

5 **BABYLON**

THE NAUTILUS COIL



J. GREGORY KEYES

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“I’ve had just about enough of this,” Michael Garibaldi said to the man with the gun.

“If you just wait quietly,” the man said, adjusting his aim on Garibaldi’s heart, “someone will be with you in a moment.” With his free hand, he pushed aside a long lock of black hair that threatened to obscure his vision. Garibaldi almost jumped him then. In his black duster and caudric shirt, the fellow didn’t look like someone who knew how to use a PPG all that well. Still, at this range anyone could get lucky.

“In a moment,” Garibaldi grunted. “I’ve been here for a whole lot of moments already pal, and like I said, I’ve about had it. You wanna read my mind? Please, be my guest. You won’t like what you find.”

“We don’t scan without permission,” the telepath said, with a slight smirk that called him a liar.

“You were one of Byron’s litter, right? You look like one of ‘em. As attached to the colour black as the Psi Corps ever was, I guess the upbringing always shows, huh? But since you were on B5 back when, you know who I am. And you know it’s not whoever told you to stand your little tin butt here that foots your bills. It’s *me* that keeps you in PPG’s, pork and beans, and hair conditioner for your oh-so-long-and-shiny hair.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Garibaldi,” the telepath said. “The whole movement is grateful for your support, but as an ex-military man you understand I have my orders.”

“Ex is the important part there. Never did care for the uniform — or taking orders. Come to think of it, neither did your Saint Byron.”

The smirk rotated into a frown, but the fellow didn’t say anything.

“Look,” Garibaldi said. “I just want to talk to whoever’s in charge, and I want to talk to them now. I’m expected.”

“Will I do?”

A faint shiver ran up Garibaldi’s neck at that familiar voice. Nevertheless, he turned to address the speaker, a slim, redheaded woman with eyes like chips of interstellar carbon.

“Lyta, tell this toy soldier he has about four seconds to get his yap out of my way before life starts getting real painful for him.”

Lyta regarded Garibaldi for a long, silent moment.

“Don’t push my people around, Garibaldi.” She nodded almost reluctantly at the guard. “Let him in, Antony.” She turned and walked up the corridor. Fuming, Garibaldi followed.

“Is he here?” he asked.

“No,” Lyta said, “Mr. Bester is not here.”

Garibaldi took Lyta by the arm and swung her around. She jerked back and her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Go ahead,” he snapped. “Do it. Mindfrag me or whatever it is you’re trying to threaten with that stare of yours. But I’ve had it with you. I agreed to finance your little revolution and you agreed to help me get Bester. Now, let’s see. Out of this deal you’ve gotten about ten million credits, three ships, and enough weapons to shoot every man, woman, and child in Calcutta with a different gun. Now let’s count up the receipts on my side. You were going to remove Bester’s little mindblock,” he tapped his head. “Golly! It’s still there! How do you like that? And Bester? He’s still alive and free. To make things even happier, four days ago I get a call in the priority code we agreed on — no explanation, no note from you, just a ‘come quick.’ Well, lady, I *came* quick, way the hell out to this miserable ball of ice. My ship is put under guns, your little fashion thug stalls me, and then you show up and treat me like something you found on your shoe. Now — you tell me what’s going on, or you can just screw this. All of it. Pay your own damn bills.”

For an instant, Garibaldi thought he had pushed her too far, that he would see those eyes go all black and have his mind shredded like so much lettuce for a Cobb salad. But then her face softened, and a little of the old Lyta peeked through her hard mask — the quiet, compassionate, slightly naive woman he had first met on Babylon 5.

“I’m a little ... on edge,” she said. “Psi Corps has been turning all of the screws, and Bester in particular seems to have gone completely around the bend. From what information we get, the rehabilitation camps have become killing fields. We’ve lost a lot of good people. *My* people, Michael,” she closed her eyes, but when she opened them they were still Human. “You’re right. I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

“Lyta — just tell me what this is all about. Pretty please.”

She nodded. “Do you know where we are?”

“Is this a trick question, or one of Byron’s deep philosophical ruminations on the nature of being? I got here, after all. Go to Jupiter, hang a left, first big sphere of cracked ice on the right.”

“I apologised, Michael. Can’t we just have a conversation?”

