchenko and Sheridan. You are also going to have to take a lot of tough decisions on your own. Remember what you have been taught. Be true to the Anla'Shok.'

As she closed her eyes once more, Shaw noticed that Badeau's breathing was becoming ragged. He had to strain to hear her next words over the noise of the settling shuttle. 'I think this is going to get worse before it gets better.'

Shaw did not have the chance to ask Badeau what she meant, as his captain lapsed into unconsciousness. The area began swarming with people in EarthForce uniforms, first taking President Luchenko aboard the shuttle, then bringing a stretcher for Badeau. He followed Tilanna to the small craft, turning to look once more at the strewn wreckage of the *Intrepide* below them before ducking inside.

CHAPTER EIGHT

July 6th 2263, The EAS Alexander, Sol

Lacking the advanced gravitic systems of the White Star, the EarthForce shuttle was uncomfortable, even for those who were not injured. Shaw and Tilanna endured the short voyage well enough as the shuttle closed distance with its mother ship, the *Alexander*, but he was thankful that Badeau had slipped into unconsciousness earlier. Though they remained alert, both he and Tilanna were engaged in their own silent meditative techniques, taught to them by the Minbari, as paramedics on board the shuttle tended them. Though forced to inaction, Shaw tried to marshal his mental reserves, preparing himself for the next challenge however out of depth he personally felt. Despite holding the title a short time, Shaw was Anla'Shok, and he was determined not to fail.

President Luchenko had no such training and she chomped at the bit, impatient at wasting more time before she could resume her role as leader of a free Earth. Frustrated, she ordered the shuttle's pilot to hook a communications link into the EarthForce emergency bands and, from the flood of chatter, she began to piece together what had happened in Geneva and the extent of the damage. At first glance, it looked to be total.

The *Alexander*, an Omega-class destroyer and one of the largest and most powerful vessels in the EarthForce fleet, loomed in the shuttle's forward viewport where all the passengers could see it. The long, square shape of the Omega, common to many vessels built by Earth, had earned the entire fleet the nickname 'flying bricks.' However, whereas many EarthForce ships still had zero-gravity throughout their superstructures, the Omega had a rotating crew section where variable artificial gravity was permanently available. As well as granting military crews a measure of dignity, it allowed ships such as the *Alexander* to stay on patrol for extended periods of time without incurring unnecessary crew fatigue.

The pilot exchanged call signs and approach vectors with the *Alexander's* fighter controllers and then lined the shuttle up with the massive warship. Flying around the front superstructure of the *Alexander* in a long sweeping manoeuvre, the shuttle began the slow approach to the red-lit docking bay in the nose of the ship. Flashing guide lights mounted on pylons extending from the sheer face of the prow gave visual aid to the pilot as he gently coaxed the shuttle forward to the open port.

Unbuckling herself before the shuttle had finished its docking sequence, President Luchenko impatiently waited for the co-pilot to lead them through the forward zero-gravity section of the *Alexander*. She only gained a measure of self-control when they reached the bridge and were able to put their feet down solidly on the deck. The transition was disorientating for the President, Tilanna and Shaw, as none of them had spent any time on an Omega, but they quickly recovered.

Captain James, a tall, dark-skinned man with severe features but a calm and friendly voice, strode up to the group as soon as they entered the ship's bridge.

'Madam President, are you alright?' he asked with genuine concern.

'I'm alive but a lot of good people died today,' she answered briskly. 'You must take me to Mars. I need to get to the EarthForce Support Centre there. Best speed, Captain.'

'Of course.' He turned to face his crew. 'You heard the President. Maximum burn to leave Earth orbit. Then open a jump point for Mars.'

'Jump point, aye,' came the automatic response.

He turned back to Luchenko. 'One more thing, Captain,' she said. 'I need access to Gold Channel communications. I presume they are still up?'

'A little scrambled but that should diminish as we move away from Earth,' he said. 'Here, Madam President. You can use my office.' The Captain ushered her to an alcove towards the rear of the bridge which housed all the systems the captain of an Omega needed. Settling herself down, the President began to tap into the high priority Gold Channel communications network.

Still standing by the entrance of the bridge, Tilanna leaned over to Shaw and whispered, 'What do we do?'

Shaw was not completely certain of the answer himself. 'We wait,' he said quietly after a moment's thought. 'We desperately need to contact President Sheridan, but I think it would be well if we do so when he can give us orders in private. We also need to watch, very carefully, what Earth does next. Keep your eyes and ears open.'

Shaw nodded as the captain walked back to them. 'Rangers,' he said, addressing both. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'Just get us to Mars, Captain,' Shaw said. 'Fast. The fate of billions rests on this.'

If Captain James thought Shaw was overstating things, he did not show it. For his part, Shaw found himself impressed with the way the whole crew of the *Alexander* were coping with the virtual decapitation of not only their military command, but the entire Earth government. Though he could sense a deep shock within the crew, they attended their duties with a renewed diligence.

Under full thrust, the *Alexander* left the shadow of Earth's gravity well and opened a stable jump point that would get them to Mars in minutes instead of hours. They all felt the lurch as the ship approached the inter-dimensional vortex, accelerating to match the velocities of shock waves and currents in hyperspace.

As the light-minutes of realspace flashed past, Tilanna leaned towards Shaw and quietly spoke. 'Do you recognise the name of this ship?'

'I know of it. It was named after an ancient Earth leader who conquered much of his known world.'

'No, that is not what I meant,' said Tilanna. 'This is the *Alexander*. The same ship that fought against Clark's forces at Epsilon Eridani, when Babylon 5 seceded from the Earth Alliance. The commander at the time was a Major Ryan but it was under the overall leadership of Sheridan.' She smiled. 'As Earth ships go, it is quite famous among the Religious Caste.'

Shaw raised his brow as he considered this. 'A good omen, perhaps?' he said.

'If it is, it will be the first one today.'

July 6th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Officially, Mars had gained its independence from the Earth Alliance after the civil war provoked by the actions of President Clark. Unofficially, the bureaucracy of EarthGov had done everything it could to hinder the progress of Mars' citizens in finding their own way in the galaxy. Many senators found the independence of a colony within their own home system something of an embarrassment, and still more believed that Mars would return to the fold within a year or two. Both groups failed to comprehend that the more barriers they put up against the Martians, the harder Martians would fight for their right to self-determination. Too much blood had been spilt in the past during the riots and rebellions for it to be any other way.

President Luchenko, if she were candid, would admit to being in the latter group. With so few natural resources of its own, she failed to appreciate the trade links the provisional Mars government would create via their membership to the Interstellar Alliance. Truth be told, Mars had done proportionally better within the ISA than Earth itself had. She had turned a blind eye to the refusals Mars citizens met when they tried to use their own passports, she delayed the withdrawal of EarthForce personnel from the red sands and did absolutely nothing to further the trade links between Earth and its former colony. Far more important issues existed with her existing colony worlds. Today, however, she was secretly glad for her past reticence, as it meant there was still a fully functioning EarthForce command centre within Mars Dome One, complete with a communications network that could span the galaxy if necessary.

The Support Centre was a small and unobtrusive, though well defended, building on the outskirts of Mars Dome One. Its meek presence, however, belied the extensive network that lay beneath it, turning the facility into a virtual bunker. In the past, the throughway outside had been the scene of violence and bloodshed, as much of the Martian aggression against Earth had been concentrated here when tempers flared.

Inside the communications hub of the centre, many EarthForce staff were going about their duties on autopilot, shocked at the news of the sneak attack, disbelieving that they could be going to war again so soon. Little more than a year had passed since the civil war. Shaw watched them talk in subdued tones and it reminded him of the sudden death of President Santiago some years before, on board EarthForce One around Io. Even on Mars, people had been stunned into silence at the tragedy of losing a popular leader.

Tilanna stood, alert, as Shaw sat down at a communications relay behind her. He had instructed her to make sure no one was eavesdropping. No doubt someone, somewhere, would be monitoring his communications with the ISA, but Shaw hoped the Ranger security protocols he used would at least slow them down. Badeau had been taken to the emergency centre of the largest hospital in Mars Dome One. That comforted him, as he knew it contained some of the best doctors on Mars, and its medical advances could rival the finest hospitals on Earth. Her condition was deemed critical from the one communication Shaw received from the staff there, and though they had promised to give him regular updates, he had doubts about receiving them promptly while in the high security command centre. Though concerned about his captain, Shaw also knew she would want him focussed on the situation at hand. Given its magnitude, he felt lost and desperately wished Badeau could be there, as he was certain she would know what to do. For all his Anla'Shok training at the hands of the best human and Minbari tutors, he simply did not feel prepared for this moment. Tilanna's presence, however, was some comfort and infinitely better than being alone.

As it turned out, Shaw's worries about eavesdroppers were made moot by Luchenko's elevated voice rising from the main computer desk on the other side of the hub. Her commands, questions, and general shouting would drown out anything he said or heard. The communications staff had managed to put the President in contact with a few senators who had either escaped the destruction of EarthDome or who were not present. She also had direct links to fleets across Earth space.

'I am not ordering a war, Senator,' she said. 'Yes, I know I need the approval of the Senate. . . Damn it man, who do you think you are talking to?' There was another pause as she listened to the private channel. 'It doesn't matter. I am hereby giving the order to EarthForce for full mobilisation. All colonies, all fleets. . . Senator, don't try me on this. EarthDome has been destroyed, and I damn well got blasted out of the sky myself. If this is a prelude to further action, our people need to be ready.'

He knew Luchenko was a moderate, but Shaw also knew the Earth Alliance had been dealt a grievous blow this day. Listening to the President, he knew she would not escalate things without further provocation, but she was still a target and was now on his homeworld. Might she inadvertently draw attention to Mars? Would she care about the Martians if another attack were made here rather than on Earth?

'Senator, if you bring that proposal up, you can be sure I will veto it,' Luchenko said after another pause. 'I am not committing our forces to invasion. However, we need a show of strength against the Centauri before they get any more ideas or become emboldened by this attack. Move those fleets to their borders – I have already spoken to the Kha'ri on Narn. They have offered us free access to their space along the Centauri border. They are enthusiastic to commit forces, but I have forestalled them for now. However, it is good to know we have friends.'

She listened again, taking a breath in an attempt to calm herself. 'It is important to remember that we are by no means crippled,' she said. 'They have struck at the heart of our government, but we still have EarthForce and we still have an effective governing body. Tell your people to remain calm. Those responsible for this tragic situation will be brought to justice. That is a promise.'

July 7th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

The hours ticked by slowly as the Earth Alliance stumbled around for someone to accuse and for a definite target to strike. Shaw and Tilanna were granted cramped quarters attached to the Support Centre, but they were at least grateful for an unlocked communications link which had been transferred to them – as much to give EarthForce officers and the President privacy as them, Shaw presumed. The ISA Headquarters on Minbar promised instructions from Sheridan himself, but there was still no word. Shaw guessed the ISA had at least as many problems as Earth, and anyone walking into an EarthForce installation would have been able to sniff the possibility of war on the air. Humanity was looking for someone to blame, and he could not completely remove himself from the impulse, as he had been a de facto target. It had been a dreadful attack.

Trying to avoid being swept up by the mania, Shaw contented himself with watching ISN broadcasts, but they focussed on the attack and little else. The time counter on the bottom of the screen showed it to be dawn in London, but Earth Standard Time meant little on the colony worlds, which each had their own rotational clock. Tilanna had tried to persuade him to get some sleep, but while he could relax physically, he remained too keyed up after yesterday's events. Besides, he would soon be going into action again, either as warrior or peacemaker, depending on what the politicians decided next. He lay on a soft recliner and shuffled

his feet back and forth to maintain circulation while he watched yet another summary of the attack, hoping for but not expecting any new information from the ISN correspondents.

The dark-haired newscaster was typical of those chosen by ISN after the civil war. Shaw could not recall the name flashed a few minutes ago, but her educated accent and a guileless demeanour promised viewers the whole truth. Even so, a little of the shock now spreading around Earth, if not all the colony worlds, registered in her tone. A screen-within-screen held steady at her right shoulder, showing the scenes of devastation from the air above Geneva. The great lake had shrunk drastically, leaving a crisped brown bed stretching between the mountains. No vegetation remained in the area, and the camera lingered on the ruins of EarthDome, now a smashed and twisted pile of rubble and metal.

'We have confirmed sightings from our correspondents across the colony worlds of EarthForce personnel on a heightened state of alert,' the newscaster said in her calm and measured voice, 'as well as fleets leaving ports for destinations unknown, though we have unconfirmed reports of EarthForce ships taking position along the Centauri Republic border. President Luchenko, currently on Mars, made just one public address since the attack on EarthDome, announcing she is working with the ISA to bring a measured response to the perpetrators of this terrorist action. So far, no evidence has been produced as to the identity of the attackers, but the assignment of fleets to Centauri space, if true, must point to information we have not yet received. In a statement received just two hours ago, Emperor Londo Mollari had this to say.'

The screen-within-screen changed to show the stern but somehow tired looking face of the Centauri Emperor, which then grew to fill the entire screen. As the transition completed, the recording began to run, and he addressed the people of Earth.

'The Centauri Republic condemns, by the strongest means possible, the cowardly attack on our friends of Earth. I, personally, weep at the unprecedented death toll and offer my sympathies to all who lost friends, colleagues and relatives. We Centauri, of all peoples in this galaxy, know the terrible cost an attack like this demands.' Mollari's face then turned harder. 'However, despite scurrilous rumours emerging from certain governments within the Interstellar Alliance, I must state, categorically, that the Centauri Republic played no part in this dreadful tragedy. We have no interest in the affairs of other worlds and seek merely to pursue our own destiny within our own borders.'

The screen flicked back to show the newscaster, continuing her summary.

'President of the Interstellar Alliance and hero of the civil war, John Sheridan, broadcast this appeal for calm to all ISA worlds shortly after.'

Once again, the screen-within-screen above the newscaster's shoulder changed to picture President Sheridan before his image grew to fill the whole screen in ISN's slick manner.

'I strongly urge all members of the ISA to abide by the treaties they have signed,' he said. 'Unilateral action against a government outside of our alliance is forbidden and must be agreed upon first by a majority of members. At this time, we have no firm evidence as to the identity of those who committed this atrocity, but the Rangers are working hard to uncover new information. You can be sure they will succeed and, as we have done in the past, the ISA will stand behind the wishes of its members. Until then, I must insist that no government undertake military action or other acts that may later be construed as hostile.'

Sheridan's image disappeared and the newscaster was back.

'In summary again, EarthDome was destroyed at 09:50 EST yesterday by what has been called by President Luchenko a terrorist action. The bomb, apparently of alien construction, devastated a huge area around Geneva. The death toll currently stands at over 68,000, but this is expected to rise drastically over the coming days as relief teams comb the region. Messages of support and pledges of assistance have been received from Mars colony, the Narn Regime, Minbar and many governments from the former League of Non-Aligned Worlds. Though many government staff were killed in the attack, EarthGov assures us it is still a functioning body. Coming up, an analysis of the Centauri Republic's military and possible response scenarios from our EarthForce liaison, Ted Chang.'

'Mr. Shaw, you have a call,' Tilanna said to him, penetrating the lethargy that inactivity brought to his system. 'From Tuzanor.' She gestured to his screen, and he switched the console from ISN to the communications network.

'Orders?' he asked.

'From Sheridan himself, I was told.'

They watched the digits scroll past on the screen for a few seconds before a weary looking Sheridan appeared. Shaw guessed he had been without sleep for longer than they had, given the timing of the attack.

'Michael, Tilanna, good,' he started. 'I apologise for not getting back to you earlier but I hoped to present you with some solid information. Unfortunately, we still have nothing we can conclusively use.'

'We still don't know it was the Centauri?' asked Shaw.

'Oh, we are pretty sure the attack *was* by Centauri,' Sheridan answered candidly. 'What we cannot prove is exactly which Centauri. I cannot imagine for a moment this was an official action by the Republic – say what you like about the Emperor, and I can say a lot, but Mollari is not a terrorist. I know him too well. We suspect a rogue element, perhaps not even within their Centaurum, but a conspiracy looking to achieve God knows what. I am uploading information from our investigation, including a resume of House Kaado which our intelligence has implicated.'

The data crystal locked into the interface next to Shaw's screen began to flash its white light as information flowed across the gulf of space between Minbar and Mars.

'I am giving you both a critical mission, consisting of two parts. First, play diplomat to President Luchenko. She is a good woman but she is also a consummate politician. Earth is hurting right now and its people have a habit of demanding action, any action, when wounded. As a politician, her instincts may be to respond to their pressure. I am also certain some in EarthForce are pressing for a military response as well.'

'We are to act as the ISA's representative here?' Shaw asked.

'You are to stop a war at all costs,' said Sheridan. 'We already know Luchenko is receiving offers of military support from the Narn and other worlds. They all have vested interests in open warfare with the Centauri and may try to take advantage of this. I do *not* want a situation whereby I am forced to place White Stars between the Centauri and a combined fleet of ISA members. That battle would mean the end of the ISA and everything we have striven for over the past year. Do you understand?'

'We do, Mr. President,' said Shaw. 'We'll advise Luchenko. I just hope I can get her to listen to us. Was there something else?'

'Yes. Take the information I have just transferred to you and begin your own investigation there in Earth space. We only have access to half of what we need here, and you may be able to uncover something at your end. Try to backtrack the bomb and see where the path leads. The Earth Alliance did their own check using information we gave them – that is how they discovered the device before it detonated. Try to find something, anything, that leads blame away from the Republic and toward the real terrorists.'

'And if the trail does lead to the Republic itself?' Shaw queried.

Sheridan sighed. 'Then war may be inevitable. Report whatever you find to me. We'll try to keep everything together here. Any questions?'

'Mr. President,' Tilanna said hesitantly. Sheridan acknowledged her . 'I am not Anla'Shok and know of the Earth Alliance only as it relates to us. I believe I am not the right person to act as Mr. Shaw's assistant in this.'

Though it seemed obvious to hear her say it, Shaw was surprised to discover Tilanna had been harbouring reservations about her own abilities, just as he had. In the past, she was utterly serene, as though there was little that could not be achieved. In fact, he associated this trait with all Minbari. To hear one have doubts shook him a little, making them seem more, well, human.

Sheridan smiled, a little sadly, at her. 'You have just been promoted to a temporary position within the Rangers, Tilanna. Michael needs all the help you can give him over the next few days. And, knowing the Religious Caste, your temple training has given you all the tools you need to face anything in this galaxy. I have some experience in that. Is there anything else?'

'No, Mr. President.'

'Then I wish you both good luck. You have served the Rangers well so far, but we must ask you to continue striving. The peace of the galaxy rests on all of us now.'

'You can count on us,' Shaw promised before the link was broken. He and Tilanna looked at one another for a brief moment.

'A chance to be heroes,' said Tilanna with a half-smile.

'Business as usual,' said Shaw with a confidence he did not entirely feel. 'Come on, we have a lot of work ahead of us.'

July 7th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

The manor was still and silent, the night shrouding its magnificent gardens. Even the royal guardsmen on patrol kept out of sight, silently watching for intruders, however unlikely they might be. Tastefully positioned spotlights, their combined effect sculpted by one of the leading artists of Centauri Prime, highlighted the exquisite architecture of the main building, turning it into a bright display and a nocturnal landmark for miles in every direction. This far from Imperial City, it remained a solitary and unchallenged beacon in the darkness.

Inside its long tiled corridors and plush chambers, few stirred. The servants and slaves still awake went about their duties like clockwork, ever mindful of the penalties of disappointing the master of the house. Some were on hand to respond to any whim or demand that Veneta Kaado or his guest might make, whatever the hour, but most were simply engaged in the normal running of a household of this size, a never-ending task.

Veneta and his sole remaining conspirator, Territt, were beneath the manor, in a small complex Kaado had commissioned from a military expert in security. It could, in theory, be turned into a bunker, leaving any would-be attacker no choice but to literally dig the inhabitants out. Inside, Veneta had ensured all conveniences due a noble were on hand in copious quantities. He had also constructed a command centre of sorts, which he could use to monitor any aspect of House Kaado's interests, usually in real-time. Here, the bunker diverged from its military ancestry, replete with expensive tapestries, priceless masters from a dozen worlds and soft furnishings that would not tax him should long hours be required here. Kaado did not expect to ever lock down the bunker and survive for any great length of time, isolated from his enemies. However, the look of envy on Territt's face as he showed the conspirator this luxurious stronghold thrilled Kaado.

He had absolutely no doubt that Territt's own household would sport a similar, probably larger, bunker in the coming months, but the important thing was that he had been *first*. A trend would certainly start among the Great Houses and he would achieve a certain amount of respect as its instigator. Money meant a lot in Centauri politics, but it could gain a noble so much more when allied to a healthy imagination and a will to get things done.

Their third conspirator, Verlime, was not present. He had scurried back to his own manor within Imperial City when Veneta and Territt had confronted him with scandalising records and images confirming his liaisons with a slave girl belonging to another House. All engineered by Veneta, of course, as he had ensured months ago that Verlime would meet a young Centauri woman who matched his subconscious ideal of a female. To within 96.4%, Veneta's experts had assured him. This, combined with his overt complicity in the attack on Earth, would keep Verlime's silence for now. There was always the possibility that Kaado and Territt would need a scapegoat if their plans went awry and if not, well, Verlime would not live to see the next year.

Kaado and Territt watched broadcasts on the giant screen that took up most of the wall in front of them. They leapt from channel to channel, viewing the reports from a dozen worlds as news of the attack began to filter in, toasting each other with Veneta's most prized stash of Brivari. If now was not the time to break open a bottle or two of his most expensive vintages, he did not know when it possibly could be. Right now, an ISN broadcast from the Earth Alliance was playing. The two nobles took a perverse pleasure in watching the people of Earth try to comes to terms with the disaster they had created, and though they monitored other channels from other races, time and again they came back to ISN.

Together, they mocked their Emperor's statement, jeered Sheridan's plea for calm, and goaded the screen as Luchenko promised a measured response. For this brief time, both forgot about the politics of Centauri Prime and the probable future that would see them at odds as they played for the same political territory. They simply basked in the knowledge of a job well done. For those few short hours, they were true comrades. All good things had to come to an end though.

