



Ranger
Dawning

Bruce Graw

Babylon 5

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Ranger Dawning

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Description:

We live for the one, we die for the one. The Anla'Shok, a sacred Minbari order known to others as the Rangers, worked for a thousand years to protect innocents from the Shadows. Upholding the values of justice and courage, they became an integral part of the Interstellar Alliance, standing in harm's way to keep the peace throughout the galaxy.

Now, for the first time, their secret chronicles are told in a unique series of novels. The year is 2259. A shadow is falling across the galaxy and only the Anla'shok can stand against it.

But their numbers are small and for the first time in their thousand year history they must recruit Humans into their order. James Vance of Earthforce is among the first to be called and begin his training as a Ranger. Even before he can begin his first mission, he must not only contend with rigorous training, but also the prejudice of the Minbari and an unwelcome legacy.

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 communique, 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 Week-es. '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.

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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 office 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 bot tom. 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 communique 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.

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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 plas-crete 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.'

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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.

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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 takeoff 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 overcautious 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 tipples?’ 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 halfhearted 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.’

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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 here 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 under-cooked squid carcasses on his oversized plate.

‘Good,’ said the Colonel. ‘Obviously everything I’m about to tell you is deemed confidential under the EarthForce 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 communique 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 clicks 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 state ment 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.

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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 unmistakable 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 takeoff 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 takeoff 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.

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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 be-gin 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 Anla'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. 'Allah'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.

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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 boot lace 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...

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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 deprivation. 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.

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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.’

Jerkleth 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 trowl 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 Jerkleth 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 Jerkleth, 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 Ni-al'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 to 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 could 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.

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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 sworn 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 V 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 unmistakable 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 counterstrike 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 demn'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 ka-tana, 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 Fu-hall'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 counterstriking.

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 cerracone 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 outdated by 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 back-streets. 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?’

Jerklemn 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 violence, 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 Dur-han.’

‘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'bokmaster, 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.

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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, willingly 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 breathe 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 sightseeing,' 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.'

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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.

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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.

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'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 dem'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 officially 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 aprehensive 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 standing 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 Dra-zi'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 Dra-zi'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 Rot-tik 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 Jerkleenn.

'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 Mu-san 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 jewelled 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 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 splendid 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 chi-tin 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 counterstrike 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 counterstrikes. 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 counterstrikes 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 Mu-san 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. Jerkleinn 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 Tor-vag'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 vo-rath 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, better!' 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 pay-load, 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 creature's 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 adrenaline 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 dem’n 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

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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 kind 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 pummeling 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 unmistakable 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 peeling 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 in 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 there 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.

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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 unmistakable 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.