He bit back another sharp comment, then sighed. “We can try. Let’s start again. We’re in an extremely well hidden installation below the surface ice of Ganymede. Looks like there’s been a fair amount of fighting going on, recently. I’m guessing this was some sort of hush-hush Psi Corps base you guys just dusted.”

“Yes. This is the other ledger.”

“Sorry?”

The very corners of her lips lifted up, the threat of a smile. “I thought you, of all people, would know what I was talking about. Back when people kept financial records on paper, dishonest businessmen kept two sets of books — one with the actual transactions —”

“And one prettied up to cover the dirty dealings. I get you now. So this place?”

“Among other things, it’s an archive. The secret archive, the one only a few people even in Psi Corps know about.”

“How did you find out about it?”

“I ran across one of those select people. I ... persuaded him to tell me.”

That tickled Garibaldi’s spine. He knew all too well what telepaths could do when they got inside your head. And Lyta was probably the most powerful telepath alive.

“Not to worry, Michael,” Lyta said softly, understanding either his expression or registering his feelings. “After all, he was *just* another telepath. I suspect you wouldn’t mind if we all wiped each other out.”

“That’s not fair. You know I don’t feel what way.” Garibaldi shrugged. “You’re the one who wanted to have the civil conversation. You found something you think I ought to know about?”

“Yes. Through here.”

They cycled through an airlock, stepping into a room considerably colder than the one they had just been in. Lyta took a Thermaskin parka from the rack. “You might want this.”

He took it and shrugged into it. “Why is the floor tilted?”

“When they built this base, they melted the surface ice and sank it. From space, it looks like a meteor strike. Even to radar it might be just one of a thousand metal bearing plumes from volcanic vents. The complex is built in modules, each capable of being self-sustaining, and of floating, should the ice melt again, say from a thermonuclear burst on the surface. When we got here, the base commander had started a self-destruct sequence designed to separate the modules and sink them another kilometre or so. I stopped him and shunted the sequence, but not before a few of the preliminary charges went off. The ice around this module thawed just enough to cant it a bit. Come on.”

They came to another lock, but when this one cycled, they were staring at a tunnel cut through ice.

“The next module came loose and drifted about ten meters. We cut through.”

“It’s *cold!*”

“Yes. We can’t warm it enough for the ice to melt. But it isn’t far.”

It wasn’t, but the next module was also cold when they entered it, a point made most clear by the six rock-solid bodies in Psi Corps uniform lying in various positions on the floor.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“We didn’t do this. This is Psi Corps sacrificing its own.”

“No need to get defensive,” Garibaldi said.

“You have a knack for making one feel defensive, Michael.”

“Nice to know the feeling’s mutual.”

“This was the archive annex. It’s all here — the experiments they carried out on their own people, assassinations, the — shall we say ‘rewiring’? — of government officials. Everything we need to sway popular opinion our way, I think.”

“That’s great,” Garibaldi said, meaning it, noticing Lyta’s expression was anything but optimistic. “We can bring this thing to an end.” *But not before I fry Bester.*

“That’s what I thought, at first,” Lyta said. “But then one of my people found something ... disturbing.”

“Such as?”

“A file that had been sealed for over 65 years, in multiple encryption’s. More interesting still, it had a sort of lock that only a powerful teep could trip.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Neither have I.”

“But you tripped it.”

“No. Someone else already had, and had spent almost a year using a high-powered AI to break the code.”

Garibaldi nodded at a corpse. “These guys?”

Lyta nodded. “They were still working out a few fine points when this happened, but the major

secrets of the document had been known a few days at least.”

“You gonna keep me in the dark?”

“No.” She tapped on a display, and a starfield came up. She tapped again, isolating a single yellow-orange star. “As far as I know,” she said, “this star has no name. It’s over 58 light years from the nearest charted jumpgate, and there are no records of any visit to it. Except this one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Seventy years ago, Psi Corps sent a covert expedition to the second planet of this star. It never returned and was never heard from again.”

“That’s impossible. Seventy years ago — that’s before we had jumpships.”

“True. The Psi Corps ship was a slower-than-light craft, capable of travelling at relativistic speeds very near the speed of light. From what we can tell, it piggybacked on a Centauri vessel to a jumpgate at the edge of their space, then plowed off on its own.”