'This is not going fast enough for my liking,' said Territt. 'I'm going to give the order for escalation.'

Veneta's head was spinning slightly from the amount of Brivari he had consumed. 'Ah, back to business then,' he lamented.

Smiling, Territt reached for a commlink lying on the floor beside the large sofa where he sprawled. 'It won't take long. With any luck, we may see it live on ISN. Earth has a habit of sending reporters into battle.' Activating a coded and scrambled channel, he placed a pre-arranged call to a close ally long ago manoeuvred into owing him a great favour. Time to collect.

'Vocator?' he asked. When he received the expected response, he simply said one word.

'Proceed.'

CHAPTER NINE

July 7th 2263, The Urza Jaddo, Beta III

From the main viewport of the bridge of the *Urza Jaddo*, Vocator Barini could look down the entire length of his battlecruiser. Hands behind his back, he listened to the bridge crew behind him complete their status checks with the other sections of the *Jaddo* and its companion ships. Lights from a hundred smaller viewports glittered beneath him across the purple and grey armoured hull, the ship's thick hide housing a veritable town floating in space. At its prow were two heavy lasers capable of slicing through enemy vessels and a dozen turrets studded the topside of the ship. In his mind's eye he could see the two other identical battlecruisers just behind the *Jaddo*. Satisfied that he had been given the right tools for his mission, he paced slowly toward the rear of the bridge, mounting the three small steps that raised his command seat on a plinth above the crew.

Easing his large frame into the comfortable sagid-hide chair, Barini waited until his first officer reported that his crew and ship were both ready for action.

'Have the *Protera* and *Voxa* signalled us?' he asked.

'Yes, Vocator,' came the reply. 'Both report all systems green and ready for battle.'

'Excellent. Are the Sentris still tracking the target?'

'Yes, Vocator. The target is stationary at the same co-ordinates.'

Barini could sense the anticipation in his crew. They did not know the reasons for the squadron of battlecruisers being here or why they were attacking the Earth fleet. In fact, he had not been told the full reasons himself. Still, Minister Territt had been most generous in the past, elevating him within the Centauri military and personally seeing him offered command not only of the *Urza Jaddo* but this entire squadron. However, the crew's anticipation and the excitement on the bridge were palpable. For too long the Centauri had been pushed around by every other race, its people under ruinous taxes to pay for reparations they did not deserve to pay. A chance to strike back at their enemies now presented itself. The real whys and wherefores were unimportant. They were actually doing something about their situation and Barini was not entirely immune to this emotion.

He stood up and cleared his throat to make sure he had the attention of the entire bridge.

'My friends, the great Centauri Republic has been through a long night.' Barini recited the speech given to him by the Minister precisely, knowing his words were

being transmitted throughout the *Jaddo* and the other battlecruisers. Of its veracity he had little idea, but he knew some truth was surely buried within. He learned early in his career not to question the orders of his superiors too closely and was happy to accept the Minister's words, especially considering what his co-operation would earn him later.

'The humans, too, have suffered a great tragedy, of that you have no doubt already heard. However, they have blamed we Centauri for this dreadful event. Once more we are subjected to the lies and prejudice of other races jealous of our superiority and they will try anything to bring us down.'

There were more than a few nods among the bridge crew, many of whom, Barini knew, had lost family and friends during the Narn and Drazi attack on Centauri Prime. 'The Earth task force we are about to go into battle against has recently withdrawn from Republic space,' he continued. 'They have already attacked our colony at Ragesh and destroyed several civilian liners that had docked there.' There was now a collective gasp of astonishment from the crew and it was well they were surprised, thought Barini. Attacking civilian shipping was an act of barbarity, one the Centauri had been accused of by the Interstellar Alliance. For one of the Alliance's member governments to now do the same was hypocrisy of the highest order.

'They have retreated back into Narn space, no doubt to assess the effects of their raid and plan their next target. We must not give them the chance! When we launch our attack, I want each of you to be aware of the Centauri, high and low, man and child, who have already paid for the humans' arrogance with their lives. Show them no mercy; give them no time to respond! We will press the attack and wipe them from space so they may never attack our people again. My friends, can you find it within yourselves to take the fight to our enemies and avenge our people?'

Barini's words were met with a loud cheer, and he nodded in approval. With a quick wave of his hand, he motioned his first officer to return everyone to their duties and then collapsed into his chair once more. Bringing a handkerchief from a pocket in his great coat, Barini mopped his brow and took a deep breath. The speech took much effort, and he reflected that being a Vocator on a battlecruiser was probably one of his wiser career choices. Leading a royal guard attack unit on the ground, Coutari waving high in the air as he urged them forward, might appear very heroic, but it really did not suit his physique or passion for over-indulgence. Besides, Barini had become aware that while swordsmen and their officers might cover themselves in glory at the Royal Court, officers on battlecruisers were the ones who made history and shaped the Republic. He had no doubts about his role in the universe.

Once the bridge calmed down, Barini gave the orders that would set the squadron on its way. 'Signal to the other ships, forward half speed.'

'Yes, Vocator.'

'Are the communications disruptors fully functional?'

'Ready and waiting, Vocator. On your word we'll flood the spectrum.'

'Excellent. Confirm with the other ships their standing orders and remind them that once we initiate communications disruption, we will have no further contact with them. Then stand by to make the jump to hyperspace, on my mark. The humans will not know what hit them.'

July 7th 2263, The EAS Corax, Deep Space, Narn Regime

With a size and mass large enough to blot out the stars, the *EAS Corax* was a leviathan of space, one of the few Poseidon-class supercarriers and the largest vessel ever constructed by the Earth Alliance. At nearly a mile and a half long, it had required constant wrangling in the Earth senate to push forward the funding necessary for such an ambitious project, but any human with an ounce of interest in spacecraft and space travel admitted it was worth the money and the wait. With a total crew complement of over ten thousand, the *Corax* was designed to be the crux of any fleet. Acting as a command centre, an entire war could theoretically be run from its bridge, and nearly one hundred Starfury and Thunderbolt fighters nestled within its cavernous hangers, the entire flock capable of being launched within minutes.

Truly, the Poseidon ships were a miracle of human ingenuity. The *Corax's* task force relied on the presence of the Hyperion cruisers *Lexington, Ares, Eros* and *Persephone* for its strength, though an aging Nova dreadnought, the *Dowding*, was attached to the formation for the duration of their current mission. These six warships lay in deep space, light-years from any star system, as they awaited orders. Flights of Starfuries flew periodic circuits of the task force on standard patrol routes, while several Hermes troop transports, tiny compared to the larger warships, hung with their larger cousins. Across the entire fleet tension was mounting, and all officers had been instructed to keep their crews busy lest anxiety lead to internal conflict.

Sitting in his office at the rear of the *Corax's* bridge, Admiral Wilson sympathised with the men and women of his fleet. Those lucky enough to serve in the mid-section of the *Corax* were enjoying the advantage of a rotating hull, much like that of an Omega destroyer, but those in the drive section or hanger bays, and on every other ship of the fleet for that matter, were stuck in zero-gravity, likely buckled into their work stations or tied down in their cots if off duty. Wilson had served on such ships in the past and knew they were less than comfortable, especially when the vessel was simply floating in deep space, waiting for orders from Earth.

Everyone knew they would be seeing action, if not outright war, very soon. He tried to keep his crew occupied, but even an Admiral only had so much experience to draw upon when imagining creative activities for keeping troops busy. At least the Starfury pilots

were happy, he surmised, as they were permitted more flight time on standard patrols than they would have ever received in orbit around an Earth colony. It wasn't combat, but Wilson knew that mattered little to a pilot.

The *Corax* and its task force had been deployed here, in deep space within the Narn Regime and within striking distance of several Centauri targets, since the attack on EarthDome. Though a few hours motionless in deep space was easy enough to endure on a ship with artificial gravity, Wilson knew the captains of the other vessels would eventually have discipline problems. He signed off on a number of reports detailing flight rosters for the squadrons of the *Corax* and then stood to begin another inspection of the bridge, intending to pass on a few comments of praise, which would go a long way to keeping his crew happy until the senators back on Earth got things running again and decided on a course of action.

A whining alert sounded from the console of the comms station, an irritating tone the officer shut down while consulting his displays.

'Sir,' he called to the Admiral. 'We are getting interference across the electromagnetic bands, broad frequencies. Very powerful. It just sprang up.'

Wilson crossed the bridge with some speed, concerned but not entirely ungrateful for the break in monotony. 'Where is it coming from?'

'Seems non-localised, sir. If I thought it was possible...'

'Yes?'

'I think it's coming from hyperspace. Maybe a confluence of shockwaves or something. But that could not break into realspace, and no one has EW that can do that.'

Wilson could not help but take a short intake of breath as his chest tightened. 'We have heard the Centauri were developing something like this,' he muttered, as much to himself as his comms officer. 'Contact the other ships. See if they can get a lock on its source.'

A brief paused followed as the officer switched through several communications protocols. 'Sir, we can't get through. The interference is blocking all comms,' he reported. 'All we have is the auxiliary hardwired system—internal comms only.'

Standing up straight from the display, Wilson frowned. The Centauri. . .

'Red alert!' he barked to the bridge. 'Scramble all squadrons and activate defence grid! Prepare for attack!'

To their credit, the crew of the bridge paused only for a split second as the full meaning of his orders sank in. They leapt to their stations and issued orders for the rest of the ship.

'Do we have Gold Channel to Earth?' Wilson demanded.

'No sir, all externals are affected.'

'Damn it. Bring the engines on line and order the squadrons to adopt a standard defensive screen,' Wilson said. 'Remind them they won't have contact with us once they leave the hangers. I only hope the other ships see what we are doing and figure this out.'

Ahead of the rotating section of the *Corax*, nearly one hundred hanger doors opened across the length of its flat hull and within seconds, Starfury and Thunderbolt fighters emerged, immediately firing their manoeuvring jets to take position close to the carrier. To see a Poseidon supercarrier perform a full alert scramble was the dream of many EarthForce cadets. Scores of fighters fell out of the immense ship, then sped away to their pre-designated positions. Normally, the fighter controllers on board the *Corax* would be close to overload as they monitored the flights, keeping an eye on those of their peers – a tough proposition when so many craft were in such close proximity. With communications down, however, they found themselves useless, unable to do anything except monitor the progress of their pilots and pray that the long hours training for this manoeuvre paid dividends now.

Little more than half of the fighters had been deployed when another alert rang across the bridge of the *Corax*.

'Admiral, jump points!'

'Where?'

'Right on top of us – aft!'

Wilson cursed and rushed to the tactical station. The officer there, a young woman he had recently promoted to Lieutenant, mutely indicated the three jump points behind the task force, worryingly close.

'Come about!' Wilson ordered. Turning back to the tactical officer, he asked 'Positive silhouette?'

'Entering realspace now, sir,' she reported. 'Three battlecruisers, Primus class.'

'Hell.' With decent preparation, Wilson might have fancied his chances against the Centauri ships, but taken by surprise like this, they could do significant damage before a proper response was ready.

'Have any of the other ships taken action?' he asked.

'The *Eros* matched our course change, and I think its weapons are now online, but the others are only just starting to react. The Centauri are launching fighters.'

'Hold fire until we see their what their intentions are. This may just be Centauri bravado. But charge up the pulse cannon, just in case.' Wilson did not believe his own words in the least but he would not be responsible for starting a war with the Centauri. He did not know what had happened in the galaxy since taking position here, but he wondered if events had not already accelerated towards armageddon.

Sweeping majestically from their jump points, the three Primus battlecruisers disgorged their light Sentri fighters,

and the small crescent-shaped craft sped forward to engage the massing Starfuries. Even as the tactical officer on the bridge of the *Corax* announced an energy spike from the Centauri ships, their massive battle lasers erupted with thick beams of red light that reached across the short gulf of space to slice into the *Lexington, Persephone* and *Dowding*. A hard evasive manoeuvre from the *Persephone* caused the beam targeted at it to cut into the forward hull, slicing the main pulse cannon turret free but otherwise leaving the ship mostly unharmed. The aging *Dowding* took the blast full on. Though debris and armour plating were blasted across space and atmosphere vented from several compartments, the dreadnought held firm and began to turn its broadside to the attackers, where its massed weapon batteries could be brought to bear.

The *Lexington* erupted fire into space as the penetrating laser beam sliced into its superstructure just below the bridge. It carried on towards the stern at a downward angle, blasting through armour, decking and support beams. The cruiser was torn in two by the attack as secondary explosions from detonating power relays began to spew fire across the damaged sections of the hull. Within seconds, feedback to the *Lexington's* main reactor overloaded the remaining control systems, and the ship exploded in a brilliant white light that sent chunks of metal spinning across space to impact the hulls of the other task force ships.

As they moved closer, the massed particle arrays on the Centauri ships found their range and hammered pre-designated targets, pounding the nearest ships of the task force, the *Eros* and *Dowding*. Unlike the huge battle lasers, the Earth ships had defences against these energy weapons, and the interceptor defence grids of both sprang into life, aiming at the incoming fire to dissipate its energy before it could strike their hulls. Within seconds, the interceptors of both were running at maximum capacity, and some Centauri fire made an impact on their armour.

On board the *Corax*, the crew was stunned at having lost the *Lexington* so quickly, but Admiral Wilson immediately focussed their minds on the task at hand. The supercarrier was not a frontline warship, having been designed to direct battles from afar. However, as he could not command his fleet effectively, Wilson knew he must send the *Corax* to fight the Centauri directly. Without the heavy armour and weaponry of a warship, he also knew he would have to trust to the ship's massive bulk to survive attack and worry about repairs later.

'Is the *Eros* still with us?' he asked.

'Yes, sir, maintaining formation. The *Persephone* is also coming about, and the *Dowding* has already taken station.'

'Good.' Wilson had commanded a Nova dreadnought before and knew the thinking of the *Dowding's* captain. Built for delivering devastating broadsides while weathering attacks, the *Dowding* would simply hang in space, raking the Centauri ships with its turrets. Now it was in position, and things would begin to even up.

'Set course for the battlecruiser in the middle of their formation,' Wilson commanded. 'The *Eros* should realise what we are doing and set course to match. If we combine our fire, we might be able to put it out of action quickly. With luck, the others will guess our intentions after we engage and join in.'

With agonising slowness, the ponderous *Corax* turned to face one of the Centauri ships, its engines straining to shift the massive vessel. The *Eros* followed closely and then took position just off its starboard bow, slightly ahead to provide the attackers with another target.

As the Centauri battlecruisers closed range, the space between the two ships erupted in a hail of energy as weapons on both sides fired and recycled as soon as they had acquired solid locks. The *Dowding* unleashed a fearsome hail of fire from combined laser and pulse turrets that scoured the hull of a Primus, flaying armour and disabling several weapons batteries. The Centauri's return fire was disrupted by the *Dowding's* interceptor arrays, and what little got through simply pattered off the metres thick armour of the old ship, a testament to its solid design.

Between the huge capital ships, a multitude of vicious dogfights between Starfury and Sentri sprang up, little pockets of fire flashing across space as fighters were destroyed. The Starfury pilots were confident in their training and the capabilities of their fighters but, lacking communication with their controllers or squadron leaders, their response was sluggish and poorly formed. The pre-briefed Centauri pilots, though outnumbered and pushing their tiny craft to their limits, began to inflict significant losses on the Earth fighters.

Having turned to face the Centauri, the *Eros* and *Corax* joined the fight, pulse cannon chattering as they mashed the lead battlecruiser. Fires raged from several areas of its wide, flat hull but it kept moving forward, switching targets to engage the carrier and cruiser thundering towards it. A squadron of Thunderbolts had followed the *Corax*, and they ignited their afterburners, speeding forward to launch missiles against the battlecruiser, adding their weight to the match.

The Centauri particle weapons lacked the raw punch of the Earth ship's pulse cannon, and they were susceptible to interception but made up for this in accuracy, and every ship in the task force was showing signs of heavy battle. The Centauri's battle lasers recycled once more, draining their advanced capacitors as they gushed energy into generators and focussing lenses. Red light tore across space to spear into the *Eros* and *Persephone*. The *Persephone* was lucky once more, taking a glancing hit to the rear engine section that immediately arrested its acceleration. The *Eros* was lanced by the lasers of two of the battlecruisers, their combined fire punching through the ship's prow to skewer the hull right down its length. When the lasers finally exhausted their energy, the *Eros*

hung in space, listing slightly to starboard. Its hull was a shattered wreck, fires burning from broken armour plates all down its length. What few crew survived were trapped in sealed sections, praying that the Centauri looked to another target or showed mercy.

The bridge of the *Corax* rocked constantly from the recoil of its pulse cannon and enemy fire impacting its hull. Wilson sprang from station to station, monitoring the positions of the fleets, the status of the *Corax's* weapons and incoming damage reports. In truth, he felt a little helpless. Still unable to break through the Centauri jamming , he could not direct his fleet – and once his own crew had been given a target, they were competent enough to go about their duties without constant management.

The designers of the Poseidon ships had not seen fit to mount thick armour plating on the carrier, and Wilson was now beginning to regret their decision. He was just thankful that most of the Centauri fire had so far struck the mostly empty hanger bays. While that might pose a problem later when the fighters had to return to base, it did not significantly affect the fighting performance of his ship.

'Hangers 12 through 37 now on fire, Admiral.'

'Send damage control teams but keep most stationed near engineering, the turrets and the rotating section,' Wilson responded. 'We can stand to lose a few hangers now but if we lose anything else...'

'Sir, I am getting life signs on the *Eros*.'

'No, we can't do anything for them now.' Wilson felt pity for the people of his task force but the stricken cruiser would have to wait. 'If we send shuttles out to retrieve the survivors, they'll just get cut to pieces by those damned Centauri fighters.'

He consulted the tactical station once again and saw the *Corax* had manoeuvred into the middle of the Centauri ships. Though it placed the *Corax* in the middle of their concentrated fire, it also meant that, at last, the *Corax* could use all of its own weaponry. It was also out of the line of sight of those dreaded battle lasers, and if the *Corax* could soak up more of the secondary weapons fire, it might relieve the pressure on his other ships.

'We are in position,' he announced. 'Weapons batteries, open fire, time on target.'

'Time on target, aye.'

An exterior camera view on the tactical display showed the pulse cannon tearing into the three Centauri ships, one salvo catching a battlecruiser on the thinly armoured underside of its hull. Centauri interceptor technology lagged far behind that of Earth's, and Wilson's time on target order ensured that the *Corax's* batteries fired simultaneously, giving the defense systems little time to respond. A stream of energy punched through the forward section of one battlecruiser, and Wilson felt relief as a single bright explosion announced the detonation of generators driving its lasers. An entire section of the battlecruiser's hull spiralled away into space. At least one of the enemy ships was rendered toothless, and the bridge crew gave a ragged cheer when they realised their efforts were paying off.

'Rotate!' called Wilson. 'Concentrate fire on the other two, let's see if we can do the same thing again – we might just be able to force a surrender if they lose their big guns.'

A shattering crash resounded through the bridge and Wilson was thrown over the tactical display to hit the metal wall with a dull thud. Acrid smoke filled the bridge and the atmospheric processors began to whine audibly as they strained to clear the air. Wilson shook his head as his vision swam, trying to shake off the ringing in his ears. He dimly realised he was prone against the wall, several feet from the floor. His vision clearing, he looked across the bridge to see many of his officers floating helplessly in the air, struggling to reach their station or a handy support from which to push off. His tactical officer had managed to hold her station and was scanning the incoming damage assessment.

'We've gone Z-gravity!' she shouted. 'The rotating section has locked!'

They were lucky the bridge had not been hit directly, Wilson knew. The more immediate problem was that while the *Corax* could carry on fighting under these conditions, vital minutes would be lost as the crew recovered and re-adjusted to zero-gravity conditions. The shuddering of the bridge from the weapons fire became more persistent, and Wilson guessed the Centauri had realigned their targeting systems to avoid the hangers.

'Back to your stations! Tactical, make sure the batteries keep firing – we can't lose momentum now.'

The *Ares* had joined its sister ship, the *Persephone,* which was now drifting through space helplessly but still intent on engaging the Centauri, pulse cannon and plasma fire raining onto whichever battlecruiser presented itself as the nearest target. Forming up alongside the stricken ship, the *Ares* now added its weight of fire and manoeuvred to open up with its own heavy laser. Based on older Centauri models, it was not as powerful and the cruiser did not enjoy the same power reserves as the larger enemy ships, but it was still a potent weapon. The red beam lanced out to strike a battlecruiser, cutting through its port fins and slicing off a sizeable section of hull. Fires raged across the whole left side of the Primus, but its weapons batteries did not slow in their firing. Massed particle beams from its turrets pounded the *Ares* and *Persephone* as the three ships continued to trade fire, the space between them a lethal criss-crossing of bright energy. The hulls of all three were soon pitted and scored with black craters, though a knockout blow had yet to be landed by either side.

Continuous volley fire from the *Dowding* rolled over the battlecruiser with the smashed laser as it turned to join the third in targeting the *Corax*, simply ignoring the dreadnought's pounding – though broken turrets and debris trailed behind it. Across the length of the *Corax*,

energy bolts streamed down to flay armour plates and ignite fires. From stem to stern, the *Corax* burned, though pulse cannon and interceptors doggedly continued to return fire, throwing every ounce of energy its reactors could generate into fighting the Centauri. The third battlecruiser then matched the turn of its comrade and fired its battle lasers.

Within the bridge of the *Corax*, the crew had settled back into their stations, strapping themselves in with nylon belts used before only in drills. The knuckles of Wilson's hands were turning white as he gripped support beams and stations to steady himself. Monitoring the tactical station, he could see how his ship was suffering under the smashing power of Centauri weapons fire. Much of the ship's internal communications were now down, and the weapons batteries were firing more or less independently, reducing their effectiveness. His eyes met briefly with the tactical officer's and he could see that, despite her young years, she too realised how badly the ship was fairing. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he searched for some platitude when he felt her tense.