Garibaldi frowned. “Fifty-eight light years at sublight speeds? That means it’s just getting there.”

“We think it arrived anywhere from one to eight years ago, depending upon its deceleration routine. Its arrival might be what brought this file to the Corps’ attention — a hidden clock, ticking all this time, finally ringing its alarm.”

“I still don’t get it. If they managed to get the Centauri to take them that close, why not all the way?”

“Because,” Lyta said, “at the time, this star was in Vorlon space.”

“Oh, geez.”

“Exactly. Michael, I need your help. I need to get to that planet, and I need to beat Bester there.”

“You think he’s gone?”

“I know he sent an expedition. He may or may not be on it. Michael, they can’t be allowed to get there and back.”

“Why?”

“I — I can’t tell you that, yet. I won’t, not until you agree to help. To get me a ship that can jump on its own.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re asking? Ships like that don’t grow on trees.”

“You have the resources. You can do it.”

“Sure. But make it worth it to me. What will Psi Corps find out there?”

She hesitated. “If you go, I’ll remove the block Bester put in you.”

“You’re supposed to do that anyway, but you keep stringing me along. And you didn’t answer the question.”

“No more delays, Michael. I’ll remove the block the second you give me your word.”

Garibaldi rubbed his chin. “I want to know what’s out there,” he insisted.

“I’m not entirely sure myself,” Lyta replied. “But I do know this — if Bester gets there first, we’re going to lose this war. And when I say *we*, I don’t just mean the resistance. I mean you, too. If what I suspect is true, Bester has finally found the magic bullet, and after he shoots us with it, he’s going to put another one right in the collective mundane brain. That, you can count on.”

Garibaldi sighed. “Great. And that’s all you’re going to say?”

“At this time, yes.”

Garibaldi smoothed his palm along his bald pate. “Fine. Here are the terms, then. My ship, my expedition. You can go, you can bring some of your people, but the muscle is mine. Whatever you think is out there, you say I can’t trust Bester with it. Maybe I can’t trust you with it either. True?”

She didn’t answer.

“See, I know the lengths you’d go to to beat the Psi Corps. I’m with you there. But there are people in your organization who would be just as happy to stick it to the rest of us as Bester.”

“That’s not true. We only want to be left alone, to have our own Homeworld.”

“So you say, and I honestly think *you*, at least, are serious about that. But I’ve never met a telepath who didn’t harbour some resentment —”

“How can you blame us? After 200 years of being used, oppressed, controlled and murdered?”

“Thanks for making my point,” Garibaldi riposted. “My way or the highway, Lyta. It has to be this way.”

She didn’t hesitate long. Even if she wasn’t scanning him, she certainly understood him well enough to know he wasn’t bluffing.

“Okay,” she said. “When can we get started?”

The PPG hummed merrily as it charged. So did Garibaldi — The Yellow Rose of Texas, slightly off-key. He pressed the contact and grinned savagely as the room flickered green. Still humming, he produced another holo of Bester, pinned it next to the blackened one on the blast shield, and stepped back.

“How long are you going to keep that up?” Lyta asked from the doorway.

“Just savouring one of life’s little pleasures,” Garibaldi said. “The ability to not only *want* to kill someone, but to actually be able to do it.”

“I think I’ve created a monster.”

“Nope. You just it off the leash. The prize in the category of monster-maker goes to ...” he aimed and fired. Bester’s evil grin vanished in a flash of superheated helium. Garibaldi blew an imaginary puff of smoke from the business end of the PPG and holstered it. “Two days ago I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t even shoot his damn picture. Thanks, Lyta.”

“Don’t mention it. I just thought you’d like to know we’re jumping in about an hour.”

“Yeah? In that case, grateful as I am, shouldn’t we have another little conversation? I mean, it was Bester who used to pull that ‘need to know’ crap.”

She nodded reluctantly. “Will this just be between me and you?”

“I’m ever the soul of discretion.”

“Right.” She folded her arms, then went over to stare out at the stars through the viewport.

“Do you think...?” she trailed off.

“What?”

“Do you think I’m crazy? All those stars, all those worlds. Can’t there be some place we can call home?”

“It’s not that simple.”

She sighed. “I know. I used to think there was hope, you know? That mundanes and teeps could live together. Now ...” again her voice dropped away into silence.

Garibaldi popped his lips together, taking a rare moment to consider what he ought to say.

“I think Byron was a kook,” he began and the swift hurt and anger that pinched Lyta’s face told him he’d not considered long enough.

“No, look,” he rushed on, patting something imaginary at about chest height. “I know he was your friend, and a lot more. You loved him, and love gives everyone a first-class case of tunnel vision. Take it from someone who knows. But what I was going to say was that I think he was right about that one thing, at least. Whatever you want, whatever I want, we can’t live together. This isn’t like the old bigotries, based on idiotic criteria like skin colour or religion. This is real. You can read my mind, I can’t read yours. It’s too hard for you not to take advantage of that, and too hard for me not to envy and fear you. We can deny it, suppress it, but it’ll always come back. Always. So no, I don’t think you’re crazy. I hope you find a Homeworld, and I hope it’s far away, and I hope you stay the hell there until we all get better somehow.”

“But you don’t think it’ll happen.”

“Which? I don’t think people have gotten any better since the stone age, and I don’t see it happening any time soon. And as for a Homeworld,” he pushed his chin at the viewport, “there’s a lot of unclaimed worlds where we’re going, right? Now that the Vorlons are gone.”

“*If* they are gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since we started this trip, I’ve been feeling something. Something familiar.”

“Vorlons?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Well this is about them, right? This whole thing?”

“In a sense. The Vorlons created us — created telepaths.”

“I know. I was there, remember, when Byron went off the deep end, tried to blackmail the InterStellar Alliance, held all of us somehow accountable for what the collective Koshs did? That’s not the big secret I’m supposed to keep, is it?”

“No. But there was more. When Byron found out ...” she suddenly, unaccountably blushed, and stopped, only to begin again, speaking more quickly. “Like you said, when he found out, he reacted badly. But you don’t know how it *feels*, Michael, to suddenly realize that your entire existence was contrived, that you are nothing but a tool.”

Garibaldi rolled his eyes. “Lyta, Bester programmed me to turn one of my best friends over to be tortured and killed. Are you really gonna tell me that’s somehow less immediate than knowing your God-knows-how-many great grandma was given some kind of telepath vitamin supplements 200 years

ago?”

This time her face actually registered chagrin, that she had made a mistake. It was gratifying.

“Point taken,” she allowed. “But Byron reacted badly. It hit him dead centre. So I didn’t tell him *everything* I learned when I was with the Vorlons.”

“But you’re going to tell me?”

“I have to.”

“It’s just like Christmas.”

She looked away. “The Shadows came early. The Vorlons never finished us.”

“Never ... Oh, my God.”

“Yeah. I’m not sure exactly how they did it, but I’ve pieced together how I think it may have happened. I think they started a long time ago, maybe thousands or even a million years ago. They took some of us ... or maybe just cells to clone us from, I’m not sure ... and they tinkered with us, bred us somewhere offworld. Now and then they would come back to Earth — and Minbar, and Narn, and all of the other worlds where they created teeps — and insert a new genetic sequence into the home populations. They worked slowly — the Vorlons live a long time, and an experiment that stretches over centuries doesn’t seem strange to them.

“Sometime in the late 21st century, they crossed a threshold, and not long after that the first obvious teeps started showing up on Earth. It happened earlier on other worlds, but it happened better on Earth. We were their pride and joy. But I still got the impression that, as we are, we were maybe a third step in a five-step plan.”

“Except for you. They made you stronger.”

“Yes. Step four, maybe, still not step five. They just didn’t have time, not with the Shadows coming too early. They had to use us as we were. After that — they left.”

She faced him squarely. “You’ve seen the things I can do, Michael. I was only a P5 when they modified me. Bester is a P12.”

“And you think this planet is where they made the mould, so to speak? That the secret to enhancing teeps is there?”

“Someone thought so. Someone 70 years ago.”

“I thought you said you were the first telepath to know the Vorlons created you.”

“I thought so too. I was wrong.”

The only response Garibaldi could think of was a long, low whistle.