'Energy spike!' she shouted.

Wilson looked down at her display to see two of the battlecruisers bearing down on the *Corax*, one making ready to fire its primary weapons.

The red battle lasers struck the rotating section of the *Corax* with punishing effect, cutting right through armour and decking with consummate ease. The metre-wide beams carried on through living quarters, mess hall and on through to the bridge, where they vaporised every crew member in a microsecond, boiling their atoms before they were sucked out into the void of space. The rear of the rotating section broke away from the rest of the ship, taking the engine section and reactor with it. The firing of the *Corax's* pulse cannon ceased almost immediately as the massive ship, the pride of the EarthForce fleet, became a floating hulk.

The *Ares* and *Persephone* struggled to repel the fire coming from the battlecruiser they faced, a warship massing more than the two of them put together. One by one, the weapons batteries of the *Persephone* went offline as incoming fire either blasted turrets clear of their hardpoints or power relays detonated under power fluctuations from the main reactor, now running to dangerously unstable levels. The crew on board fought valiantly, struggling to manage the constant pounding and keep their weapons firing at all costs. Against a larger ship, they could not hope to win.

While the Centauri ship concentrated its particle arrays against the *Persephone*, it traded laser fire with the *Ares*, completely outclassing the smaller cruiser. Cycling its laser faster than the *Ares* could, the Primus speared the Earth ship with red light, smashing into its reactor and penetrating the shielding that kept its energies in check. A blossoming ball of fire from the *Ares'* rear section grew quickly to engulf the ship before a massive explosion tore it apart, sending huge parts of its superstructure spinning across space. So close to the explosion, the *Persephone* absorbed the shock wave, buckling its hull. The remaining power relays, jury-rigged by a desperate crew, finally gave out and the ship stopped firing, every light on board growing dim before dying completely.

As it had been designed to do, the *Dowding* held its line, keeping its broadside facing the nearest Centauri ship at all times. Though lacking the heavy lasers of more modern ships, the *Dowding* nevertheless possessed a huge number of weapons batteries and it unleashed pulses of energy as fast as its weapons could recycle, taking incoming fire on the chin. Now outnumbered and with jump engines offline, its crew went about their duties with a grim efficiency, intent on avenging their fallen before joining them.

The target Primus visibly shuddered under the impact of the *Dowding's* combined weaponry, paying the price for ignoring the dreadnought. Fins were sliced off the Primus, turrets blasted apart and sections of the superstructure sagged visibly under the relentless hammering.

More pulse cannon fire thudded into its hull, and the multitude of lights emanating from the viewports along the hull suddenly flickered and died. Fires licking outwards along streams of venting atmosphere grew brighter and an explosion blasted a large piece of hull plating clear of the ship. More explosions soon followed and the Primus rocked as a chain reaction of fire leapt from section to section, sweeping through the ship to sear any Centauri inside. A bright light shone briefly from the viewports and open sections of hull as a massive interior explosion, barely contained by the superstructure, finally silenced the ship. Within the *Dowding*, the captain announced the death of an enemy ship to his crew and was met with joyous relief. The weapons teams redoubled their efforts as they sought the next target.

July 7th 2263, The Urza Jaddo, Deep Space, Narn Regime

The loss of the *Protera* had caused Barini some irritation but it did not worry him unduly. As losses went, it was more than acceptable, especially in return for the honour of destroying the huge Earth flagship. He shook his head in some wonder at the thinking of the Earth Alliance. Why go to the time and trouble of building a ship that large if it was not armed for frontline combat? The Centauri had little use for dedicated carriers in their fleet, and their naval tactics simply did not revolve around support vessels. In a Centauri fleet, every ship had to pull its weight.

Today, Centauri tactical thinking was vindicated. The vaunted Earth Starfuries were unable to consolidate their superior numbers and the Sentris picked them off squadron by squadron. Even now, they were chasing the stragglers attempting to regroup around the remaining Earth ship.

Barini recognised it as an older model and was surprised it had lasted this long. It stood up well to their attacks,

but now it faced two battlecruisers. These were the kind of odds Barini favoured. It was a shame, in a way, he thought. Of all the ships he had faced today, this one seemed most Centauri in its design. Of course, it lacked the technological sophistication of Centauri ships, and he imagined the crew inside worked in primitive zero-gravity conditions, but the thinking behind it he could admire.

No matter. 'Is the *Voxa* forming up with us?' he asked his first officer.

'Yes, Vocator. I believe she is just waiting for our lead.'

'Excellent.' Barini could see the Earth dreadnought in the main viewport, dead ahead. Its weapons continued to cycle, pushing out bolts of energy in their direction, but they were out of its effective range and what little reached the *Jaddo* was intercepted by the defensive screen or else pattered harmlessly off its hull.

'Charge the lasers,' Barini said, waiting for a nod from his first officer. 'Fire!'

The twin lances of red from the *Jaddo* were soon joined by those of the *Voxa* as they skewered the *Dowding* amidships. They drilled four holes straight through the dreadnought, then worked fore and aft as their gunners expertly altered the focussing lenses to caress the *Dowding*. Though the *Dowding* was well-armoured and could take a significant amount of punishment from regular weapons, it had no defence against modern battle lasers. Regulating their power output, the Primus' crew maintained the laser beams on their target. Armour buckled and broke free on the *Dowding*, revealing the superstructure beneath, which were eagerly consumed. Fires sprang up under this assault, and the dreadnought slowly began to break apart, its hull cut into several sections.

Barini relaxed for the first time since battle began. He thought of himself as a well-trained officer of the military and a good example to his crew, but he always felt tense during battle, no matter how one-sided. Service of this nature was a sure route to wealth and power, especially with a patron such as Minister Territt, but it always carried the risk of disaster and death – two things a noble could never recover from.

His first officer stood at attention below the command plinth until Barini acknowledged him.

'Yes?'

'Vocator, we have detected life signs within some of the wreckage.'

'You know what to do,' Barini replied.

'Yes, Vocator. We have also found a few life signs on the *Protera*.'

Barini shrugged. 'We have no time for rescue attempts. Deal with that wreck as well.'

If the first officer or any of the bridge crew blanched at the idea of murdering their fellow Centauri, they were wise enough not to show it. Each was in a privileged position on board a ship as powerful as the battlecruiser and, more to the point, they would be well compensated for their actions today. The core of Centauri society rested on the best striving to get ahead of those they bettered, and politics was as much a part of the military life as was combat.

The two battlecruisers charged their weaponry once more, spending the next hour blasting apart the broken ships into ever-smaller pieces. Lasers were not used this time, as the Centauri crews worked to use the impact of their weapons to lend momentum to the debris, sending it reeling across space, far from the scene of the battle. Barini knew that, at some point, Earth would send ships to investigate the disappearance of the task force. Within hours, any recognisable part of any ship would be far beyond any sensor range, destined to keep its secret as it travelled through deep space for a million years. If discovered after that, Barini really did not care. He had no time to mask the energy signatures left by the discharge of weaponry. The aim, as Minister Territt had been at pains to point out, was to ensure that any investigation did not lead back to Barini's own squadron – it was inevitable that the Centauri as a whole were blamed, but there was no sense in Barini being called to account.

Barini readily agreed with that sentiment. As his ships finished their post-battle task and prepared to jump back to Centauri space, Barini considered the favour the Minister now owed him.

He considered that the Minister might double-cross him after this mission, but he quickly dismissed the thought. He would make the perfect scapegoat if anything went wrong, of course, but he had fulfilled his orders to the letter. Barini harboured a strong sense of his own innate worth. As powerful as the Minister was, having a squadron of battlecruisers effectively in his own pocket was something that he prized, and Barini was the key to that. No, he was sure the Minister understood the value of a powerful military force at his beck and call.

In return, Barini could ask for a higher position within the military, a political appointment to the Royal Court or even a boost in the standing of his House – which could potentially lead to a place within the Centaurum, given time. However, all that could wait. Barini did not have sufficient power among the nobles nor his House among the other families to take advantage of the gifts the Minister could bring in that arena. No, on reflection he would ensure his ships were repaired and that the *Protera* was replaced. After that, he would simply take money. With money came power and freedom of choice. If, later in his life, he decided to enter the political arena, he would be well funded. If not, well, a good retirement awaited, possibly in a small manor among the forests south of Imperial City. No sense in being greedy, after all. Come what may, Barini's actions today would provide him with a safe and secure future.

CHAPTER TEN

July 8th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Sequestered in a tight booth on one side of the communications hub, Shaw and Tilanna had been literally falling over one another in an attempt to backtrack the Earth Alliance's investigations into the attack on their government. Shaw encountered bureaucratic resistance with his initial enquiries. Here, at least, he found himself on firmer ground as he had dealt with monolithic Earth institutions, in one form or another, all his life on Mars, and he managed to negotiate access to the files he sought with little extra effort.

Shaw found his spirits raised slightly. He now had a course of action to follow, though he still could not imagine where his investigation would lead or how to convince the President and brass of the Earth Alliance of his findings. He decided his lifted spirits were probably a direct result of his affinity to his homeworld of Mars. Maybe something in the recycled air seemed familiar or the gravity tugged at just the right level. Though Shaw had been taught and conditioned by the Anla'Shok to accept the places he travelled and consider his own body his only real home, there was something comforting about Mars. He knew many Earthers hated the place, visiting only on sufferance because of duty or business, but for him it just felt. . . right.

While Shaw had been navigating the treacherous waters of Earth bureaucracy, Tilanna was interpreting the information on the data crystal transmitted by the Ranger-Analysts of Tuzanor. Sitting just to Shaw's left in the close confines of the booth, her proximity was at times distracting, and on more than one occasion he smiled to himself. Frankly, he had more important things to worry about, but if her presence could offer some relief from the administrators he spoke to, then it was also reassuring to have her close by. In the very least, he was not alone.

'Mr. Shaw, given the depth of information provided, it seems clear that House Kaado is implicated in the plot,' she said after a period of silence.

Shaw smiled. 'Tilanna, if we are going to be working together like this, you really need to start calling me Michael. Or Mike.'

'That would not be. . . appropriate. It would not show the respect due one of the Anla'Shok.'

He winced slightly, having encountered the stubbornness for protocol common in the Religious Caste before. It could be an immovable obstacle, and many humans had trouble understanding just how this sect of Minbari thought. Count him among them, certainly.

'Well. . .' he said. 'President Sheridan gave you a temporary assignment to the Anla'Shok. That makes us equals, right?'

She considered this. 'I lack your training and have not been through the trials required by the Anla'Shok.'

'True,' he answered. 'But you have your own temple training that I know nothing about – you have skills I could not even begin to master. It seems President Sheridan knows this and that is why he made the appointment.'

'However unofficial it may be,' Tilanna said, looking pointedly at him.

'Given the situation, I hardly think that matters.'

'You are probably right... Michael.'

'Better,' said Shaw, with a wry smile. 'What was that about House Kaado?'

'It seems that House attracted some interest from the intelligence centre long before this attack on Earth.'

Shaw paused for a few seconds, turning ideas over in his head. 'That does us no good. We can prove very little, other than the facility we visited was used, at some point, to store the device. It is not a smoking gun we are looking for – we only need to visit the ruins of EarthDome to find that. What we need is motive – *and* a good reason to indicate that the Centauri Republic as a whole was not responsible.'

He turned to face her, his leg brushing hers.

'Luchenko already has the same information we do. If we go to her with this, we have nothing else to back it up. The Earthers are in shock; their pride has been wounded. They are looking for someone to blame, and Luchenko will be under pressure to do something, anything – and that will likely be military action.'

Tilanna shook her head, a little sadly, he thought. 'It seems incomprehensible to me that an entire people can be moved to aggression without ample evidence.'

'Well, you could say that was exactly what happened when your people went to war against us,' Shaw said quickly, then immediately regretted it.

Tilanna paused for a few seconds and then whispered quietly. 'That was different.'

'Maybe. We have to keep searching. We won't find an answer in the information sent to us from Tuzanor—if anything substantial was there, someone far cleverer than us would have found it.' This, at least, drew a slight smile from Tilanna. 'It may help us though, if we can uncover something else, something we are missing right now.'

'I agree,' she said simply and turned back to her station.

They both looked up as a quick rap on the wall of their booth announced the presence of an EarthForce ensign.

'I was sent to fetch you, err, Rangers,' he said. 'Something has happened.'

Hurrying out of the booth to the centre of the communications hub, Shaw and Tilanna were immediately struck by the increased activity of the EarthForce personnel present. If anything, more blue uniforms rushed around. Luchenko was in the middle of a cluster of high-ranking officers, leaning over a display as she repeatedly asked for clarifications from an unseen voice.

A colonel stepped out from the scrum to intercept Shaw. 'Rangers, we have just had news – sketchy at the moment as we are just getting information in.'

'Trouble?' Shaw asked, already fairly sure he knew the answer.

'The carrier group *Corax* is missing, presumed destroyed. They were in deep space, waiting for orders, when we lost contact. An Oracle scout was dispatched to their location and reports signs of a battle, though no substantial wreckage has been found. The President is talking with the Oracle's captain now.'

'You think it was the Centauri,' Shaw said.

'Who else?' said the colonel. 'I am afraid this changes everything. As the duly appointed representative of the ISA, I must ask you what support you will give us.'

For a second, this question stumped Shaw, and his first reaction was to run to a communications terminal to reach Sheridan. Dismissing the impulse, he pushed past the colonel and into the middle of the EarthForce officers surrounding Luchenko.

'Sorry, Colonel, I must speak to the President.'

Shaw immediately sensed that his Anla'Shok robes gave him at least a measure of authority among even admirals and generals. His bearing and demeanour surely did not. The Rangers were still something of a mystery on Earth, even the human members, and this lent an air which few directly questioned. After all, he *was* the representative of the Interstellar Alliance.

He listened to Luchenko's closing words with the scout captain.

'Agreed, Captain. Widen your search and report back. But if you see any trouble... That's right. Get yourself out of there; we will need you later. Don't take risks. Luchenko out.'

If the President had slept since the disaster at EarthDome, she showed no signs of it. Shaw noted the bags under Luchenko's eyes and the wrinkles of strain across her brow, but she retained a look of such raw determination, even fury, that he imagined she could go on for many hours more on pure adrenaline.

'We have just bits and pieces at the moment – literally,' she said. 'Captain Leverstock reports that while there is no wreckage, micro debris is strewn across a wide area. More to the point, residual energy scans all point to a heavy discharge of Centauri-grade weaponry, as well as our own. Clearly a battle was fought there.

'That's it then,' said a tall admiral to Shaw's left, her lilting voice an odd contrast to her words. He had heard her called Keynes earlier. 'We are under attack from the Republic. Madam President, you already have our recommendations.'

'I do. Admiral—'

'Madam President, if I may,' said Shaw, interjecting. He was acutely conscious of every high-ranking officer nearby staring at him.

Luchenko raised her head to acknowledge him, though he could sense her impatience.

'I must insist on restraint,' he began. 'By the laws of the Interstellar Alliance, you cannot take unilateral action against the Centauri.'

'Actually, I have to disagree,' said Admiral Keynes, looking down her long nose at Shaw. The authority of the Rangers was not universal among EarthForce officers after all, he reflected. 'The Centauri are no longer part of the ISA, by their own choice. They have initiated hostilities against us, and we have every right to take pre-emptive action to defend ourselves.'

Shaw pointedly turned from Keynes to concentrate on Luchenko. 'Madam President, please, you are not at war yet. We don't know exactly what happened to the carrier group. If the Centauri were serious about starting a fight, would you not see attacks across their entire border, perhaps even into Earth space itself?'

From over his shoulder came Keynes' voice once more. He had to confess, its tone was beginning to irritate him. 'They may have just not found our other deep space task forces yet.'

Ignoring the admiral, he pressed on. 'Madam President, we have some good leads. We do not believe the Centauri Republic as a whole is responsible for these attacks. With just a little more time—'

'I am sorry,' said Luchenko. 'I have the safety of the entire Earth Alliance to consider, not to mention the men and women manning ships near Republic space. I might have believed a rogue House was responsible for the attack on EarthDome, but a military force strong enough to destroy a carrier group? That is just not believable. That was an action undertaken by the Centauri military, not a group of disgruntled nobles. Admiral!'

The admiral strode forward, positioning herself between Shaw and the President. He swore she actually clicked her heels while standing to attention.

'Order the fleets into Centauri space,' said Luchenko. 'Make sure they understand the protocols we discussed. If this is not a prelude to an all-out war, we don't want to

start one inadvertently. Have them jump into the listed systems and show the Centauri we will not tolerate any attacks. In deference to our friends in the ISA, we will not initiate hostilities – under no circumstance should any ship open fire before it is fired upon. We just want to show our presence and prepare for the blockades if needed.'

'If the Centauri attack our fleets?' asked Admiral Keynes.

'Then we will respond with deadly force.'

July 8th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

Veneta Kaado looked ruefully at the empty Brivari bottle in his hand before dropping it to the side of the setee. He lost track how many hours he and Territt had been in his bunker and, in truth, he was beginning to get bored. Hours had past since the attack on Earth. In fact, he was pretty sure it had happened the day before. Minister Territt had stopped drinking a while before and stayed intent on watching the news channels displayed on the huge screen before them. Veneta had been woolgathering, enjoying the effects of the Brivari as he indulged in self-congratulation. Territt's attention on the screen annoyed him, and he considered it something close to bad manners to halt the celebration so suddenly. Even if only two Centauri were present, they had a duty to celebrate their successes. It was just the way things were done.

He groped for a second bottle on the floor, knowing he had already emptied it but feeling compelled to check once more. More bottles waited in his cellar, Veneta knew, but he would not summon a servant here, in the bunker. He sniffed. He, at least, intended to follow tradition even if Territt was boorish. The suffering endured by a lack of more Brivari was, of course, another duty he had to shoulder. Adherence to duty maketh the noble, after all.

'It's been too long,' said Territt, bringing Veneta out of his reverie. 'We should have heard something by now.'

Veneta struggled to focus. Ah yes, their conspiracy. He no longer knew how long it was since Territt made his call to the attack squadron but guessed this was causing the Minister's concern. Squinting at the screen, he gradually deduced one problem.

'You have it on an Abbai channel.'

Territt's examined the screen, a little perplexed. 'So it is,' he decided. 'Still, makes little difference, eh? So many aliens out there!'

Veneta laughed. 'True words, Minister. We ought to do something about that.'

'One major plot at a time, my friend,' Territt said as he searched for the screen control, rooting around the setee beneath him to locate it. 'Let's get back to the Earthers...'

'Did you know the Abbai were pacifists?' Veneta mused.

'Ridiculous, isn't it? The Dilgar should have wiped them out when they had the chance.'

'Ah, the Dilgar. A most impressive people.'

Territt shrugged. 'If you think so. They couldn't stay the distance though. No sense of destiny. Only one race in the galaxy truly deserves the greatness it was born with.'

Nodding, Veneta was about to respond when Territt hushed him. Looking at the screen, Veneta saw the Minister had located the ISN feed once more. Clearly the presenter on the screen was agitated about something, and Veneta tapped his foot impatiently while Territt reversed the feedback several minutes to catch the beginning of the report. The slightly greying male presenter started formally in the studied way human newsreaders were trained to speak, but his lethargy gradually gave way to excitement at the incoming news.

'We have received confirmation of today's earlier rumours that the Centauri have struck at one of our task forces. EarthForce has released the names of the ships destroyed – the carrier *Corax*, cruisers *Ares, Eros, Lexington* and *Persephone*, and the dreadnought *Dowding*. No survivors have been found, and it appears none are expected to be recovered. Officials within EarthForce have confirmed that Centauri ships were responsible for the sudden attack, and that it occurred in Narn space.

'At this time, we have no word of whether the attack is linked to the destruction of EarthDome yesterday, or whether war has officially been declared by either side. We have ISN Military Correspondent Dan Withers online to tell us a bit about EarthForce procedure in this situation and what we can expect to see next. Dan, is this an inevitable prelude to war?'

The screen flickered as the image of a much younger man filled the screen, but Territt fingered the control once again to one of the many Centauri news channels.

'I wanted to see that,' protested Veneta. 'Why are you looking at this court gossip?'

Territt smiled. 'My friend, what laughably passes for news reports in our Republic has some uses. Observe.'

Growing dark, the screen displayed a star field that slowly panned around to reveal a blue-green world. Two of the largest warships Veneta had ever seen hung in orbit above its verdant surface, both dwarfing the dozen Primus battlecruisers that held steady formation with them. He had seen technical diagrams of these vessels before but had paid them little interest. Line drawings and specification charts did them no justice, and his breath was taken away with some real scale to relate them to. That his people were capable of building such ships made him feel intensely proud. The voiceover relayed events as the two ships fired their massive engines, slowly leaving orbit under the escort of the battlecruisers.

'As unexpected as the arrival of both the *Turhan* and the *Cartagia* at our supply colony on Gorash was, more surprising was their recent departure, as seen here. Never before have two Octurions flown together in the same fleet and certainly not with so many battlecruisers. Unnamed sources in the Royal Court have told us that the *Turhan* and *Cartagia* will be voyaging throughout our border worlds, demonstrating our resolve to resist the insidious accusations of the Interstellar Alliance and, in particular, Earth. The Emperor himself is said to believe that the Republic will be blamed for every mishap the ISA suffers and that we must show willingness to defend ourselves so the terrible attack on Centauri Prime can never be repeated.'

Muting the screen, Territt turned to Veneta. 'You know what that means?'

'Mobilisation,' Veneta said, nodding. 'It's working.'

'Indeed. Now for the final piece of the puzzle,' said Territt as he once again accessed the ISN feed. Entering its menu system, he selected the most recent address from the Emperor.

Turning back to the screen, Veneta rolled his eyes as the imposing image of Emperor Mollari appeared. 'My friends of Earth,' the Emperor said. 'We Centauri have suffered alongside you for your recent tragedies. First the cowardly attack on your centre of government and now the loss of several ships as they travelled peacefully through Narn space. We condemn the conduct of your enemies, for we know the pain a dreadful attack like this causes.

'However, I must once again refute the rumours coming from within your own government that the Centauri Republic has any hand or purpose in these reprehensible actions. We Centauri are a peace-loving people and have no desire for war. We simply seek to rebuild our homeworld from the ruins left by the unwarranted attack by the Drazi and Narn.'

Territt gave a callous laugh, 'He doesn't know what is going on.'

'Of course not,' said Veneta. 'We made sure he wouldn't.'

'True.' A minute passed by before Territt spoke again. 'Veneta? Send for some more Brivari. I feel like celebrating.'

July 8th 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

'Then help me understand, Londo. Just what is going on in the Republic?'

Tuthenn stood dutifully out of the communication link's field of view as the President of the Interstellar Alliance desperately tried to pick his way through the half-truths and evasions of the Centauri Emperor. The Ranger-Analyst had his own auxiliary screen, and he scrutinised it to glean any additional information he could on the state of the Emperor's mind.

'President Sheridan, I have already told you. The Republic has no interest in starting a war with anyone, let alone Earth. The very idea is preposterous.'

Sheridan sighed. 'Londo, you and I have known each other for years, and we have clashed before. But the stakes have never been so high. We might have been able to manage the attack on EarthDome, worked with you to find the perpetrators. Now things have escalated with this attack on an EarthForce fleet.'

'And as I explained to you earlier, there is no possibility that Centauri ships were involved in that tragedy. All squadrons are accounted for.'

'I'll bet,' Sheridan said. 'I have just seen a report on the movements of your fleets. Londo, you have mobilised your entire military!'

'So would you, President Sheridan, in my position. Earth has placed warships along our borders, and we have reason to believe the Narn will join them. Who knows what other fleets of your highly vaunted Alliance will join them?' Londo sat back in his throne, imperiously staring down at Sheridan. 'We will not tolerate any threat on our sovereignty. If Earth ships enter Centauri space, there will be war. You can be sure of that. Tell President Luchenko. There *will* be war.'

Sheridan hammered a fist down next to his display. 'Londo, that is exactly what I am trying to avoid! Damn it, man. We have been down this road before, and you know where that led.'

'And that is what I will avoid, Sheridan. I have a duty to my people. We have suffered enough in recent years and have agreed to every demand your Alliance has made of us, simply so we can attend to our own problems in peace. It appears there are many in the galaxy that are all too ready to blame us for what goes wrong, who will not be satisfied until we are no more. I will not tolerate these constant attacks on our character.'

'Character?' Sheridan was faintly incredulous. 'Londo, I know you realise what is at stake here. I have spoken directly with the captain of the ship dispatched to find what happened to the *Corax* and its task force. I know the man. I am satisfied with his assessment that, wherever they came from, the attackers were Centauri.'

'They did not come from the Republic. All ships are accounted for. Have you considered looking into what the Narn are doing? You know they still possess many of our weapons.'

'No way, Londo. You tried that line before. It did not work then, and it will not work now. The attack on EarthDome came from your Republic and the ships that destroyed the *Corax* were most certainly from your Republic. Londo, I have to ask; do you even know what your own military is doing?'

For a moment, the Emperor regarded Sheridan with something the President guessed was either loathing or

contempt, and he suppressed a shudder. He had never seen such malevolence in the old Ambassador before.

'President Sheridan, you know my position. We will not tolerate an invasion. You tell Luchenko if she dares violate our territory, the wrath of the Centauri will follow her fleets back to Earth and finish what the Minbari started!'

The display went dead as the Emperor cut the link.

'Damn him!' Sheridan swore violently.

Tuthenn stepped forward but paused to allow Sheridan's frustration to run its course before he spoke. 'The Emperor's speech was guarded, for all the passion he displayed. He gave nothing away.'

Sheridan looked up at the Minbari. 'Then we are back where we started. I swear, Tuthenn, Londo has changed. I have known him for years now, but I do not recognise the man I just spoke to.'

After another respectful pause, Tuthenn said 'There is. . . something. I do not think he was alone. We can analyse the transmission, but I do not believe we will discover anyone else in the throne room with him as he spoke with you. Still... I cannot shake the feeling someone or something was present and that his words were guarded – not from you but that other.'

Sheridan looked quizzically at Tuthenn as he considered this. 'It is not like you analysts to work on hunches.'

'Oh, hunches, or *intuition*, as we like to call it, are certainly factors in our work. However, they must always be tempered with facts. Intuition is the raw material which, with facts, forge the conclusion. I believe this is a dead end though.'

'How so?' asked Sheridan.

'If we find no trace of anyone else in that transmission, no trace heartbeat or breathing, then we will have nothing with which to pursue this line of investigation. And I believe that any force powerful or canny enough to force the Emperor of the Centauri Republic to be careful with his words will evade our attempts to uncover it through so simple a method.'

While Sheridan seemed to think this over, Tuthenn interrupted him. 'My apologies, President Sheridan. This is the nature of what we do. As Ranger-Analysts we are taught to consider all possibilities, to follow every logical path to its conclusion. I should not have mentioned this without something more to go on.'

'No, no, that is fine. So, where does that leave us?'

'I must return to the intelligence centre and continue my analysis. I think you know as well as I that evidence of the Republic's innocence can avert war.'

'I agree,' Sheridan sighed. 'Tuthenn, you know that if either attack is traced back to the Republic, war is inevitable.'

Tuthenn nodded silently and took his leave as Sheridan picked up a report on Drazi immigration throughout the Narn Regime. Unable to focus on the words, he dropped the papers.

'This means the end of the ISA.'

July 8th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Having run into deadends with EarthForce administration, Shaw finally managed to obtain the scout ship's analysis of the attack on the *Corax* from one of the officers in the communications hub, something he considered an act of mercy after being passed from desk to desk via the link in his booth. The atmosphere in the Support Centre was tense. Everyone seemed to expect war to break out at any second.

Reviewing the information, he quickly reached the same conclusions as EarthForce. Everything pointed to the Centauri launching an attack without provocation. It must have been one hell of a battle.

Soon after, Luchenko called for a meeting with her EarthForce officials to discuss options. Shaw had not been invited, but no one turned him away as he seated himself among the brass. He sensed Luchenko's desperation as she spoke, and the discussion clearly focussed on finding a way out of the crisis. Earth suffered much over the past decade and could not afford another war without dire repercussions on its galactic economy.

For five minutes Luchenko debated just this with two of her generals, and tempers were less than totally controlled.

'General Lefcourt, I know what you are saying. We have already talked about force deployment across the Centauri border, and I read your report some time ago. What we need to focus on now are the alternatives.'

'Madam President,' said the target of her appeal, a man in his late fifties with a gravely voice that was used to giving orders, not debating. 'I am no politician but the people are demanding action. It has been nearly forty-eight hours since the attack on EarthDome and we have done nothing.'

'This is not like the terrorist attacks of old, General. I think the people know that we operate on a larger stage than just one world now. Even our most advanced ships take time to cross the known galaxy.'

'With respect, Madam President, I don't think they do. They want to see strong leadership and positive results, quickly. I understand you hesitate to send our men and women into battle – that is to be respected in any President, and you would not have had my support for so long if you casually threw them into battle without due thought. But we have been over this. We have clear evidence that the Centauri are behind both attacks. This demands an appropriate response.'

Shaw took the opportunity to interrupt. 'Madam President, I counsel caution – not just as the representative of the ISA, but as a human. If the Emperor is to be believed, any action we take against the Centauri at this point will provoke them into a full-scale war which neither government can support.'

Keynes, the admiral that had plagued Shaw earlier, chose that time to weigh in with her view. 'And if we do nothing, we invite further attack – not just from the Centauri but any government with something to gain from our weakness.'

Shaw spun round to face her. 'You are advocating a war that will kill thousands without knowing all the facts!'

'The facts seem clear to me,' she said. 'What matters is how we appear to the rest of the galaxy. If someone pushes us, we have to push back, or stand to lose everything we gain. Good Lord, how much more evidence do we need – there is clear and incontrovertible proof that the Centauri have attacked us. General Lefcourt is right; we have already waited too long.'

'The Centauri are a divided people!' Shaw said a little too loudly as he lost patience. 'We have never disputed that Centauri are responsible. What we contend is that the Republic as a whole is not the root cause. They have nothing to gain!'

'You may be right in that,' said Luchenko, raising a hand to pacify both Shaw and the admiral. 'But I have long thought they might not need a reason to take such a course of action. It is my belief that the Narn and Drazi, and even we to an extent, have pushed the Centauri too far. We have bottled them up in their corner of the galaxy, and it might be inevitable that they would break under the pressure of isolation and those reparations.' She paused before continuing, weighing her words. 'Why attack Earth? There *is* a certain logic to it. They cannot strike the whole ISA at once, and though they have history with the Narn, the ISA is the new enemy. The head of the ISA, of course, comes from Earth. What better target? Or, look at it this way – if they want to strike at Sheridan, they can choose to hit either us or the Minbari. The Centauri may be illogical, but they are not stupid.'

'Surely that means we should contain them sooner rather than later?' asked the admiral.

Luchenko sighed. 'We cannot afford another war, for so many different reasons. We need some way to avoid it.'

'Madam President,' General Lefcourt said gently. 'I think you need to realise that a de facto state of war already exists between us and the Centauri.'

Luchenko looked at each of her advisors before her gaze settled on Shaw. He wished to give her some alternatives but, as their eyes met, he could see what the President was thinking. With a sinking feeling, he watched as her eyes dulled slightly, her decision made.

'General. Proceed. Blockade the border worlds of the Centauri.'

Shaw closed his eyes. 'That will give the Centauri no choice but to attack your fleets,' he muttered.

'That is the intention,' answered Keynes. 'We will strike quickly, subduing any resistance their outposts attempt. Then, we will use each colony world as a base of operations, allowing us to effectively fortify each system against attack. When the Centauri fleets come, we will be in a position of advantage. A series of battles across the entire front will see their defeat, and *then* we will be in a strong position to negotiate further reparations with the Centauri. If we so choose.'

Lefcourt spoke up once more to bring another point to the discussion. 'What of the offers of support from the Narn and Drazi? We also have word that the Brakiri, Hyach and Gaim are willing to send ships if we engage with the Centauri fleets. Others will likely follow.'

'I thought about that,' said Luchenko. 'I'll personally thank them and suggest they negotiate with the Narn to enter Regime space. We may need their support later, and we cannot look a gift horse in the mouth. However, we cannot have them join us in the initial invasion. In the interests of stability, we cannot turn this into a galactic-wide war, however eager they are.'

The meeting broke up soon after that, and Shaw rushed back to his booth to join Tilanna. He placed a hand on her shoulder to pull her attention away from her display.

'Get me Sheridan,' he said. 'It's starting.'

They exchanged concerned looks as she began the communication protocols. Minutes later, Sheridan's face appeared on the display, replacing the facts and figures Tilanna had been ploughing through.

'Michael, Tilanna. What have you got?' Sheridan looked as stressed as Luchenko had in the meeting.

'Mr. President,' Shaw said. 'EarthForce is moving. They are going to blockade several Centauri worlds along the border and force their fleets to engage. Other governments are pledging their support.'

Sheridan looked away from the screen briefly, annoyance and frustration clearly visible on his face. 'That was to be expected,' he said. 'Many within the ISA would like nothing better than to see the Centauri wiped off the face of the galactic map.'

'Mr. President. We have turned up nothing here. Nothing Luchenko or her people will accept.'

'Michael, you must keep trying. We have nothing but supposition and circumstance despite the best efforts of the intelligence centre. We desperately need something showing House Kaado acted independently, rather than the Republic or the Emperor. Without that. . .' Sheridan trailed off briefly before continuing. 'I am going to send

the White Star fleet into the targeted systems and place them between the Earth and Centauri fleets.'

'Sir, that means—'

'I know, Michael, I know. This is going to end badly.' He paused, looked as if he was going to say something, then changed his mind. 'Keep me informed of any developments within EarthForce. I imagine that when the fireworks start, you will be politely asked to leave. Do so. If it comes down to that, you will not be able to do anything else.'

'Understood, Mr. President. Good luck.'

The display went blank, and Shaw stared at it for several long seconds before Tilanna called up her previous work.

'We cannot give up, Michael,' she said after he continued to stare at the screen.

'I don't know, Tilanna. I don't think I am the right person to be here. I cannot help thinking that if Sabine was here in my place...'

Tilanna shook her head firmly. 'You are exactly where you need to be,' she said.

'You think so?'

'I know so. The universe works in such a way that we are all placed exactly where we need to be. These places and times are rarely easy to live through, but you can take comfort from the fact that you are not supposed to be anywhere else.'

He smiled. 'Your people have a unique way of looking at things.'

'Just so.'

'Okay, if I am meant to be here and the universe obviously has something in store for me, what do we have so far?'

'Likely little else,' she said. 'Still, attend. We know the device used to destroy EarthDome was of Dilgar origin, due to your work on Coutor.'

'That was more Sabine than me,' he said.

'Regardless. We have trailed the device through customs checkpoints throughout the Narn Regime, Babylon 5 and then into the Earth Alliance, right up to EarthDome. What you found on Coutor is the link that places the origin of the device in the Republic.'

'I'm with you so far.'

'We also know that Centauri ships attacked the carrier group.'

'Yes – if we believe the reports given to us by EarthForce, of course.'

'I see no reason for duplicity there. At least, not yet,' she said cryptically.

'What do you mean?' he asked, puzzled.

'I'll come back to that. However, the report was too detailed to forge easily and has been verified by Tuzanor. Let us accept it as genuine for now.'

'Okay.'

'We do not know where the Dilgar device came from. That is a complete unknown. We might be tempted to decide that, at this point, it does not matter. The attack happened, and we have a link back to the people who initiated it.'

'House Kaado,' he said.

'Correct. From all this, we know Centauri are involved. All that is missing now is the extent of the plot. Does it involve House Kaado alone, a group of conspirators, the Centaurum, or does it go all the way up to the Emperor? If it is one of the last two, that means war.'

'We have war now.'

'Well, not yet,' said Tilanna. 'Not until Earth and Centauri fleets actually meet in battle as commanded by their respective rulers or ruling bodies. However, this is the question that must be answered before any action can be taken in good conscience.'

'I think we are fresh out of that.'

A pause lingered between them as Tilanna looked straight into his eyes. Slowly her intent dawned on Shaw.

'You have something, don't you?' he asked, with a growing smile.

'Please do not get your hopes high,' Tilanna said. 'It is... an anomaly, perhaps nothing more.'

'Tilanna, at this point, I'll take anything.'

'The records of Babylon 5 customs points are quite chaotic and took some time to work through. However, I was able to verify that the energy signature generated by the Dilgar device did pass through the station on its way to Earth.'

'As you said before, we already knew that. What more is there?'

Tilanna activated a new programme on her display, and she called up a new set of data. 'Why is this section of the customs reports classified? In fact, if you have a moment, why classify any part of any customs report?'

Shaw frowned. 'Umm. I don't know. Cover a covert operation or something?'

'Maybe. Certainly to cover something.'

'I am sorry, Tilanna, but why do you think this is important?'

'Look at the dates on these files. The classified section covers only a short time of May 23rd, by your calendar, and

only exterior sweeps by service bots of ships that have not docked with the station. That perhaps means nothing by itself. But look *when* the section was classified.'

He peered at the display, now jumbled with figures. 'Yesterday.'

'And do you recognise the classification protocols that protect it?'

He shook his head. 'No. I'm no cryptographer.'

'Neither am I. But from what I have been able to tell, it relates to Earth's Joint Chiefs of Staff.'

Shaw shook his head. 'No. The Joint Chiefs are all either dead or in critical condition after the *Intrepide* went down.'

Tilanna turned round to face him. 'Exactly.'

He suddenly came to a screeching halt as the direction of Tilanna's thinking became clear. 'Then who classified it? And why?'

'Those are two very important questions, Michael.'

Taking a step back, he sat down at his own station, thinking hard. The possibilities began to swim in his mind. None seemed very wholesome, and he had a great deal of trouble believing that anyone in the Earth Alliance would purposefully want war with the Centauri.

'Can you break those protocols?' he asked.

Tilanna took a deep breath. 'I would really like to consult with our colleagues in the intelligence centre, but if we send out a communication like that, it *will* get intercepted. We will be thrown off this base, arrested or worse. Either way, we will be of no help to anyone.'

'We are on our own then,' he smiled sadly.

'As before. However, I do have some small training in this area.'

Shaw's smile became broader at her typical modesty. He long ago learned that when Minbari understated their capabilities, they were usually more than capable.

'Give it your best shot,' he said.

'I may trip an alert with my stumbling around,' Tilanna warned.

'We have literally nothing left to lose.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

July 9th 2263, Beta III, Centauri Republic

For centuries, the star system Beta III rested on the outskirts of the Centauri Republic, its people relatively untouched by Centaurum politics so long as they fulfilled their annual quotas of Quantium-40. This suited them just fine, as the Centauri of the colony on Beta III were known to be individualistic and content with a simpler way of life. Quantium-40, a material vital for the construction of new jump gates across the Republic, gave them the means to support themselves, which in turn allowed them to govern their own people with little interference from Centauri Prime.

Their tranquillity was shattered when the first EarthForce fleet blockaded their world from the rest of the Republic. With such a valuable commodity as Quantium-40 present, the inevitable Centauri response would begin at Beta III, though other colony worlds along the Republic's borders were being invaded simultaneously.

A dozen blue jump points lit up space less than a million miles from the sole inhabited world of the system and far from any active defence. Certain he could deploy his fleet safely, Admiral Andrew Ward gave the order for his ships to jump into realspace and begin their approach to the colony.

Ward's own ship, the command destroyer *Heracles,* appeared first, the slowly spinning section of its hull seeming to turn purposefully as the crew inside monitored the condition of the rest of the fleet and scanned the Centauri defences around the target world. Confident his fleet could handle anything the Centauri threw at it, Ward stood in the centre of the bridge and listened to his officers account for each ship. Three Hyperion-class cruisers and four frontline Omega destroyers gave him the heavy punch he needed, while several new Chronos attack frigates, the latest design from Earth's spacedocks, would protect his flanks. Two Oracle scout cruisers were the eyes of the fleet, and every ship would benefit from the support of the *Fraternity*, an Avenger-class heavy carrier with nearly fifty Starfuries nestled in its hangers. Officers waited their whole careers to command a fleet this impressive.

'Destroyers and cruisers, form up on us,' Ward said, the confidence in his voice carrying to the other ships in the fleet as they fired their main engines and began the approach. 'Protect the *Fraternity*. Frigates to our flanks and keep the *Claros* and *Didyma* far back.' The last command was to ensure no enemy could directly engage his scouts, for he would have need of them later.

'Sir, the Centauri just activated their mines,' a junior officer reported from the sensor suite.

Ward nodded, expecting the news. 'Standard Centauri response. All ships, deploy fighters. Sweep those mines clear.'

From the open maws of the Omega destroyers and yawning hanger bays of the *Fraternity*, scores of Starfury and Thunderbolt fighters screamed into space with a rapidity born of constant drilling. Ward was not overly concerned with the mines, small floating satellites with tiny but powerful particle arrays. Using automated systems, they could co-ordinate their firepower to target incoming ships, but they posed little threat to a fleet this size, and it was unlikely they could penetrate the armour of his largest

warships. Still, Ward preferred not to tempt fate, as a lucky hit could cause any number of delays. Far better to follow standard procedure for dealing with standard defences.

Once free of their motherships, the fighters formed into squadrons and fired afterburners to converge on the mines across a wide front, forcing the defences to split their fire, not allowing them to concentrate on any one fighter. Designed to hammer small and medium-sized warships, the targeting system of the particle array mounted on each mine failed time and again to lock on to the tiny and fast-moving fighters, and several drained their power reserves fruitlessly as they discharged into empty space.

From the point of view of the EarthForce pilots, however, the situation was a little less clear. Their entire forward view suddenly filled with bright bolts of energy as the mines fired randomly. Small packets of lethal light peppered space around them, and many pilots jinked instinctively, keen to avoid damage that would leave them sitting ducks for the Centauri defences.

The Thunderbolt pilots commenced their attack runs first, their longer-ranged wing-mounted missiles acquiring the front line of mines. Independently targeted, each Thunderbolt unleashed four missiles that blazed a trail of fire across the darkness. Explosions added more light to the battle, causing the visors of many pilots to automatically dim for a brief second. Almost immediately, the weight of fire from the mines diminished as the missiles took their toll. Their opposition crippled, the Thunderbolts and Starfuries swept forward to engage the mines directly with short-ranged pulse weapons.

Following their training, each pilot constantly switched targets, pointing his fighter at one mine, firing a brief salvo, then violently changing course to come about on another, repeating the process a dozen times. This tactic allowed them a relatively straight run at a mine, but by turning away after only a second or so, they were able to fool the tracking systems of their automated enemy. Though the pulse weapons of the fighters were too weak to destroy a mine outright, the combined attacks of scores of Starfuries and Thunderbolts, each focussing on a target for a short time, soon blasted through armour to explode the volatile crystalline core within.

A few unlucky pilots were killed as their fighters exploded in a hail of particle fire, caught by a tracking system just as they completed their attack run or hit by a stream intended for another target altogether.

The skirmish lasted only minutes, and while Ward regretted losing pilots so early in the expedition, it was inevitable. When that much charged energy was let loose in such a small area of space, people died. Once the last mine finally fell silent, he gave the order to break off.

'Fighters, disperse into your patrol patterns. Start bringing squadrons back to base in twenty minutes, maintaining standard fleet patrol roster at all times.'

'Contact.' The officer of the sensor suite relayed his readings with a calmness that encouraged Ward. He knew his people were well trained, but battle was always the baptism of fire that demonstrated their true character.

'Report.'

'Sir, reading... twenty-four bogeys leaving planetary orbit, dead ahead. Looks like fighters, sir.'

'Are they on attack vector?' Ward asked.

'No, sir. Looks like they are running,' the officer answered with a smile.

'Very wise. Keep track of them but broaden your scans. Any ships in the vicinity?'

'Negative, sir.'