“I know they must be out there,” Garibaldi muttered. But for all of his staring, he saw nothing but a lot of little stars and one big one, the unnamed yellow-orange sphere that had greeted the *Toreador* and her crew when they dropped out of hyperspace. The *Toreador* was a refitted IPX ship, as red in tooth and claw as Garibaldi could make her. She couldn’t duke it out with a White Star, or even an EA destroyer like the *Agamemnon*, but anything else had better watch out.

“Well, the planet’s there,” said Kirstin Firth, the freckled kid at navigation. “About 50 million clicks from our present position. Can’t tell much about it from here.”

“Shouldn’t have come out so far away,” Garibaldi complained.

Captain Dochale — a middle-aged man with striking Dravidian features and coloring and not a single gray hair — cleared his throat. “That *was* the way you wanted to do it, Mr. Garibaldi, remember?”

“I know. I didn’t want to drop in to a warm reception. Now I’m worried they beat us to the punch.”

“Maybe they didn’t come at all,” Dochale said. “After all, Psi Corps has plenty on its hands these days. Maybe too much for what could be a wild goose chase.”

“No. Bester would never let this pass. They’d come as soon as they managed to get a ship fitted. The question is, given their current situation — how long did that take?” He rubbed his chin.

“Let’s jump closer,” he said.

“Risky, Mr. Garibaldi.”

“Not as risky as letting them find whatever is down there while we cruise in at sublight speeds. Jump again.”

This time it was the discernible disk of a planet that greeted them as the black-and-white of real space replaced the red nightmare of what lay under it.

Garibaldi crinkled his brow at the sight of the planet. Like most habitable worlds, what he saw was mostly white. The poles were huge, and equatorial regions were quilted in clouds — ribbons and veils, swirls and checkerboards. Glimpses of topaz oceans came through near the equator, and the yellow brown of arid regions. He saw very little green.

“Well?” he asked, impatiently. “What have we got?”

“Earth-like,” Firth said. “Larger, but with fewer heavy elements, so about the same mass. Sir, it’s been banged up. A lot, and recently.”

“What with?”

“There are two large continents. Both of them have been bombed to bedrock, in some places. There’s still dust in the air — that planet seems to be in the grips of a nuclear winter. No signs of energy or industrial production. Not on this side, anyway.”

“Any ships around?”

“Not yet. There is a moon — small, with a few metal structures.” She looked up excitedly. “There’s a jumpgate, sir. Or what’s left of one!”

“Whose design?”

“Unknown, but it looks more like a Vorlon gate than anything else.”

“It’s Vorlon.”

Garibaldi turned. Lyta had just come on the bridge.

“Can you feel them, Lyta? Are they out there?”

“I’ve been trying. There is — something — on the planet. It might be Bester’s people, it might not. I

really can't tell."

"Sir! Firth shouted. "I've got a profile! Cyclops class cruiser. That's got to be them, sir!"

"Hot damn. Let's go light some candles."

But what they found was a dead ship, or at least an empty one. Life support systems had been turned off, and the ship opened to space. There were no bodies, no trace of violence, nothing at all to indicate what had become of the crew. The log had been wiped blank, and the computer was not aware of anything that had happened since leaving I-O.

But an atmospheric shuttle was missing from the hanger.

"Could they be hiding from us, Lyta?" Garibaldi asked, glancing around nervously. "When Bester was hunting your friends on Babylon 5, you pulled a disappearing trick with them. Hid them in plain sight."

"It's possible that all of them working together *might* manage to fool me," she said, "but I don't really think so. For all of their talk about being a family, Psi Cops aren't good at that sort of cooperation. Psi Corps is dog-eat-dog, and the last thing you want is for a possible rival to know your innermost thoughts." Her face assumed an almost wistful look. "Except when we were kids. Before they managed to set us all at each other's throats."

"What if they've already enhanced themselves?"

Lyta shrugged. "In that case, we're doomed."

"That's what I like about you, Lyta. The glass is always half-full. Half-full of something awful."

"I think they're on the planet."

"So do I," Garibaldi muttered. "But where?"

“We find what they were looking for, we find them,” Lyta replied.

When they returned to the *Toreador*, Firth had magnified views of a sector of the planet up.

“Big neutrino source here,” she said. “An underground fusion reactor, or something like it. We’ve got surface structures, too. Also, traces of what looks like an Earth-built shuttle.”

“Traces?”

“Scattered in a 20 klick radius.”