'*Claros, Didyma*, are you with us?' Ward asked, his query automatically routed by the ensign at the communications station to the two Oracle scout cruisers behind the *Heracles*.

'Yes, sir.' 'Online,' came the immediate responses.

'Get your eyes and ears running. I don't want to be caught by surprise.'

There was a brief pause before the captain of the *Claros* answered. 'Contact. Relaying wide-band scans to you now.'

Ward turned to his bridge crew as they worked to analyse the incoming data stream.

'Sir, contacts are Vorchan-class, six of them. About two hundred klicks away, though the signal keeps getting scrambled.'

Ward nodded. '*Claros*, you may have an opposite number out there. Start looking.'

'Confirmed,' said the voice over the communications link.

There was little that could throw off the sensor sweeps of an Oracle-class scout, as its electronics suite was constantly being updated by EarthForce R&D to keep pace with the other races of the galaxy. The Centauri, however, were known to possess electronic warfare capabilities that were at least the equal of Earth's. The presence of a scout in a fleet not only gave it far-seeing eyes but also allowed it to shroud friendly ships with interference or display ghost readings on enemy scanners. On their own, scout ships were rarely a match for frontline warships, and Ward was not overly concerned about the presence of the Vorchans, as each massed less than any of his ships with the exception of the frigates.

'Contact,' the voice of the *Claros'* captain echoed across the *Heracles'* bridge again. 'Admiral, we have him. Fifty clicks behind the Vorchans. All blips are moving directly away from us. Obviously they don't like what they see.'

'Roger that, *Claros*,' Ward replied as he turned his attention back to his own bridge officers. 'Deploy the frigates, back them up with six 'Fury squadrons. Chase those interlopers out of our sky.'

He held no hope in successfully engaging the Centauri ships, as they had a good lead already and were notoriously fast compared to typical Earth Alliance vessels. However, a Centauri response was expected in this system, and he could live without a rogue scout at the edges of his engagement envelope interfering with his scanners as a larger fleet approached. If the enemy decided to stand and fight, hoping to take out his frigates piecemeal while the rest of his fleet was too far away to lend support, he knew the new Chronos design would give the Centauri pause. Though small, the frigate had armour as thick as that on his own destroyer, and its railgun turrets would tear through the Vorchans. So long as they could gain a lock through its electronic fog, the frigates would make literal mincemeat out of any Centauri scout, though he doubted its captain would be so foolish as to let them get that close.

Summoning a tactical display on a nearby console, Ward watched his frigates and fighters peel off towards the contacts on the far side of the screen. Within a minute, the Centauri acted as he had predicted, increasing their speed to leave the Earth ships trailing far behind.

'Sir, energy spike,' called one of his officers. 'They are opening a jump point. Vortex is stable. Looks like they are holding it open long enough for all their ships.'

'We are going to see them again later when the next lot of Centauri show up. Don't worry, we'll get another chance at them!' Ward's bravado raised a quiet laugh across the bridge. 'Recall the frigates. Any update on the fighters?'

'*Didyma* reports they are heading into deep space, sir!' Now it was Ward's turn to smile at the scout captain's elaboration.

'Tell them to keep the fighters pegged. There are not many of them, but we don't want to be surprised by a couple of squadrons of Sentris when the fighting really begins,' he replied.

Ward nodded and sighed quietly. So far, so good. Everything had gone to plan, and the system was effectively theirs. Now they would just wait for the hammer fall.

'Instruct the *Claros* and *Didyma* to jump to hyperspace and begin their long-ranged probes,' said Ward. 'I want to know the second they detect an incoming fleet. Remind both captains they are to return with all haste when they find the Centauri but to only jump back to realspace when they judge it is safe to do so. We will need their services in battle, but I don't want to lose either of them to a Centauri squadron just because they were rushing to get back.'

'Confirmed, Admiral.'

Firing their lateral thrusters, the two Oracle scout cruisers turned from the rest of the fleet as they opened yellow spinning jump points that would carry them to hyperspace. Huge ion engines igniting, they waited for the hyperspace currents within to settle for a brief second before surging forward on a tide of white fire, quickly disappearing into the dark centre of the jump point. With a flash of brilliant light, the vortex shrunk into nothingness as it disappeared. The two scout cruisers began their trek through hyperspace as they searched for any sign of approaching Centauri.

Ward spent the next few minutes deploying the remainder of his fleet around the inhabited world below them, taking full advantage of the gravity well. Spreading the ships out in high orbit, he ensured no enemy could approach using the shadow of the planet to mask an attack, while his own ships had the option of either breaking out of the gravitational pull of the world, weak this far away, or firing their engines and plummeting downwards, diving into low orbit where they could use the gravity to slingshot themselves at great speed around the planet to surprise an enemy on the other side.

All his preparations completed, Ward knew his captains were familiar with their standing orders should the Centauri appear.

Now all they could do was wait.

July 9th 2263, Hyperspace, Centauri Republic

Like two great behemoths, the battleships *Turhan* and *Cartagia* moved slowly across the rippling red plasma clouds of hyperspace. Following a beacon track to their rendezvous, they moved inexorably forward, hyperspace shock waves scattering off their hulls even as the creeping fingers of moving gravity wells slid feebly from their huge mass. Ships of this great size posed certain problems for their helmsmen while around a busy world with constant orbital traffic, but here in hyperspace they became a dream to handle. Hazardous eddies and currents that would send smaller ships spinning away into the abyss did nothing to disrupt the smooth passage of an Octurion battleship. By comparison, the escorting Primus battlecruisers, still large warships in their own right, were forced to make constant course corrections as they navigated the strange other dimension of hyperspace.

Only a few Octurions existed, as each required a massive amount of resources to complete, draining the economy of entire colony worlds. One was built for every Emperor who took to the throne of the Centauri Republic as a mark of his absolute power and authority, whether or not he actually wielded it, though traditionally few survived in office long enough to actually use the ship as a royal transport. In a galaxy where every military force possessed destroyers, frigates and cruisers, the Octurion was a true battleship in every sense of the word. Few vessels could repel its sheer weight of fire.

Command of an Octurion was by royal appointment only, and it almost always fell to a popular noble of the Centaurum who bucked for the honour of the highest post in active combat service. Aboard the *Turhan*, Minister

Provenza stood imperiously, unmoving, as he watched his crew go about their duties. The bridge structure rose from the rear hull of the battleship like a massive office block, with the bridge itself occupying the entire top level. Metres of thick Corrilium armour were layered above their heads for protection, an expensive extravagance for a warship but a mere fitting on a vessel such as this. The bridge was a lavish affair, fit for the Emperor it had once been intended to carry on state visits to colony worlds. At its rear a tall throne was mounted, though none but the Emperor himself was permitted to approach it without royal decree. Offices to its side permitted closed sessions with ambassadors and military officials or a moment of solitude for the monarch. The walls and consoles were decked in acres of rich cream-coloured hide, while soft and expensive carpets lined the floor.

Though such luxury was a far cry from the military ships of other races, few visitors could fail to sense the latent power while standing on the bridge of the *Turhan* or its sister ship, the *Cartagia*. The massed ranks of display consoles and control stations, all manned by some of the finest officers in the Centauri fleet, were obviously state of the art, while the front viewport looked down at the main hull of the ship, extending well over a mile out into space. Huge turrets, dozens of metres across, studded the purple hull, hinting at the purpose for which the Octurion had been designed. Though officially classed as a royal transport, the Octurion could defend itself against entire fleets.

Waiting patiently, Minister Provenza ticked off the minutes as they sailed through hyperspace to the fleet's rendezvous point. The Emperor himself gave the order not to just turn away invading fleets, but utterly crush them. No doubt was to be left in any part of the galaxy that invading the Republic resulted in the severest response. Never again would the Centauri suffer the humiliation of seeing their homeworld bombed into ruin.

To the Minister's memory, no time in Centauri history saw this much military might gathered in one place. Two Octurions and six escorting battlecruisers made a fearsome display, but they had been deemed insufficient for the mission's objectives of total annihilation. After leaving the staging post at Gorash, they were to join with a secondary fleet of support ships, ranging from cruisers to gunships. Waiting in hyperspace they would then keep station, listening for any sign of an Earth fleet entering nearby territory.

'Minister?' An aide reporting from the control station interrupted Provenza's thoughts of final and total victory. He raised his chin in acknowledgement.

'We have a report from our scout at Beta III. An Earth fleet has appeared and blockaded the system. What are your orders?'

'Signal the supporting fleet,' he answered. 'They are to head to Beta III immediately. Time their arrival to coincide with ours. We will make the jump into realspace at the far edge of the system. Give the humans time to see what they are up against.'

'As you wish, Minister.' The aide bowed and backed away.

Provenza smiled to himself. He had been appointed command of the *Turhan* six months ago but had yet to see its guns fired in anger. With a guaranteed victory like this, he would get his wish and be lauded by the Emperor himself. Nothing less than a position in the Royal Court would be his prize.

July 9th 2263, Tuzanor, Minbar

'Accept and decode,' said Sheridan. He waited with some anxiety for the incoming communication and tapped his fingers on his desk while the security protocols were identified and translated. Seconds later the figure of a man with a boyish face greeted him, though the Anla'Shok robes promised a hidden strength beyond any lack of years.

'Ranger Sosa,' Sheridan said. 'What do you have for us?'

'It has been confirmed, Mr. President,' said the Ranger. 'The Centauri have sent several fleets to the border worlds invaded by the Earth Alliance. However, the largest and fastest moving is headed towards Beta III, as expected. The Earth fleet there is led by an Admiral Ward.'

Sheridan frowned. 'I don't know him. What is his strength?'

'A reinforced task force. He has access to supporting fleets if need be, though they are at least an hour or two away.'

'And the Centauri?'

'They are aiming to wipe out the Earth fleet. The reports of the *Turhan* and *Cartagia* being launched are confirmed – they are leading the Centauri fleet. We have counted more than thirty other vessels in the area, all converging on Beta III from hyperspace.'

'I see.' Sheridan thought furiously. He retained certain sympathies to his old colleagues in EarthForce and was reluctant to go down a path that would see so many killed in battle. On the other hand, he had greater responsibilities to the Interstellar Alliance and the billions of sentients that lived under its protection. He knew what action had to be taken but hesitated. Committing the White Star fleet was a risky move, as it was unlikely to sway the Centauri when they had a force that powerful.

'Listen to me very carefully,' he said. 'This is important. I am putting you at the head of the entire White Star fleet, every craft that can reach your position in time. By our calculations, you will have sixteen ships behind you. Take them to Beta III, put yourself between the Centauri and Earth fleets and do everything you can to stop the shooting. You know what is at stake.'

'Yes, sir. Mr. President, what are our orders if battle starts? The Earth fleet is not likely to survive unless we intervene.'

Sheridan took a deep breath. 'I know. And as soon as the Earth ambassador here realises what is going on, he is going to raise merry hell in the Council—and there will be more than a few governments agreeing him, if the rumours of fleets moving through Narn space towards the Republic turn out to be true. It feels like President Luchenko is trying to play off Alliance members to her own ends.' He hesitated, not liking the dark place of politics and machinations that he was headed towards. 'Sosa, I cannot take unilateral action against the Centauri without damaging everything this Alliance stands for. I am going to be consulting Council members to reach a combined resolution on this so, until you hear from me with definite orders, you are to act on your own initiative. Do you *understand*?'

'Yes, sir, I believe I do.'

'Good. However, we must do everything we can to stop a full-scale war. The Centauri cannot win against a united Interstellar Alliance force, but they do have rights to their own sovereignty, whether they are members or not. And an invasion of Republic space is going to cost our fleets more than they might think, despite the bragging of the Narn and Drazi.'

'We'll do our part, sir. If there is a way to stop the Earth Alliance and Centauri from blasting each other across Beta III, we'll find it.'

'I hope you do, Sosa. Sheridan out.'

As the screen went dark, Sheridan became aware of another presence entering the room, comforting in its familiarity.

'This is where it ends,' he said bleakly.

'There is still time,' a soft and serene female voice said. 'Come, we have work to do in the Council.'

July 9th 2263, The EAS Heracles, Beta III

'Admiral, incoming transmission from the *Claros*,' reported an ensign across the low background hum and chatter of the *Heracles*' bridge. 'Centauri ships, on their way here.'

Ward snapped around on his heels. 'How long?'

'ETA less than forty minutes. They have registered thirty-six hyperspace silhouettes, mostly cruiser masses.'

'Thirty-six?' Ward could not help asking, wanting to make sure he had heard his officer correctly.

'Yes, sir. They have had trouble identifying two. One moment, sir, awaiting the data stream.' The ensign leaned closer to his station as he began to interpret the information transmitted by the scout ship. 'Sir! They are massive!'

'Do you have identification?' Ward asked, puzzled and concerned.

'Not definite, sir. They are massing several times larger than their battlecruisers.' The ensign looked up at his commanding officer. 'Sir, could they be Octurion?'

Ward appeared thoughtful before answering. 'Let's not get ahead of ourselves, ensign.'

'No, sir.'

'Is Captain Musaki still in position?' Ward asked. The level of forces that the Centauri appeared to be committing worried him. Even without the possibility of two of their largest battleships, they had amassed a response that outnumbered his forces three to one. While most of their ships would be lighter than any of his frontline vessels, he knew that they would be bringing enough heavies to provide a significant advantage. They had possibly spooked their hyperspace silhouettes, as they had reacted with astonishing speed, but that was not a risk worth taking. Several battle groups and squadrons had been held back in hyperspace to reinforce the EarthForce ships jumping into Centauri territory as needed, and Ward needed as many ships as could be mustered before the enemy fleet arrived.

'Yes, sir. ETA sixty-seven minutes if we give him the go now.'

'Do so. Also contact the battle groups *Ajax, Achilles* and *Nelson*. Tell them to make full burn to get here.' He guessed the other ships would not arrive before conflict started, but if he could hold out against an initial assault, he would be able to summon enough ships to wipe out any enemy. 'Do you have a precise fix on the Centauri's course yet?'

The ensign did not answer straight away as he consulted his screen and made calculations. 'Difficult, sir. It looks like they are on a slight tangent to our position. They won't be dropping in on top of us.'

Thank heavens for small mercies, Ward thought. The Centauri in charge of the incoming fleet obviously did not know the full extent of the Earth fleet and was not taking chances. Then again, with a fleet as large as his, perhaps chances were not necessary.

'Recall the *Claros* and *Didyma*,' Ward ordered. 'They have done their job. Instruct their captains to maintain distance from any direct confrontation. They will know what to do when the fireworks start.'

The bridge clock ticked away the long minutes as they awaited the arrival of the Centauri. Ward felt envious of his crew who each had their own duties to keep them occupied. Whether they were controlling the patrol patterns of Starfuries in orbit, monitoring the power relays and capacitors of the *Heracles* or doing any one of the million tasks required to keep a warship of this size flying, they were all active. For Ward's part, much of his job had already been done, organising the fleet, ensuring the readiness of each section of the ship and making preparations for battle. An officer occasionally approached him with a status check or query but, for the main, he was left to his own racing and nervous thoughts.

He recalled someone saying that military service was hours of boredom punctuated with moments of sheer terror and, having served EarthForce for most of his adult life, it was a sentiment he could appreciate. However, the worst part was the waiting, he always found. The moments where all plans had been laid and all eventualities covered. When the enemy approached and all that could be done was wait. It left a cold, hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The *Claros* and *Didyma* jumped in system several minutes ahead of the Centauri, reporting that the incoming fleet looked to be heading towards the edge of the system. It was an unusual move, Ward considered, but it matched what he had heard of the Centauri's ruthless efficiency. They were obviously planning to deploy far from any possibility of interference, gauge their opposition and then sweep through the system, annihilating anything they came across. Start at one side and then continue forwards until there was nothing left to fight. No initiative required on the part of your sub-ordinates and time-consuming, but the Centauri were in their own territory and could afford to spend time making sure they had successfully repulsed Earth's invasion.

'Contact!' called his tactical officer. 'Jump points forming beyond the sixth planet.'

Ward had given no orders for his fleet to break orbit until the Centauri appeared. He was mindful of the possibility that the Centauri could change course in hyperspace at the last instant, jumping in close to his ships to start a brawl that would put him on the defensive immediately. He might have contemplated this tactic himself in their place, and it was foolish to treat an enemy as stupid – 'always consider them at least as smart as you are' was the mantra in EarthForce. Nevertheless, the Centauri leading the fleet seemed content to fight a battle with no surprises. At least, not initially.

'What do we have?' he asked.

'A real mix, sir. Gunships to battleships. They are already at full thrust towards us. ETA on their forward screen, ninety-two minutes. The big guns, seventeen minutes behind them. Running analysis sweeps of attackers. . . wow!'

The breach of bridge protocol made Ward look up in surprise.

'Sorry, sir,' said the tactical officer. 'We just scanned the two Octurions. . .'

'Punch it through to my office,' said Ward, walking to the rear of the bridge to review his enemy privately. Sitting down in front of his main console, he selected the feed from the tactical station and reviewed the first comprehensive data an Earth vessel had received on the Centauri's largest warships.

It made for impressive reading. Reactor output was measured at six times greater than his command destroyers already up-rated systems, and he had no doubt it would increase once battle started. A full defensive grid, capacity for two full squadrons of fighters, and an extensive communications suite. The armour was thick enough to shrug off all but the heaviest weapons Ward had at his disposal, and it looked as if it could readily trade fire with several ships simultaneously. As well as the Centauri's renowned battle lasers, the hull was studded with particle array batteries and six huge turrets sat on the top deck, each containing several matter cannon, smaller versions of the mass drivers the Centauri had used to bombard the Narn homeworld years before.

He now faced two of these incredible vessels and knew immediately that his present fleet would take substantial losses even without the support of three dozen other warships. He looked across the bridge.

'Comms, get me the status on the *Hermione*.'

The *Hermione* was a Warlock class advanced destroyer, one of the new breed of warships Earth had constructed using the technological advances developed or stolen from alien races. Barely two years old, no finer ship existed in EarthForce, though only five had been built so far.

'Sorry, sir. *Hermione* reports being already committed, covering Admiral Breckinridge's flank past Quadrant 37.'

Ward now had to acknowledge that he had a problem. Even with the reinforcements, there was no guarantee they could win this battle, much less so with losses that would be called 'acceptable' by bean counters back on Earth.

'Signal the fleet,' he said. 'Break orbit. Destroyers and cruisers, form up on us. Frigates, protect the scouts. Launch fighters and engage their forward screen at the first opportunity. See if we can begin whittling them down early. Put us on an oblique course, make their big ships work to engage us.'

Satisfied that his orders were being carried out correctly, he looked down at the data streams of the Octurion battleships once more, now sporting the Centauri designations *Turhan* and *Cartagia*.

'How do I fight such beasts?' he murmured to himself.

July 9th 2263, The Turhan, Beta III

The mood on the bridge of the *Turhan* was altogether different. For some time the Centauri had endured humiliating defeats and setbacks. Forced to withdraw from their own territories, constantly out-manoeuvred in the game of intergalactic politics and then, of course, seeing their homeworld, the jewel of the Republic, bombarded by their enemies. This battle would set them back on the road to glory that was their rightful place. Moreover, they had an enemy ahead of them on which to vent their years of pent-up frustrations and disappointments.

Maintaining a vaguely disinterested façade, as protocol demanded, Minister Provenza was as

eager as any of the crew. As head of the fleet, he stood to gain the most when they returned in triumph to Centauri Prime.

He already noted the Earth fleet comprised many of the best ships the humans had to offer, but not one of them could match the *Turhan* or *Cartagia* alone. He regarded their fleet as small. Tiny. Puny. They would sweep across Beta III with majestic pride, crushing each target within range. Even through the thick carpet of the bridge, he could feel the *Turhan* hum with power as it engaged its massive drives and began the slow trek across space toward battle.

Provenza sent his fighters and lighter ships forward to trap the Earth fleet and pin it down, hoping to block any attempt at escape, mildly gratified that the humans seemed willing to engage as they broke orbit from the colony world. Subconsciously, he began tapping a foot in anticipation until three more Earth ships jumped in system close to the rest of their fleet. He smiled as he imagined the human admiral frantically calling for reinforcements when he saw the Centauri jump into realspace to reclaim their territory. It didn't matter. Call every ship you have, Provenza thought to himself. Today the Centauri demonstrate their true resolve and nothing will save you from our righteous fury.

Across space, the lead elements of each fleet met. Provenza finally moved from his place on the bridge to look over the shoulders of his crew, monitoring the battle and making mental notes for promotions and recriminations later.

The main bulk of the Centauri fleet was some distance from initial weapons range, but across a wide front, small explosions and energy discharges marked the clash with the Earth fighter squadrons. The Centauri's own fighters, a mix of light Sentris and even lighter Raziks, were spearheaded by several gunships and patrol boats. Technically classified as capital ships, these small vessels were light and fast with weaponry intended to punch through fighter screens and similar small ships. Throughout space, a series of dogfights broke out, running battles that expanded, dispersed and combined to create a brawl of exploding ships and bolts of lethal energy.

The Starfury pilots made good account of themselves against the more nimble and numerous Centauri fighters but were forced to give way when the gunships entered battle, their massed particle arrays lancing out to smash entire flights with each salvo. A few squadrons, covered by their comrades, sallied out from the growing furball to make attack runs on the gunships, paying for their heroic efforts with their lives as concentrated fire made it impossible to approach the larger vessels while maintaining a target lock. The Earth line held for a time, then began to buckle as more and more Starfuries withdrew, either through mounting damage or due to superior numbers of the enemy, forcing a retreat that fast became a rout. Several squadron leaders managed to keep their pilots in check, and the initial rush to escape became tempered as they engaged afterburners, hoping to draw the enemy into the big guns of the main Earth fleet.

Many Centauri fighters obliged and were cut down in minutes as the turrets of the Earth cruisers and destroyers worked overtime to fill space with a criss-crossing of pulse cannon fire impossible to fly through. The gunships refused to follow though, having received standing orders from Minister Provenza to hold until the battleships opened fire, as much from his own interest to claim early victories as their safety.