“Something shot them down?”

“I can’t say, sir. She certainly blew up at a respectable altitude.”

“Kind of makes me wonder whether we ought to land at all. What about transmissions?”

“None, sir, not even in response to our own.”

Garibaldi blew out a long breath. “Huh. What the hell?”

“I’m going down,” Lyta said. “He’s down there. I feel him — there, where the reactor is.”

“Who?”

“A Vorlon. Or something that feels like a Vorlon. And doesn’t. I don’t know, but I have to find out.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea? Something sure took a bite out of our Psi Corps buddies.”

“I have a strong feeling that if whoever is down there wanted us dead, we already would be,” Lyta countered.

“Well, your feelings and a credit, after taxes, comes to about half a credit,” Garibaldi muttered, “But I have the same feeling. Now we have a credit between us. Okay, let’s hit it.”

“You don’t have to go, Michael.”

“Sure I do. I don’t trust you, remember?”

“Well — feels like home, anyway,” Garibaldi said, a little weakly. He’d spent the last half an hour anticipating the particle beam or warhead that would scatter them onto the bits of the other lander. Now that they were on the ground he felt almost giddy. And it did feel a little like home — it was cold. Not as cold as Mars, where Garibaldi had grown up, but still pretty chilly.

They had landed on the shore of an iced-over lake that Firth assured them was no more than seven years old, the result of a river being diverted by a catastrophic impact or clean fusion explosion some 80 kilometers South. Beyond the lake, battered umber mountains cut against a pearl sky veined with dark jade.

Inland from the lake were artificial domes of various sizes, pushing out of the ground like young mushrooms. Some were no larger than a groundcar, but the largest could have contained their shuttle easily.

But it was the shore itself that held their attention.

“Nice beach,” Garibaldi said.

Lyta nodded, mute with horror. The lake had a border of bleached bones around it, mixed and piled like driftwood by the waves.

Garibaldi bent and picked up a skull. “Poor Yorick,” he said. “I don’t think I knew you at all.”

“It looks Human,” Lyta said. Behind her, one of the four telepaths they had brought along bent double, vomiting. Garibaldi was pleased that none of his security forces followed suit, but even the most seasoned of them looked a little green. Hell, *he* was having trouble holding his lunch down.

“Sort of Human,” Garibaldi said. “I’m not an expert, but it looks too small.”

“Maybe it was a child.”

It’s not a child.

The voice buzzed inside of Garibaldi’s skull.

“Stop that, Lyta,” he muttered, studying the empty white eyesockets.

“That wasn’t me, Michael.”

“Then who...” but then he saw him, a thin figure leaning on a cane, hobbling his way from one of the structures.

“Hold it right there!” Garibaldi said, drawing his PPG. Behind him, his security men were already

locked and loaded.

I mean you no harm.

“Get out of my head!”

“Michael,” Lyta whispered. “That’s him. That’s who I’ve been sensing.”

The man was a few meters away now. He was incredibly old, his skin like ancient brown parchment, his skull nearly as visible as those on the beach. His hair was whiter than snow, and hung in a queue that trailed him on the ground. He wore a suit that would have looked out of date on Garibaldi’s grandfather.

I... “I-” the spoken word came reluctantly from the old man, like an antique petrol engine trying to start after a long period of rest. “Sorry,” the stranger went on. “I haven’t spoken aloud to anyone in — well, in my terms in around 10 years. By your reckoning, considerably longer.”

“Who *are* you?” Garibaldi asked.

The man held out his hand. “My name is Kevin Vacit.” Garibaldi took the offered grip, tentatively. It felt like wire.

“That’s impossible!” Lyta sputtered.

Vacit turned on her. “And you are most certainly an Alexander. How true runs that blood.” He smiled, tightly, as if it hurt his face.

“You two know each other?”

Lyta’s eyes were somehow both dubious and as wide as a child’s. “He was the Director of Psi Corps,” she said. “I mean, in the last *century*. My grandmother worked with him.”

“And her mother, and hers,” Vacit said. “All the way back to the beginning. The Alexander’s were among the first.”

Lyta nodded, studying his face. “You look like him. My mother had a picture from her mother. She said you just vanished one day. Everyone thought you had been murdered, but the body was never found.”