Provenza nodded, satisfied at the opening stages of battle. Everything was proceeding as expected, and he was not concerned about the loss of fighters. They did not win battles and, more to the point, it was unlikely that any noble of good standing would be found among the dead, as fighter pilots tended to be drawn from the ranks of nobles who did not have enough money or political clout to get a commission on a warship. Feeling the soft hide covering the console in front of him, Provenza recognized the proper way to fight a war, not being cramped inside a tiny fighter and subjected to the rigours of high-gravity manoeuvres. He looked up as an aide tried to get his attention.

'Yes?'

'Minister, we have jump points ahead. More ships have arrived!'

At first, Provenza was confused at his aide's words. He was not expecting any more Centauri ships to arrive and was momentarily irritated with the idea that someone, somewhere within the Centauri military had thought he was not capable of winning this battle alone. 'Whose ships?' he said.

'Minister, they are White Stars.'

Provenza stood upright with a start, the surprise evident in his raised brows. Well now, he thought. This is going to get interesting.

July 9th 2263, White Star 8, Beta III

Rocketing into the contested space of Beta III, seventeen White Stars darted forward from their jump points, immediately speeding for a point equidistant between the Earth and Centauri fleets. On the bridge of White Star 8, Sosa quickly listened to hurried reports of the situation outside.

'Skirmishing has commenced with their lead elements,' said the Minbari at the weapons station to his right. 'Sensors detect debris directly ahead of us, trailing away to the Earth fleet. Some fighter-to-fighter battles are still going on, but it looks like we missed the initial clash.'

'Then there is still time,' said Sosa. 'Their governments can both pass off a few scraps between fighters. It is the big ships we have to stop. What are their relative positions?'

The main holographic display shimmered in front of him, plotting the course of his White Stars and marking the Earth fleet to his right and the Centauri to his left.

'At present velocities, they will be in weapons range of each other within ten minutes. Then again, they are only five minutes away from weapons range of us. . .' said the Minbari.

'Oh, that's comforting,' said Sosa, as much to lighten his own mood as any of his crew.

'Do you wish a broadband communication to the fleets?' asked another Minbari.

'No. We are going to have to manage each very differently. Get me the Earth admiral first.'

Within seconds, the holographic display changed hue and then presented the face of Admiral Ward to Sosa.

'White Star fleet,' acknowledged Ward. 'It is good to see you. Are you here to lend us support?'

'Sorry, Admiral,' replied Sosa. 'I am here to stop outright war from breaking out. I must insist you break off and leave this system. You are violating the sovereign territory of the Centauri Republic without sanction from the Interstellar Alliance.'

'We are responding to a legitimate threat to the security of the Earth Alliance, in accordance with the rules of the ISA.'

'You cannot do this unilaterally, Admiral,' Sosa persisted. 'Not without the majority vote of the Council. This is an illegal action, and Earth risks expulsion from the ISA if you persist on this course. Let the Rangers monitor the border between Earth and the Republic – that is what we are here for.'

'You know that the Council will ratify Earth's actions here today. I ask again, will you stand beside us against the Centauri? We have reinforcements on the way, but your White Stars will save the lives of many humans today if you commit.'

Out of view of Admiral Ward, Sosa stamped a foot on the deck of the White Star in frustration. He had hoped that the Earth fleet would be convinced to at least delay action. He was not confident that the Centauri alone would be persuaded, but he knew he had to try.

'Admiral, please stand by.' The display went dark, and Sosa signalled the Minister leading the Centauri fleet. It took a full minute for them to respond, which he was sure was a slight of some description. The holographic display presently showed a stern-faced Centauri with a huge hair crest. Dressed in a dark blue greatcoat, he stared down at Sosa, arms crossed in defiance.

'White Star fleet, you are violating Centauri territory,' he said with a conviction born of years surrounded by sycophants and yes men. 'Withdraw or be destroyed.'

Well, that is a good start, thought Sosa. 'Minister, I bring the respectful greetings of President Sheridan. He regrets the matter has gone this far and seeks a solution that protects the sovereign territory of the great Centauri Republic without bloodshed.'

The Centauri minister blinked at Sosa's words, encouraging the Ranger to continue. He knew from past experience that humility and flattery could go a long way when dealing with the Centauri.

'I respectfully ask that you cease hostilities with the Earth fleet in this system and allow me to come aboard to discuss this further. I will be alone and unarmed.'

When the minister smirked at Sosa's words, the Ranger knew he had failed.

'White Star, it is my intention to close with the Earth fleet and blast them from our sky. If you intervene, we will open fire on your ships. Persuade your fellow humans to leave our territory, if that is your wish, but we consider any non-Centauri ship in our territory an enemy. We will allow you to leave unmolested, if you do so now.'

With that, the display went blank as the Minister cut the link.

Sosa closed his eyes and sighed.

'It is as if they both desire battle,' said one of his Minbari crew.

'Patch me through to the Admiral again,' said Sosa. If diplomacy and flattery would not work with either fleet, perhaps a threat would at least buy time.

'Admiral, I insist you withdraw from Beta III at once and leave Centauri space,' he said when Ward's image appeared once more before him.

'You know we cannot do that.'

'Admiral, see reason. You are outnumbered and outgunned. This is a fool's errand you are on and it will gain Earth nothing.'

'I disagree. We already have reinforcements on the way and are more than capable of holding off the Centauri attack until they arrive. I will ask you again, however, to join us against the Centauri. Your ships are powerful enough to tip the balance and will save many lives.'

Sosa shook his head. 'Neither the ISA nor the Anla'Shok differentiates between Centauri and human life, Admiral. If you continue to engage the Centauri, you do so without the permission or direction of the ISA and risk retaliation from the Rangers in the interests of continued galactic peace.'

Admiral Ward looked surprised. 'Are you saying you will defend the Centauri and attack us?'

'Admiral, the Centauri are the injured party here. You have violated their territory, attacked their colony and now refuse to leave.'

Ward fell silent for a few seconds then looked back at Sosa. 'I have my orders,' he said and, once again, the display went blank.

Silence fell across the bridge of the White Star until an Minbari spoke over Sosa's shoulder. 'What are your orders?'

'Get me Sheridan, now,' he said. 'Get him dragged out of the Council if you need to – we have less than six minutes before all hell breaks loose here.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Shutting down the communications link to Tuzanor, Shaw leaned back from his station, sighing. Tilanna worked hard on the other console, with an occasional sharp but quiet intake of breath that Shaw attributed to momentary frustration. He looked at her petite form, her slender neck rising above grey robes beneath the hard bone crest that bracketed the rear of her entire skull.

'The White Star fleet has been sent to Beta III,' he said. 'It seems EarthForce and the Centauri are going to kick off hostilities there, though they are expecting repeats all along the border.'

When Tilanna did not answer, he tapped her on the shoulder. 'Please tell me you have gotten somewhere. Once those White Stars reach Beta III it could all be over.'

'Mmm, yes,' she said at first, continuing after a pause. 'I have managed to get through the security protocols on those customs records. I don't *think* I triggered any alarms doing so.'

'You broke them?' Shaw asked in surprise. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

Tilanna turned to face him, blinking in surprise of her own. 'I had no time to analyse the information within – thus I had nothing to tell you.'

Shaw stared at her then grinned, rubbing his brow. He could not deny it made some logical sense. If you were a Minbari, perhaps.

'Okay, forget that,' he said, standing up to look over her shoulder at the console. 'What have you found? Anything we can use?'

'Perhaps. Look here,' she indicated a set of files at the fore of the screen. 'The covering and classification of this record was not skilfully done. It seems as if someone has simply grabbed the data they were looking for and were not concerned if they also took anything else nearby. This made the anomaly easier to spot but, consequently, there has been more information to work through now that we have it.'

'And?' Shaw asked, waiting to hear what the diligent Minbari had uncovered.

'The energy signature of the Dilgar device is what allowed us to track it all the way from the Centauri Republic to Earth. However, it seems as if someone were covering their tracks. We have to ask ourselves, how did it get into the Centauri Republic in the first place?'

'That makes sense,' said Shaw. 'We already know the Centauri fitted their own fuse to the device. And, however you look at it, if it is a Dilgar weapon, it had to originate from outside the Republic. But we don't know how long they had it in their possession.'

'We do now,' said Tilanna. 'A routine exterior sweep by a maintenance bot at Babylon 5 picked up the signature, on a free trader called the *Freedom Flight* that had a flight route logged for Quadrant 15. However, it did not take me long to ascertain that it never arrived.'

'Did you find where exactly the ship went?'

'No,' she said. 'At least not straight away. But let us make a leap of faith – look at the star charts. If the ship went off the regular jump routes, what Centauri system is very close to Quadrant 15?'

Shaw peered at the star chart Tilanna called up and saw immediately what she was getting at. 'Coutor!' he exclaimed.

'An interesting supposition, is it not?' she asked rhetorically. 'The scan was performed by accident. The maintenance bot was no doubt engaged in some mundane status checking of flight patterns in the vicinity of the Babylon 5 station. That does not matter. However, it picks up on the Dilgar device, logs what it finds – and then those logs are classified, ensuring they cannot be used to accurately track what happened prior to the attack on EarthDome. It goes unnoticed for *this* long because everyone is concentrating on the immediate events, not what happened a little earlier.'

'Until a diligent Minbari starts looking into things.'

Tilanna smiled slightly, the first hint of self-satisfaction Shaw saw in the Minbari. 'Our analysts would have picked it up sooner than I,' she said. 'But I was the only one with direct access to Earth's own records. The only one with an interest in not blaming the Republic as a whole, that is.'

'So where is this ship now – what did you call it, the *Freedom Flight*?'

'It is registered to a man called Hans Shiritori, and I managed to track its progress as soon as it returned to Babylon 5, from Coutor we are presuming. You will find this interesting. After a brief stop at the station, it headed further into the Earth Alliance, landing at Mars Dome Two just three days ago. It departed. . . no, it *will* depart in two days. It is still here.'

'Mars Dome Two,' Shaw mused.

'I know you come from Mars. Do you know Dome Two?'

'I should do. I was born there.'

'The perfect guide then,' said Tilanna. 'Mr. Shiritori is marked as currently residing in the habitation block on the North side of the Dome, apartment IIc.'

'The transport to Dome Two is a forty-minute ride. Come on,' he said, glad of the chance for direct action. 'We don't have much time.'

'Mike, wait,' she said, grabbing his arm to arrest his attention. 'There is one more thing you should see.'

'What?'

Tilanna tapped a control on her console and pointed at the screen. 'This. Who classified the report in the first place. This person, for whatever reason, be it an intentional cover up or a bid to avoid some embarrassment, deliberately hid information that might exonerate the Republic. And thus, perhaps, start a war.'

Shaw stared at the screen grimly, remembering an Anla'Shok saying about enemies within as well as without.

'Come on,' he said quietly. 'We need solid facts, now more than ever.'

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome Two, Sol

Sharing the transport tube to Mars Dome Two with other passengers, Shaw and Tilanna avoided discussing the conspiracy at hand, lapsing instead into their own silent thoughts. Shaw found himself thinking of Badeau as the red Martian landscape flickered past the window at hypersonic speeds. While he could take comfort at her care in Mars Dome One's best medical facility, the last report he saw of her condition was still labelled as critical. Though he had known her briefly, it still pained him that a Ranger so capable could be brought down.

She had neither failed nor made a mistake. They were all in the *Intrepide* when the shock wave sent it spiralling out of control into the mountains around Geneva. Why had Badeau seen the worst of it and not him? Sheer bad luck. Nothing else. Of course, there were many humans and Minbari who had perished in the crash, but Badeau was the one who should be here now, in his place. Shaw felt that, up to now, he was muddling through events, doing what *seemed* right rather than what he *knew* was right. A subtle distinction perhaps, but he could not shake the feeling that Badeau would have found the right connections and gotten to Mars Dome Two much quicker than he had. The one consolation was that, away from President Luchenko and her high-ranking EarthForce officers, away from the miles and miles of records that Tilanna had been gifted enough to sift through, here was a task he could be competent at. Breaking the head of some low-life and perhaps his even lower-life cronies to get information vital to the security of the galaxy? That was his idea of being a Ranger.

The passengers were jolted to the side as the transport decelerated sharply in its vacuum tube. Shaw looked through the windows again, trying to pick up on some familiar landmark. Though it had been just over a year since he left Mars to join the Anla'Shok, he was surprised at the lack of 'homecoming' he felt now and, in truth, one sand-blasted and ultraviolet-fried plain on Mars was much the same as another. Perhaps he had come further than he had initially thought.

Helping Tilanna to her feet, Shaw disembarked and, moving her swiftly through the checkpoint to the main transit avenue beyond, held up his hand to flag down one of the innumerable taxi cars that prowled the area. Stepping inside, they gave the driver the address of the North Habitation Block and sat back as they sped through the streets of Mars Dome Two.

Tilanna looked outside at the people and buildings of Mars as they accelerated down the avenue. Joining her gaze, Shaw looked at the massive metal and glass dome that arced high above them, sealing this small city in its own self-contained environment, safe from the ravages of Mars. Aside from that, and the constant red sheen the light from outside the Dome spread everywhere, it could almost be a city on Earth or any other well-developed colony world. Green gardens sprang up on any spare piece of ground that was not dominated by multi-storey shopping centres, offices and homes, as much a human attempt to bend the planet Mars to their own vision of paradise as an aid to the giant atmospheric processors that Shaw knew worked hard day and night beneath the streets of the Dome.

The journey lasted only minutes and, after paying the driver of the taxi with the credit chit issued to all Rangers, they approached the towering pale-blue habitation block. Designed to pack as many souls as possible into a tight space, the block was typical of several others in the Dome and was a common home for passing travellers who needed a permanent address on Mars or those who simply could not afford to live in one of the so-called suburbs, places marked by the lack of proximity neighbours had with one another. The North Habitation Block had, at least, a better reputation than some of the others, and so its population was dominated by off-worlders who found it convenient to keep a home on Mars.

'Are we just going to knock on his door?' asked Tilanna as they mounted the steps to the block's main entrance.

'More or less,' Shaw said. 'It's not as if he will be expecting us.'

'You seem more confident now, Mike.'

Shaw smiled as he opened one of the glass doors for her. 'This is my department.'

Taking the lift to the second floor, they found themselves at the corner of a carpeted L-shaped corridor with the doors

of many apartments leading from it. The place was spartan but clean. Shaw indicated the corridor they should follow, and they were soon outside apartment IIc.

'So you just knock?' Tilanna asked, her voice subdued.

'In my own special way,' he said, gesturing for her to stand clear. He began tapping away at the key code next to the doorframe, its security giving way to his Anla'Shok infiltration training within seconds. Unhooking his Denn'Bok pike from his belt, Shaw looked up and down the corridor before giving it a shake, extending the weapon to its full five-foot length. One more tap on the key code sprang the lock, and he forced the door open with a swift kick, bounding inside with a roll that sprang him upright, pike at the ready for trouble.

The living area was empty, and he quickly looked across into the kitchen before sliding the bathroom door open . Nothing.

'All clear,' he whispered. 'Shut the door behind you. No sense calling attention to ourselves.'

Tilanna did as asked, gliding in to look at her surroundings curiously. She located the apartment's computer console mounted in the wall of the living area and started to move toward it.

'Don't,' Shaw warned. 'Not unless we have to. If this guy is a pro, he might have rigged it to tell him if it was accessed – even if switched on.'

'So what are we looking for?'

'Not sure. We'll know it when we see it. Anything that points to what Shiritori is up to, where he might be or even if he is still on planet.'

'The records of the Earth Alliance say he is still on Mars,' Tilanna pointed out.

'Yes, but Mars is a big place. And since it left the Alliance, records have become a little sketchy at times.'

The smallest room of the apartment, the bathroom was ruled out as a place containing any information regarding what their target was up to, so they concentrated on the combined living area and kitchen. Minutes were spent rifling through a small bookshelf of century-old paper books, the contents of Shiritori's larder and a collection of data crystals that mostly contained a selection of recent blockbuster features.

'His taste is questionable,' reported Tilanna after going through the latter.

Shaw smiled. 'I used to watch that stuff all the time. Funny how you don't miss it.' He sighed. 'I have nothing. You?'

'No. I believe the only useful information we may get is from his computer.'

'I wanted to avoid that,' said Shaw. Then something on a desk beneath the console caught his eye and he began to laugh. Tilanna looked up in puzzlement.

'You can keep all the Anla'Shok training, the advanced infiltration techniques and even your Temple teaching restricted file access,' he grinned. Walking over to the desk, he picked up the object that had caught his attention. 'Me?' he asked. 'I'll just stick with a copy of the Universe Today!'

Tilanna shook her head, not following him. A paper edition of the Earth Alliance's main newspaper was a common enough feature in any human home, even on Mars.

'I am not understanding.'

'It's the Universe Today!' he exclaimed. Seeing her confusion, he went on to explain. 'This is today's issue. That confirms he is still here. Not just on Mars but here, probably in Dome Two. Our searched just narrowed considerably.'

'So... we wait for him?' Tilanna asked.

'We could,' said Shaw thoughtfully. 'But we could end up spending hours here, and I don't believe we have the time. Come on, I have an idea.'

Sealing the door of the apartment behind him, Shaw led Tilanna out of the habitation block and onto the streets of Mars Dome Two. Here, at least, was something that no one but he could do. Perhaps the universe did conspire to put people where they were supposed to be, he mused. Something he would meditate on later.

For ten minutes, they moved along the sidewalks of Mars Dome Two, steadily making their way to a familiar district, and one Shaw hoped had not changed too much in the past year. After noticing several long glances in Tilanna's direction, he suggested she raise the hood of her robes. A monkish individual shrouded in a long and hooded robe would not exactly pass by unseen, but he knew it would create far less attention than a Minbari on Mars. Even in these days of interstellar co-operation, most residents of Mars would not have seen a Minbari if it were not on one of their news or film channels.

They had walked to the outskirts of the main spaceport of the Dome, a sprawling affair that encompassed far more than just the landing area and the passenger terminal. A whole medley of businesses, shops and hotels sprang up to catch the immediate trade of visitors just entering the Dome, true to the way the people of Mars approached things, but these places tended to get less shiny and pristine the further one moved away from the spaceport. Here, entire avenues were filled with nightclubs, bars and other less wholesome establishments, a garish area of neon and perpetually drunken revellers, some of whom made these places the whole point of entire vacations. Shaw winced as he remembered some of the days he had woken up in a metaphorical gutter somewhere in this district.

'You think we will find him. . . here?' asked Tilanna, a little concern in her voice.

'Maybe, maybe not. But I should still have friends here.' He looked at her again. 'Keep your hood up though.'

Shaw soon found what he was looking for, and he walked across the avenue, leading Tilanna to a small bar whose neon sign proclaimed it as the Little Green Man. Like most other bars of the area, the interior lighting remained at a level suggesting early evening, a common ploy to give drinkers the feeling that their night had just begun, no matter the current time. Rapidly acclimating his eyes to the gloom, Shaw walked to the bar without any hesitation. Just another traveller looking for a drink to fuel him before tackling one of the more expensive clubs.

As he waited for the bartender's attention, he became aware of the eyes of many patrons upon him, and though he first put it down to his unusually dressed companion, he inwardly groaned and mentally kicked himself. As strange as Tilanna might look, he was far more identifiable in his Anla'Shok robes, which anyone would easily recognise after seeing ISN documentaries filmed on the Rangers. So much for blending in like any other Martian.

The bartender, a balding, middle-aged man Shaw knew as the proprietor, looked the Ranger up and down with some surprise. 'Good day,' he said cautiously, assuming Shaw was not after a simple drink.

'Hi!' Shaw said with a smile. 'I'm after Douglas. Usually hangs around here, though it may be a little early.'

'Ranger business, is it?' the bartender asked.

Shaw's smile dropped a little, expecting resistance. 'Something like that.'

'Well, I am afraid you are out of luck, friend. Douglas died, more than a year ago.'

'Oh? I am sorry to hear that,' Shaw said, a note of genuine concern in his voice. He had got to know Douglas through a friend of a friend, and they had hardly been tight. However, Shaw had spent more than one night with Douglas and other companions, steadily drinking one another into oblivion, and he was sorry to hear of the man's demise.

'Got himself killed in the civil war,' said the bartender, quite matter-of-factly. 'Got worked up about what they were doing on Earth and signed himself up with one of those resistance groups. Couldn't be talked out of it, though many of us here tried.'

'Ah.'

'What were you after him for? Come to arrest him?'

'No. No, nothing like that. Rangers don't arrest people,' said Shaw. 'He and I knew each other a while back. I just thought he could help me with something.'

'Ranger business,' stated the bartender.

'Well, yes.'

'Lots of things said about you Ranger-types. Hear them everyday. Everyone seems to have their own thoughts on what you are really up to.' He looked Shaw up and down once more, as if weighing just what to think of the Ranger. If he thought Tilanna's presence seemed strange, he did not show it. 'Seems to me that Sheridan was the one who made sure Mars got its independence, even if Luchenko wasn't keen. I guess if Sheridan says you guys are okay by him, I can see my way clear to helping where I can. You know, doing my bit for the galaxy and all that.'

'That is appreciated. We are looking for a man called Shiritori.'

Even though Shaw had lowered his voice and leaned forward a little, the bartender gave him a sharp look of alarm and nodded his head to the empty end of the bar. Going through the motions of serving Shaw some random cocktail, he raised an eyebrow as he spoke quietly.

'What business have you Rangers got with a man like that?' he asked. 'Not being nosy mind, I just thought you concentrated more on, you know, the big stuff. Wars and the like.'

'We need to talk to him – his name came up in our investigations. What do you know of him?' Shaw asked.

'Nasty type. A trader by name, he began as a thief. Grown up now though, and he finally figured more credits were made buying and selling stolen goods than risking his neck trying to steal them. *That* kind of trader, if you take my meaning.'

Shaw nodded. 'That fits.'

'He has a set of warehouses in the spaceport, just a mile or so from here. He stays away from the hot stuff like Dust, which means the law here more or less ignores him. They have bigger fish to fry. But everyone round here knows where to go for knocked off goods at half the usual price. Trouble is, I keep hearing he is getting into larger things – espionage for corporations, acting as a middle man for contract killings, that kind of thing.'

'The police are not interested in stopping that?'

'Things are still in a flux here. The government is still provisional, and no one is sure where their jurisdiction starts and stops. Just the kind of place where people like Shiritori thrive, especially if they have a legitimate trading business to hide behind. He has built himself up with the small-time stuff and now fancies a chance at the big score, I reckon.' The bartender finished playing with cocktail bottles and placed a glass in front of Shaw, filled to the brim with a noxious smelling orange liquid. Shaw wrinkled his nose as he pretended to drink, thankful that he had not been given it in his youth, where it would have been knocked straight back and damn the consequences.

'Any of this useful to you?' the bartender asked.

'I think so,' said Shaw. 'Can you give me directions to his warehouse?'

The warehouses surrounding the spaceport were a perpetual hive of activity, Shaw knew from experience, having earned a few credits lifting and stacking while he was still at school. In Mars Dome Two, it was either that or serving in one of the many bars, and Shaw had preferred back then to keep his working life separate from his leisure. Small one-man loaders sped around beneath huge wheeled haulers, either stacking them with goods destined for far star systems or unloading necessities and luxuries for the citizens of Mars. Business had boomed since independence and alien trade was flooding into the colony, enriching its economy and enabling Mars to stand as an independent entity, despite constant vexations from Earth.

The small complex of warehouses where the bartender directed Shaw was typical of its neighbours. Hastily constructed grey pre-fabricated structures formed the basis of the storage areas, with a tiny office centre literally bolted onto the side of one of the warehouses. No security was evident on the perimeter of the complex, allowing Shaw and Tilanna to enter unchallenged. He presumed enough traders and other customers frequented Shiritori's warehouses that even their out-of-place appearance did not arouse suspicions. If any of the workers struggling with the endless supply of transport crates even bothered to give them a second look, they would presume the two robed figures were eccentrics after goods technically proscribed on Mars, rich dilettantes looking for another fix to relieve their lives of endless boredom. More likely, they just did not care, working long hours for few credits.

This apathy enabled Shaw and Tilanna to walk straight through the complex and, without breaking his stride, Shaw vaulted up the metal frame stairs that led up to offices. Gesturing at Tilanna to remain a few paces back, Shaw unbuckled his Denn'Bok and, holding it close to his body to conceal the action, activated the pike to bring it to its full length with a metallic hiss. Reaching for the handle of the office's door, he slipped in quickly, ready for anything.

Inside the reception area, a Brakiri sat quietly. His ridged face squinted slightly, then his eyes opened in alarm as he saw the Anla'Shok robes and brandished fighting pike. Behind the counter, a burly dark-haired man quickly reached down, coming up with a small PPG pistol.

Reflexes trained to react unconsciously, Shaw gripped his pike by one end and swung, connecting with the man's hand before he could squeeze off a shot. The man yelped and looked at his broken hand as the PPG skittered across the floor.

'None of that,' said Shaw. 'I am here for Shiritori.'

The man spat and ran through a door behind him. The Brakiri, witnessing what had happened, began to gibber in fear and raised his hands, eyes pleading with Shaw not to hurt him.

'I suggest you leave,' Shaw said. 'Quickly. You have no good business here.'

The Brakiri bolted for the door, nearly knocking over Tilanna as she entered.

'Making friends already, I see,' she said.

'Stay alert, they're armed,' Shaw said as he crossed to the far door. Opening it a crack, he saw a dozen office workers look around in concern, obviously confused at the receptionist running through their work area, cursing as he went. Seeing no immediate danger, Shaw entered.

'Where is Shiritori?' he demanded of a young girl who shrank behind her desk. Keeping everyone else in his peripheral vision, Shaw noticed all were shocked at his entrance. He deemed none an immediate threat, allowing him to concentrate on questioning the girl.

The girl stammered in front of him, unable to speak, but a glance at the door opposite the one Shaw entered by confirmed his suspicions.

'Okay, everyone leave,' he said. 'Work's over today.'

Having no illusions as to the kind of company their boss kept, the office workers dutifully gathered their possessions and rushed out, none meeting Shaw's gaze as they left. Satisfied any innocents were removed from danger, Shaw crossed to the door the girl had indicated and, again, opened it a crack.

He immediately sprang back as a PPG shot ricocheted off the doorframe. Glancing back to ensure Tilanna was not in the line of fire, Shaw mentally prepared himself before shoving the door open and diving inside. PPG fire sang above his head as he rolled, dissipating harmlessly with no more than a black smudge against the synthetic walls of the office. Instinctively, he swung out with his pike, connecting with the head of an assailant who hit the floor with a loud thump. He noted the dark-haired man he encountered previously was taking cover behind a desk, another PPG cradled in his good hand tracking the Ranger's movements. Another super-heated blast of plasma tore past Shaw as he twisted away from the shot, singeing the robes beneath his left arm.

With a single fluid motion, Shaw crossed the distance between them and heaved the desk upwards with one hand. As the man began to stagger backwards, Shaw placed a booted foot on the underside of the desk, driving it backwards into the attacker's chest. Completing the manoeuvre, Shaw leapt up and placed his full weight on the upturned desk, pinning the man. A sharp and well-practised tap of the pike to the man's head made sure he would remain unconscious for at least an hour with no permanent harm.

A noise behind him triggered Shaw's instincts once more and he rolled to the side as another PPG blast pierced the air above. Noting only that a third man had appeared at the entrance of what seemed to be a smaller office, Shaw swept his arm and released his pike so it flew straight and true into the stomach of his assailant. The well-dressed man fell to his knees, releasing his PPG as he struggled to find his breath. Seeing no other threat, Shaw crossed the office to retrieve his pike, then grabbed the man by the collar of his suit and peered into the small office to ensure no other surprises lurked there.

'Impressive,' said Tilanna as she entered the room.

Shaw did not look back as he answered. 'Well, I've had some training.'

A click of a PPG being primed caused him to whirl round. He saw another thug behind Tilanna, pointing his weapon at the back of her head. Shaw belatedly realised that allowing the office workers to leave so hastily might well have drawn some unwanted attention.

'Okay, drop the stick,' said the man, gesturing with his pistol. 'It's over now.'

Feeling foolish for having gotten this far before failing, Shaw looked at Tilanna and noticed she had something of a sparkle in her eyes. He was mystified at what she was trying to tell him but could not do anything but slowly drop his pike and raise his hands. As he did so, Tilanna whipped round with a speed Shaw could only later describe as feline. Her right hand formed into a hard, flat palm, she circled with graceful but terrible force, striking the man in the side of his neck. Her momentum carried through his body, hurling him several feet to one side, though Shaw guessed he was senseless before he struck the floor.

Shaw stared at Tilanna with incredulity. She returned his look with an innocent smile.

'You perhaps thought that prayers were all we were taught in Temple?' she asked.

'Apparently not,' said Shaw, finally remembering to pick up his pike. He looked down at the gasping man at his feet. 'You Shiritori?' he asked.

To his credit, the man refused to answer, but a quick glance up at the sound of his name confirmed the question for Shaw.

'There are some things I need you to tell me,' said Shaw, almost conversationally as he hoisted the man to his feet.

'I'll tell you spit!' said Shiritori.

'We really don't have time for this.' Shaw glanced uneasily at Tilanna. 'I must do something,' he said softly. 'I would be happier if you did not see.'

Tilanna nodded. 'Mora'dum. I understand. Go. I will make sure you are undisturbed.'

Hurrying Shiritori through the door he had come in by, Shaw threw the man on the floor. Closing the door behind him, only seconds passed before the screams began.

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

With the information they worked so hard to uncover, Shaw and Tilanna returned to Mars Dome One by the same transport tube they had used to leave. This time, the journey was an anxious one for Shaw, as he now had all the pieces of the puzzle in his grasp but dared not risk using an unsecured channel from Mars Dome Two to contact Sheridan with his report.

A mixture of emotions swirled within him. Elation at surviving his first firefight, however minor it may have been in the grand cosmic scale of things. He realised the truth now of what his Warrior Caste tutors had always tried to hammer into him. No amount of training and preparation can instil just what it is like to fight for your life.

There was darkness too, mixing itself insidiously into his excitement. Mora'dum, the Application of Terror, was an ancient Minbari discipline, one that focussed on turning a subject's fears in upon themselves. No physical torture was involved, for the Minbari tended to reject such brutal methods as being a stain upon their souls that would carry into the next generation. It was no less cruel though, for the technique allowed a trained Ranger to subject a victim to their worst nightmares with a remarkable efficiency born of a thousand years of development and practice. However, the user of Mora'dum could rarely walk away from a 'session' completely untainted. Some of that darkness and terror passed into his own psyche, where it would have to be managed through careful meditation and reflection. His Minbari tutors warned him of those in the past who grew to relish the use of Mora'dum just a little too much – and of what was done to stop them.

The mental cleansing necessary beyond Mora'dum would have to wait and, true to form, the Minbari had given him a variety of techniques to bottle emotions for a limited time as well. Gradually, Shaw saw what it truly meant to be a Ranger, to sacrifice oneself for the mission at hand, paying little heed to the personal consequences. Only after victory had been attained could the self be treated, healed and cared for. All Rangers were required to make this sacrifice, and it crossed his mind that, in this, he was no longer so very different to Badeau, who was even now making her sacrifice in some intensive care unit.

The security checkpoint in the Earth Alliance Support Centre cleared them quickly, which gave Shaw some hope. He expected their trip to Mars Dome Two to draw some suspicion by more than a few officers within the communications hub, but he averted his eyes from the stares of anyone who saw them go back to their small booth. Too much rested on success to risk any intervention, and he felt more than a little unprotected when he realised that Luchenko was no longer present,

apparently dealing with her crisis workload in another section of the centre.

Shaw immediately went to work on the communication link to Tuzanor, engaging the Ranger security protocols as he flagged its attention for President Sheridan. By now, he assumed all his communications were being routinely monitored, but the protocols used by the Anla'Shok were a mutating code whose cipher was jealously guarded and regularly updated. Shaw hoped they would buy him enough time to get his message to Sheridan and receive instructions. Still, he felt someone watching every move he and Tilanna made, and he fought the impulse to turn around and scan the communications hub for likely suspects.

Minutes later, Sheridan's strained face appeared on the display. 'Rangers,' he said. 'The White Star fleet is about to jump into Beta III. What do you have?'

'Sir, we have it,' said Shaw. He quickly relayed the progress of his investigation, from the process of filtering the Earth Alliance's own files to the apprehension and confession of Shiritori.

'Is that enough?' Shaw asked.

'It's enough for reasonable doubt,' said Sheridan, the relief evident in his voice. 'Now we just have to convince Earth and the Centauri of its veracity. If I know Mollari, he will accept what you have found, so long as Earth withdraws with good graces from Republic space. The White Stars will broadcast your information to both fleets in Beta III. If nothing else, that should get them to hold fire for a while. What you must do is convince Luchenko. Everything rides on this, Shaw, since only she can pull back the Earth fleets. Tell her we have convincing evidence that must be confirmed before she can go to war. Tell her that if further investigations prove false, the Interstellar Alliance will stand by any action she decides.'

'I will, Mr. President,' said Shaw. 'What of the conspiracy we have uncovered in EarthForce?'

'Watch your back,' said Sheridan. 'We have no jurisdiction there. It is for Luchenko alone to adjudicate. Talk to her now – let's try to halt a war.'

Sheridan signed off and Shaw stood up, about to tell Tilanna to follow him. Instead, he found himself staring into the hawkish face of Admiral Keynes. Her tone was laced with dire threat.

'Been busy, haven't you?' she asked.

'Admiral,' he sighed, noting the olive-green uniforms of the two EarthForce soldiers standing behind her. 'I really don't have time for this.'

'Some incidents have come to my attention regarding your use of EarthForce computer operations during your investigation here,' she said, without missing a beat. 'You will be taken into custody, pending further investigation of your actions.'

'What?' Shaw was incredulous. He expected trouble, but this approach put him on the back foot.

'Take him away,' said Keynes, motioning to the two soldiers. They stepped forward to grasp Shaw, but he stepped back and placed a finger on the chest of one.

'By the terms of the Treaty of the Interstellar Alliance, I have full diplomatic immunity, and incarceration of my person brings penalties to Earth up to, and including, expulsion from the Alliance.' *That* checked their approach. Shaw had absolutely no idea where those words came from, but he suddenly felt glad to have paid attention during all the long Anla'Shok political lessons he endured as part of his training.

The noise level of the communication hub beyond the booth suddenly picked up noticeably, and they all turned to see President Luchenko enter, surrounded by her usual flock of asides and officers. Keynes whirled round to the soldiers.

'Get them out of here, now – that's an order!' she hissed.

Shaw decided on a more direct approach. 'Madam President!' he called, with a volume unusual enough that all eyes in the hub turned towards him. Suddenly feeling too conspicuous, Admiral Keynes spoke hurriedly.

'Madam President, we have just uncovered a potential plot on the part of the ISA to hinder Earth's war with the Centauri, providing them with critical information of fleet dispositions. I believe these Rangers are directly responsible for the loss of the *Corax* and its task force. I want them apprehended.' Keynes directed the last part to the soldiers once more, and Shaw could see them wavering, their eyes on Luchenko, waiting to see what their President would order.

With the attention of the entire hub, Shaw decided to plough forward. 'Madam President, I believe we have uncovered the information we sought, exonerating the Republic from the attacks on Earth and its ships.'

'More ISA lies,' said Keynes, beginning to regain control of herself. 'Madam President, we have sensitive operations here. We can interrogate these Rangers later to verify the veracity of their claims.'

General Lefcourt stepped up to Luchenko's side, a puzzled expression on his face. 'Keynes, what is going on here?'

'General, I have information you must hear,' Shaw stepped in but was cut off by Keynes.

'They are too dangerous to keep here!'

'Admiral Keynes, stand down!' said Luchenko, her voice cutting through the hub and silencing everyone instantly. 'These are duly appointed representatives of the Interstellar

Alliance, with full ambassadorial status. Of course we will hear what they have to say. And whatever they may or may not have done, we cannot arrest them.'

Shaw breathed a sigh of relief. 'Thank you, Madam President.'

July 9th 2263, Beta III, Centauri Republic

Drumming his fingers on the control console of his seat, Sosa waited impatiently for a communication from Tuzanor. The holographic display was kept in tactical mode, and the bridge crew watched as the two fleets closed. A full-scale war was unfolding in front of them that would involve many members of the Interstellar Alliance, and Sosa felt powerless to stop it.

'Captain, incoming transmission from Tuzanor,' said a Minbari.

'Put it through,' Sosa said anxiously.

Sheridan's face immediately replaced the tactical display, and Sosa sat up straight.

'Mr. President,' he said. 'Please tell me there is good news.'

'We have what we need, Sosa,' said Sheridan. 'Whether they will pay attention is anyone's guess. A prepared statement is being relayed to you now. Broadcast it on all frequencies – make sure every ship can receive it. Messages have already been sent to Earth and Centauri Prime.'

Sheridan's image disappeared, and a crewman reported that the statement had been received and was ready for relay to the opposing fleets.

'Do it!' said Sosa, desperate to see the results.

On board the command destroyer *Heracles*, Ward listened intently to Sheridan's message, rubbing his chin as the President of the Interstellar Alliance concluded his statement.

'In the interests of peace and mutual prosperity, we urge both governments to reconsider their positions so a full investigation can be conducted by both yourselves and the Interstellar Alliance,' he had said. 'To the fleets at Beta III, which are moments away from engaging one another, we ask that you check your fire. Let diplomacy take its course. If we can trust each other for just a few days, we can avert a pointless war that will consume the lives of thousands, even millions, on both sides. Please, think before you act. History will judge you on what you choose to do right now.'

'What do we do, sir?' asked his tactical officer.

'What are the Centauri doing?' Ward asked. 'Have they checked their approach?'

'Negative, sir. They are still coming.'

He thought furiously. 'Maintain formation. Signal to all ships, do not fire unless fired upon. And get me EarthForce command. They would have received this by now.'

Within the bridge of the *Turhan*, a very different scene of events was taking place. As Sheridan's voice faded, Provenza barked a laugh and was joined by the sniggering of several loyal bridge officers who tactically placed their mirth alongside their Minister's.

'You see?' Provenza demanded of them. 'We even have the mighty Interstellar Alliance running scared! My friends, we have the most powerful battle fleet the galaxy has ever seen and they know it!'

'We are not delaying the attack then, Minister?' asked his aide.

'Of course not!' Provenza said, snorting. 'It is a delaying tactic, nothing more, something to buy a little time for their allies on Earth. Proceed as instructed. Let history remember our great victory here today, and let the Great Maker worry about the diplomacy of weak races!'

His pugnacious attitude carried well across the bridge, and the crew went about their duties with renewed vigour. The aide's next words instilled a dark, sinking feeling in his hearts though. 'Minister, communiqué from Centauri Prime.'

'I have no time for premature congratulations from the Centaurum or those seeking favours,' he said, hoping to delay what he could already feel was.

'Minister, it is the Emperor,' said the aide. Now all eyes on the bridge turned to Provenza.

He paused for a few seconds, one hand rubbing his temple as he fought to mentally stave off what he knew his Emperor would tell him. 'Put it through to my station,' he said quietly.

Walking away from the crew to his own seat near the back of the bridge, he sat down heavily and composed himself before giving the signal to relay the Emperor to his private console. Mollari's heavy face looked sternly at him, already appearing as if no argument would be brooked.

'Minister Provenza, you are to hold position and cease any hostilities against the Earth fleet immediately,' the Emperor said. 'You are to allow them to leave Beta III unmolested, and you will not move until every one of their ships has gone. You are then to make your way to our colony on Beta III and begin work reconstructing their defences. Am I clear, Minister?'

A hundred thoughts, questions and rebuttals went through Provenza's mind as he saw his great victory flutter from his grasp. He knew a dozen arguments could be put to the Emperor: that to strike now would send a message to every government in the galaxy and keep the Republic's borders safe for a century, that to destroy such a large portion of Earth's military in one stroke could shift the entire balance of power in the region.

Instead, he just answered weakly. 'I understand, Majesty.'

'Minister Provenza, if I hear of any conflict between your ships and those of Earth, I will hold you personally— and painfully—responsible. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Majesty.'

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

Motioning Shaw to a seat opposite her, Luchenko sat down, her attention focussed on the Ranger. Shaw felt the weight of a dozen stares but, having come this far, pushed it out of his mind. He beckoned Tilanna to join him as he sat down and began to relate what they found.

'Madam President, we have documented everything, and I assure you it will stand up to scrutiny,' Shaw said. 'But we have very little time, so I must ask you to trust me.'

From the corner of his eye, he saw Admiral Keynes back slowly away from the group and turn to leave the hub. He waited until she left before starting again. 'But first, please give me your assurances that Admiral Keynes will not be permitted to leave this centre.'

'You want me to take *her* into custody?' asked Luchenko with amazement.

'Not until you hear what I have to say. What happens then is in your jurisdiction.'

'I'll see to it,' said Lefcourt, tapping instructions into a datapad that would see the admiral detained.

'I am not sure I like where this is heading, Ranger,' said Luchenko.

'Madam President, we uncovered a report from Babylon 5 that had been classified—by Admiral Keynes, using her newly gained authorisation as a Joint Chief following the destruction of the *Intrepide*—sorry, the White Star we left EarthDome in.' Shaw noticed the eyebrows of Lefcourt rise, though whether that was in surprise or disbelief, he could not tell.

'That report showed the Dilgar device had been through Babylon 5 on its way *to* the Centauri Republic.'

'It is common sense to think the weapon started outside of the Republic,' said Luchenko. 'And Babylon 5 is the perfect place to make such a trade.'

'True. However, from this report, we were able to track the fence who handled the sale of the device, a Mr. Shiritori. He bought it from an Earth prospector and then sold it on to the Centauri. However, it was not a sale to the Republic or the Centaurum but a single House. He confirmed that he flew the device himself straight to Coutor, a possession of House Kaado, where it was modified into the weapon that destroyed EarthDome.'

Luchenko and the officers surrounding them regarded Shaw impassively, and he worried that, in the light of day, his evidence did not seem so convincing after all.

'Madam President, we have the data files, we have a full confession from Shiritori – in fact, we still have Shiritori, as I arranged for him to be detained by law officials in Mars Dome Two. If you look into this further, you can locate his ship and check its flight logs, perhaps instigate a joint investigation with the Centauri into House Kaado.'

'And what if you are wrong?' asked Lefcourt.

'Then President Sheridan has instructed me to tell you that, so long as you withdraw your forces from Republic space for the duration of an investigation, he will back any play you make against the Centauri, with the full support of the ISA.'

Luchenko considered this, giving Shaw the chance to push a little further and remind the President of trouble in her own house.

'What I have not been able to determine is why Keynes would be involved in covering this evidence, the one report that could possibly point the blame away from the Republic,' he said.

He noticed General Lefcourt and Luchenko exchange looks.

'Keynes was always a proponent of war with the Centauri, ever since this started,' she said eventually.

'I was just thinking that,' said Lefcourt. 'She has some questions to answer, that is for sure. I hesitate to say it, but this would not be the first time a high-ranking officer has pushed a military solution for their own ends.'

'But why?' asked Shaw.

'The budget for EarthForce has been slashed since the civil war,' said Lefcourt. 'The Earth Alliance has other needs right now that must take precedence. Simply put, we cannot take part in another war so soon without seriously impacting on the lives of our citizens across all colonies. But an enforced peacetime of this nature rarely results in a healthy career for an officer used to war.'

'If I have been played. . .' Luchenko said angrily, then thought better of finishing the thought. 'Get me Admiral Ward. We must put an end to this now.'

July 9th 2263, Mars Dome One, Sol

All but collapsing in a plastic seat he had dragged from his booth, Shaw watched the machine of the Earth Alliance swing into action, this time to halt a war rather than initiate one. He listened as Luchenko spoke with the admiral leading the fleet at Beta III, ordering him to withdraw his forces immediately and return to Earth space. The admiral was just as relieved as anyone else, which did not surprise Shaw once he heard what the Centauri had deployed against him.

Over the course of the next few hours, he watched as the Earth Alliance, working in concert with the Centauri Republic, began a staggered but measured stand down and demobilisation across their borders. Earth fleets already within Republic space were permitted to leave without prejudice while the Centauri, for their part, mirrored those movements by returning their warships to bases deeper within the Republic, leaving only standard patrols in their place. The Centauri even admitted to the existence of more fleets poised to strike Earth Alliance colonies and then dutifully disbanded them, perhaps to warn President Luchenko and all other ISA governments watching the proceedings what it truly meant to make war on the Republic. Strike at us and we will obliterate you.

Perhaps that was fair enough, thought Shaw wearily. One very brief exchange between Luchenko and the Centauri Emperor forged an agreement to postpone any hostilities until further investigations could be conducted on both sides of the border. That had sounded ominous enough, but everyone listening knew that, for all intents and purposes, diplomacy would now take over where force of arms had proved, in the very least, an unwise course of action.

Emperor Mollari promised dire consequences for the noble House that propelled recent events, and speculation already started in the hub as to the exact form of punishment. Most bets were on something fairly medieval, as the Centauri needed to demonstrate to the galaxy as a whole they were not behind the attacks on Earth, and their society had a long tradition of very cruel punishments when laws were transgressed to this extent. To act without the authority of the Emperor was treason, and few races who took that lightly. In a monarchy, there was literally nothing worse.

Earth appeared to have its own complicity in the matter, of course, but Shaw believed nothing more than one overzealous officer in a position she should never have been promoted to was the culprit

President Luchenko crossed the hub and sat down opposite him, forcing Shaw to take a deep breath and keep his eyes focussed on her.

'Mr. Shaw,' she said. 'We owe you and your Minbari friend a great deal. If you had not worked so hard to uncover the vital information we were missing, we would now be at war with the Centauri. You have the grateful thanks of a President.'

Shaw straightened his weary slouch. 'Madam President, I am just glad we could be of service. What has happened to Keynes?'

'She is being questioned now,' said Luchenko. 'We'll get to the bottom of it soon enough. The important thing then, of course, is to make sure it can never happen again.'

'The Rangers will always be on hand to help you.'

'I know that, Mr. Shaw. Now, is there anything we can do for you?'

'Thank you, Madam President but, frankly, I just want to get some sleep,' he said candidly.

Luchenko smiled. 'Mr. Shaw, I know exactly how you feel.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

July 11th 2263, House Kaado, Centauri Prime

The alarm dutifully chimed its alert over and over, a soft, mellow tone that hinted at a dignified urgency. Veneta spent some time selecting precisely the right pitch, just as he carefully selected the carpets, fittings and electronics that bedecked his luxurious bunker. Expecting to entertain many visitors here over the next few months, Veneta understood the importance of taste as the novelty of his construction swept through the noble houses, each guest slowly contributing to his rising star in however small a manner. All a matter of appearances, you see.

At this moment in time, however, the chime resounded with a dull repetition inside his head, which he was already nursing. Surely not too much Brivari. He was more disciplined than that.

'Off,' he mumbled, his consciousness rising back to sentience. Surely whatever his servants wanted could wait. Didn't they know who was in charge?

The alarm continued to sound, and Veneta realized that having his face mashed into the plush carpet could, feasibly, disrupt the sound waves from his mouth to the alarm's receiver. A gargantuan effort enabled him to roll onto his back, an action causing his feet to drop to the floor from the sofa they had been propped upon. Somehow he had fallen from his perch and not woken during the descent. Hardly dignified.

'Off!'

This time the alarm was silenced, and Veneta allowed himself a few brief moments of calm as he lay on his back, trying to summon the energy to open his eyes. He recalled Territt leaving at some point during the previous night's revelries to attend to some business he had not deigned to discuss. Then. . . he was damned if he could remember.

Taking a deep breath, Veneta rolled to his side and then propped himself up with an elbow, head hanging low as his senses spun briefly before settling. He chanced opening his eyes, squinting around through the subdued lighting of his bunker. Everything seemed pretty much in place, and he heaved himself onto the settee, sprawling into its comfort. For the next twenty minutes, Veneta did nothing more than lay there, his head tilted back, open mouth drawing in air noisily. For him, time ceased to have any real meaning during his daze. Slowly, Veneta began to return to the land of the living, the synapses of his brain gradually firing in unison as conscious and reasoned thought crept into his mind. What was wrong with him, he dimly wondered? If

he did not know better, he would have said this was the after-effect of some drug. Or poison.

Still feeling a little delicate, he opened his eyes and frowned. Something demanded his attention. His great conspiracy? No, he thought, that was being pretty well managed. In fact, if everything went according to plan in the small hours, all that remained was political manoeuvring that would seal his position. More favours to give out, more to call in. Business as usual, though far more to gamble with now.

Veneta looked at the main display, across the bunker to his right. The screen had automatically shut itself off, its systems determining that no one awake was present to watch it. However, the blue alarm light flashed beneath it on the blackwood-crafted console, insisting he give it attention. He stared at it hard, trying to decide whether walking over and activating the console by hand or forming coherent words that the system would comprehend would hurt less. He stood, swaying for a second, and then stumbled across the room to the console. Hitting a control, he queried the system as to just why it felt the need to trouble him right now. He could imagine some serious discipline being laid onto the house staff later for allowing his recovery to be interrupted. Standing orders within the household were in place for this sort of thing. Consulting a sub-screen, he saw an incoming message, its source... his blood ran cold.

The Royal Palace.

Why was the palace contacting him now? His first thought was the conspiracy but he dismissed it out of hand. He was too clever and Territt too shrewd to give him up – they shared too much mutual risk. Anyone else with a connection had either been marginalised, silenced or else knew nothing of any real worth. No, he had been too smart to get caught. So what then?

Believing he truly had nothing to be concerned about and determined to brazen out any accusations from a mere royal flunky, he hit the panel to receive the message. The huge image of Emperor Mollari leered at him from the main display, the effect of the massive screen serving to dwarf Veneta in his Majesty's presence.

'Veneta Kaado,' said the Emperor with a booming conviction that came from sitting in a position of absolute authority. 'A detachment of my guard has been dispatched to your manor to place you under arrest. You will be brought to the Royal Palace where you will answer to charges of treason against your Emperor and against the Republic. The royal guard currently under your orders will no longer accept your commands.'

With that, the screen went blank, leaving Veneta to deduce that the message had not been live but recorded, no doubt after a frustrated Emperor had given up trying to contact him directly some time ago. He was stunned, but Veneta's mind gradually began to turn, seeking the solution that would spare him the accusations of treason. He did not even consider the penalties for being found guilty, knowing that the mere accusation would be enough to fatally injure his political future if left unchecked. As possibilities came to his mind and were then dismissed, he began to think furiously of other options. He had come too far to simply give up now.

The first logical thought was that if he were not arrested, he could not be taken to the Royal Palace. He could find friends who would hide him, though he was not sure who would stick their neck out this far for a fugitive of imperial justice. From a place of safety he could plan his return, perhaps even turn the tables upon the Emperor, disgracing the royal household and forcing them into accepting whatever terms he decided. On the other hand, the Emperor had sent that message some time ago...

He tapped at the console, summoning feeds from the various cameras sited throughout his estate. Sure enough, skimmers had touched down all across his land, disgorging several squads of royal guard, their golden breastplates and helmets glinting in the morning sun as they filed towards the manor.

Veneta yelped and activated the manor's internal communications system. His voice blared out to his servants and slaves in every room of the massive building. 'This is Veneta Kaado,' he said, trying to summon a measure of authority. 'The manor is under attack! They will appear to be royal guard but. . . they are actually impostors! I order all of you, resist the attackers, don't let them inside!'

He fervently hoped he had not sounded too desperate, but a quick check of the manor's internal camera system revealed his staff doing nothing but standing where they were, confusion spreading quickly. Frustrated at the lack of moral fibre being demonstrated by those who should accept his commands without question, Veneta howled, bringing a fist down on the console. His screens showed him the royal guard had already entered the manor and were now going through every room in an effort to root him out. In the very least he could make things difficult, perhaps even buy enough time to formulate a new plan.

Activating a function he thought he would never have to use for anything other than a demonstration to visiting nobles, Veneta shut down his bunker, locking its entrance and engaging several lethal defences around its perimeter. There, he thought. Even if they try to tunnel down to me, they will regret it.

Veneta paced the circumference of his bunker with some speed, thinking just as fast. Now locked in, the walls of the bunker already seemed too close, and he began to regret having skimped so much on floor space. Tunnelling a greater area would have cost exponentially more but, on reflection, it would have created an even greater impression for anyone entering for the first time.

A thought struck him, and he raced back to the console, placing a communication to Minister Territt. Surely, if they had come for Veneta then Territt would have already been captured. If not, maybe he would have a solution. Yes, that was it! They still needed one another, and if they could bring war and a new, brighter future to the

entire Republic, then surely they could navigate a little wrangling within the Royal Court. His joy was short lived as he realised all communications from the bunker were being jammed. Even the hard lines had been cut, severing any contact with the outside world. He fruitlessly tried to access his various cameras again but the blank screen confirmed his solitude.

A voice boomed out in the bunker, disrupting Veneta's thoughts.

'This is Proctor Piccolli of the royal guard. Veneta Kaado, we are here to place you under arrest and convey you to the Royal Palace for the judgement of his Majesty the Emperor. Release the locks on your bunker or we will gain entry by force.'

That was quick, Veneta thought. They had already subdued the manor, though given the courage demonstrated by his staff that was no great achievement, and gained access to the internal communications of the bunker. He sat down heavily on the settee. This was happening too fast, but they still had the physical barriers of the bunker to break through. He just needed time to think.

A soft electronic bleep sounded from across the bunker, near its reinforced entrance. Quickly followed by a mechanical click and clunk, Veneta looked over in disbelief as the thick door swung gently open. Several royal guardsmen entered and fanned out across the bunker, their PPG rifles held at the ready to cover his every move. Veneta just sat there, mouth open. Unresisting as two grabbed him under the arms, he allowed himself to be manhandled out of the bunker and through the manor. Just one thought ran through his mind as he was dragged across the gardens in front of his frightened staff, before being thrown into a waiting skimmer. The main architect of the bunker had given up his secrets, allowing the royal guard to enter at will. He should have taken Territt's advice earlier.

He should have had the man killed.

July 10th 2263, The Royal Palace, Centauri Prime

Though it was clear that Veneta offered no resistance, the royal guard manacled him anyway, to humiliate him when he was marched into the palace. He just hung his head during the journey to Imperial City, feeling very sorry for himself.

Veneta could not decide where he had gone wrong. Had Territt given him up in return for Royal Leniency? It was doubtful that the Emperor would permit that for treason on this scale. His throbbing head reminded him that the devious Territt may well have tried such a play if he sensed things were going wrong.

As the skimmer flew over the broken buildings and shattered streets of Imperial City, Veneta could not help but think the Emperor himself shared some blame in the affair. If Mollari had not allowed the Republic to falter, if he had not given way to the demands of their enemies, if the economy had been focussed on rebuilding their society instead of paying the ruinous reparations, then maybe patriots like himself would not have to chance everything just to set their people back on the right path. Risking all for, more or less, selfless reasons – was that not the very definition of a hero?

Veneta conceded a man braver than he would have ended his own life in the bunker. Now he would lose everything, his name joining that dark list of traitors to the throne. That was how history would remember him now, a far cry from what he had hoped and dreamed.

All too soon, the skimmer touched down at the primary landing pad of the Royal Palace, and the guardsmen made a great show of parading him into the courtyard where minor nobles and assorted hangers-on pointed and whispered. Veneta looked up at the great palace, a building that had stood, in one form or another, for centuries. Just what kind of ruler, he wondered, would board up the windows of his own palace so he could not see the people he ruled?

He knew that, in a very short time, he would be dead. No one taken before the Emperor to answer for treason survives the trip. However, Veneta convinced himself not only of the inevitability of his position but also the righteousness of it. Certainly, he intended to profit personally from his grand design, but he also planned to become a major force of good in the Republic, teaching their enemies just what it meant to cross them and thereby ensuring the peace and prosperity of every Centauri. The Emperor never achieved so much, he was sure.

Led into the palace and then marched through its winding corridors to the throne room, Veneta's gait became stronger. He walked with greater conviction, returning the stares of the palace staff, guardsmen and nobles who populated the building, defying them to remember him as anything less than a proud and great man who followed his beliefs to the end, challenging the Emperor himself for supremacy. There was a good tale in that, he felt, a certain nobility that would overturn the accusations of treason later in history. Maybe his journal, uncovered from his manor, would surface in future years to explain his actions, or perhaps his friends and allies would keep his memory alive. He did not give much hope for them continuing his work after his fall, for he felt it unlikely the conspiracy would carry on without his genius and leadership.

Veneta carried these thoughts with him into the throne room, the moral certitude of a man condemned to die for his beliefs and actions. He would stand proud in front of the Emperor and his Royal Court, giving a speech of defiance that would humble his Majesty and stay in the minds of the assembled nobles for years to come.

The gold-laden double doors of the throne room swung open before Veneta, and he immediately stopped in his tracks, forcing the guardsmen behind to push him roughly forward, robbing him of a dignified entrance. The throne room was not filled with the throng of gossiping nobles from the Royal

Court that Veneta had expected. Instead, the lighting was subdued, daylight filtering in from just one unboarded window. Emperor Mollari sat on his throne, straight-backed and unmoving, staring across at Veneta with a mixture of contempt and imperial grandeur. At his right handstood Durla, his Minister of Internal Security, while on the floor at his feet lay the headless body of Minister Territt. Veneta could only tell it was the corpse of his co-conspirator because the head had been placed on a beautifully crafted ceramic plate next to it. If the Minister had indeed betrayed him, the Emperor had evidentally been less than generous in gratitude. His eyes flickered from Durla to the sightless eyes of Territt and then back to the Emperor. So much for the grand speech.

'Veneta Kaado,' said the Emperor. 'You are charged with treasonous acts against my person and the Republic. The attacks you instigated against the people of Earth have destabilised the galactic status quo and pushed us perilously close to war. Do you have anything to say?'

'Your Majesty...' was all Veneta could manage.

Mollari coughed before reaching for a silk handkerchief. After a moment, he continued. 'Believe it or not, Kaado, there was a time when I might have been more lenient towards your actions. I might have done something similar myself. But that was long ago.'

'Majesty, I did it for the Republic.'

'You did it for yourself!' roared Mollari, instantly silencing Veneta. 'Still,' he said more softly. 'I do realise what your hopes and dreams were beyond personal gain. We all do what we do for a combination of self-interest and duty to the Republic. We are at our best when the two coincide. And we are also at our worst. That is what you fail to realise.'

Veneta saw Mollari stare out of the one unboarded window for a long moment before his attention returned. In that look, Veneta was not sure what he saw in his Emperor. Sadness? Regret? A deep inner fire that would see the Republic through its difficult passage? Perhaps it was an acceptance of fate that meant that even Mollari could not solve the problems of the Centauri Republic, that he was merely biding his time until another, stronger Emperor would ascend to the throne. Whatever it was made Veneta hold his tongue.

'You also did not comprehend what our people are going through at this time,' said Mollari. 'What it is they *must* go through if we are to survive as a united people. Your actions might have served us well in the past, and they may well have a place in the future. But now was never the time. We are set on a course that will take years to unfold and, for good or ill, we must see it through. Whatever I and others like me may think of what you have done, Kaado, you must be one more sacrifice our people make in the course of their own redemption.'

Noting that Veneta seemed confused by his words, Mollari sighed. 'Very well, think of it this way then. You committed the cardinal sin of every traitor brought before every Emperor in the long history of the Republic.'

'Majesty?'

'You got caught.'

Mollari waved a hand at Durla.

'Take him away.'

EPILOGUE

September 24th 2263, White Star Indefatigable , Sh'Lassan Empire

Shaw opened his eyes and took a deep breath, fully rested. In the days after the averted war, he had some trouble sleeping as the magnitude of the events sank in. There was also the aftermath of Mora'dum to contend with and, for his part, he regretted what did to the fence Shiritori. He resolved none of this in his own mind until he returned to the peace of Tuzanor and the temples whose mere presence enforced a kind of serenity. There were scientists on Earth, he knew, with terms for the effects on his psyche that the past couple of months inflicted, but the Anla'Shok had their own methods, developed over a thousand years, for dealing with Rangers returning from harrowing missions. It had not taken long to repair the damage and set him on his way once more.

Before that, Shaw had endured a debriefing by EarthForce officials, mercifully cut short by a direct intervention from President Luchenko herself. It appeared as if she had been true to her word about the grateful thanks of a President. Admiral Keynes faired less well, citing a weakening military and a contracting Earth presence in the galaxy as justification for her actions. By all accounts, she truly believed she acted in Earth's best interests. Keynes had not been involved in any massive conspiracy with the rogue house in the Centauri Republic – she simply saw an opportunity to bring matters to a head and, newly instated as a temporary Joint Chief, took advantage of it. She was imprisoned for her part in the conflict, but Shaw did not believe she would remain there long, as too many high-ranking EarthForce officers agreed with her, thinking she simply did the wrong thing for the right reasons. It did not matter to Shaw. He still disliked the woman.

Back on Tuzanor, Shaw had found his strength of purpose again. As senior Rangers predicted, the new Shaw – the Shaw emerging from the trials he faced – was tougher, wiser and more adept. He was a better Ranger. In himself, Shaw discovered a new certainty that he could handle any mission assigned to him. He might not always know all the answers – who did? – but he knew at least where to look for them.

A great deal of handshaking and back-patting from fellow Rangers and more experienced peers went a long way to building a solid self-confidence. The informal meeting with both Sheridan and Delenn did nothing to dampen this, though the hours-long debriefing sessions with the

Ranger-Analysts seemed designed to do just that. Shaw respected their expertise though and finally he had a chance to meet one named Tuthenn who, he was told, had sparked their initial investigations into the Centauri House Kaado. Simply by reviewing streams and streams of data. Shaw marvelled at this incredible task, but he was surprised when Tuthenn not only seemed a most personable Minbari but actually respected Shaw's own capabilities in return. Shaw was fairly certain that Tuthenn was a far more valuable component of the Anla'Shok than he, but they developed an easy friendship that he hoped to pick up again on the next trip to Tuzanor.

The greater joy had been seeing Badeau return to Tuzanor. She had winced when he hugged her in a bear's grip. Though she must have reviewed his file on the long trip back from Mars, Badeau insisted on hearing the whole story of his escapades on Mars after the loss of the *Intrepide*. She was on her feet again, but had yet to be cleared for field service. So, Badeau had taken on staff duties in Tuzanor, work just as important as that done in the field, she had said. A new White Star had been pegged for her captaincy as soon as she was declared fit for active duty, one of the new modified WSC-2's, Shaw had heard. He had no worries about her future.

More important, to Shaw at least, was Badeau's private words to him. She admitted a concern for the future of the entire galaxy when her injuries forced her to make way for Shaw, but she could already sense the change within him. She did not describe it as a process of maturation, more one of. . . 'seasoning' was the word she finally chose. He had survived a proper baptism by fire, Badeau acknowledged, of the kind that few Rangers face no matter how long their service. In ordinary circumstances, he might have been reassigned to another Ranger to continue his induction into field service, but Badeau had pledged to do everything she could to see he received his own command.

Her words and actions meant more to Shaw than the gratitude of Presidents, be they of Earth or the Interstellar Alliance.

With some reluctance Badeau said she would give up Tilanna, should Shaw be successful in his application for command. She was sad to lose a good engineer but acknowledged the bond that had grown between Shaw and the Minbari. She also felt it was unfair to hold Tilanna back until she could return to active duty.

Even after this time, Tilanna remained a puzzle to Shaw. At times, they were as close as he could imagine being with another person. At others, she seemed distant and, well, alien. Her own duties had occupied her while on Tuzanor. As a member of the Religious Caste, she was required to attend to duties in her temple for a certain period of time each year, and she took the opportunity to do so while waiting for another assignment to a White Star. Shaw had already admitted to himself that he was attracted to the Minbari, but he had no idea whether she was just interested in pursuing a friendship. He found himself ready to accept her decision either way and, moreover, he was prepared to wait for it. As things stood, they had a deep bond that would not easily be broken. As far as he was concerned, he and Tilanna had all the time in the world.

Most of all, Shaw reached an understanding of what it meant to be a Ranger, one of the Anla'Shok. When he had first joined, he pursued the romance of an idea, of the solitary Ranger, standing alone on the bridge, refusing anyone to pass. Protectors of an entire galaxy, they fought for peace, justice and security, shielding those who could not fight for themselves.

The truth of the Anla'Shok encompassed all of that, certainly, but there was a deeper aspect he was just beginning to see. It was a sense of self, of the deepest commitment and, above all, sacrifice. All through his training, Shaw studied the Minbari texts, learned their language and meditated on their ideals. Much of that was still a mystery, but he now understood why a Ranger was not trained as a pure fighting machine. It was inevitable that a Ranger would go into battle, but it was never intended to be the core of his being. Being Anla'Shok was as much a search for spiritual perfection as physical capability. The two went hand in hand and should never be separated. To do so would leave a technologically adept thug little better than the forces of evil he had been trained to fight against. *That* was the difference.

Or so he believed at this moment. Shaw was well aware that though he had accomplished much, he still fulfilled so little of his own potential. As a Ranger, the pursuit of salvation for his own soul meant just as much as the pursuit of galactic peace. Two battles were being fought, the one within and the one without.

The gentle bell of the White Star's primary alarm sounded throughout the ship, and his musings ended as the voice of the weapons officer called for his attention.

'Captain, we have jumped into Sh'Lassan space,' said Tilanna. 'Raiders sighted on attack vector to transport convoy Delta.'

Another day, another fight for justice.

'Heat up the weapons,' he said, knowing his voice would be automatically relayed to the bridge of his new vessel, the *Indefatigable*. 'I'm on my way.'

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