“Well, now you’ve found it,” Vacit said. He shivered. “I find the cold unsettling, even through my insulated clothing. Won’t you join me in my house? I assure you, I’m happy to answer your questions, and I am no danger to you at all.”

“Hold on,” Garibaldi said, feeling the situation somehow getting away from him. “This family reunion is awfully keen, but how’s about answering at least *one* question before we enter your parlor?”

“Of course,” said Vacit.

“What happened to the Psi Corps shuttle?”

A brief wince that might have signified regret folded Vacit’s forehead. “This place was where the Vorlons had their chief experimental station. All of it was destroyed, I thought, with the exception of the reactor, which is deep underground. I was wrong — there were still some surface-to-air defenses. They took me — and the shuttle — by surprise. I managed to locate and disable the device before you arrived.”

Garibaldi looked at Lyta. She shook her head, clearly confused. “Director Vacit was a normal,” she said, “not a teep. Michael, he’s the Vorlon.”

Vacit smiled thinly. “A Vorlon I’m not. But please, can’t we sit? I weary easily these days.”

The buildings scintillated. Vague, slow patterns of colour formed, melted, moved. They were like the Vorlon ships Garibaldi had seen, organic and somehow alive. Vacit led Garibaldi and Lyta in the largest dome — Garibaldi left two men at the door and sent out the rest on a perimeter watch. Likewise, Lyta’s telepaths wandered around restlessly, scanning for other presences.

Inside, the living nature of the structures was even more pronounced. Chairs, tables, and couches formed from the Vorlon stuff furnished it.

“It took me some time to learn how to make this material conform to my wishes,” Vacit explained. “For a long time, the best I could get were some toadstool-shaped lumps.”

“I thought you said the base was destroyed,” Garibaldi said. “Where did these domes come from?”

“They *grew*,” Vacit replied. “In reaction to my presence, I think.” He gestured around the room. “Please, sit. I’ll start from the beginning, or as near as I can.” He looked hard at Lyta. “I *am* Kevin Vacit,” he insisted. “I was born around 2109, I’m not sure of the exact date. My mother was one of the first real telepaths. I watched — and felt — her die in one of the early programs. As an adult I was an aide to Senator Lee Crawford, who organized the Metasensory Regulatory Agency, which later —

much later — became Psi Corps. In time, I became director of Psi Corps. As Lyta observes, in those days the director was supposed to be a normal. I posed as one, because I had the power to do so.”

“No,” Lyta said. “He’s lying. No telepath is that power. Even I’m not.”

Vacit shrugged. “I am, or was. I’m not sure why. But part of it — part of it is something my mother passed on to me. It’s what you sense, Lyta. Part of a Vorlon, one of the two who came to Earth to implant their modifications in our ancestors. The Shadows found him, you see. But before he died.”

“Something similar happened on B5,” Lyta said. “Kosh hid his essence in Sheridan. But only for a short time.”

Vacit nodded. “So you understand. My mother had a fragment of Vorlon in her, just so. I was very young when my mother passed him to me. I developed with him in me — we were never separate entities, really. I never had two voices, only one, a fusion of Vorlon and Human. Later in life, I met the second Vorlon and learned the truth about myself. And about other things — the Shadows, the coming war. About our origins, as telepaths.” He rubbed his knees. “So I am Vorlon, in a way, yes, but also Human. I was not something anyone ever planned.”

Lyta nodded. “I see it now. I think I understand.”

Garibaldi had more immediate concerns. “Why did you come here? You left Earth, alone, in a slower than light ship. You spent 60-odd years in space. Why?”

“You understand, of course, that for me the time was much briefer — less than a year in space, in fact. Relativistic speeds, you know. Time dilation.”

“I’d still like an answer to the question. And here’s another one — where’s your ship?”

Vacit sighed and sank back into his chair. “When I arrived, my ship was damaged. There was very little left on this planet, only a hint of power in this one place. I landed, expecting to die. Instead, these structures started growing, and they took care of me. They manufacture food, distill water, give me shelter and heat. The price was my ship. Vorlon technology is in part organic, but it needs metals. There are precious few metals on this planet.”

“It ate your ship.”

“Yes, as in time it will find and absorb the remains of the crashed shuttle.” He stood. “That’s a little better. I’m feeling up to moving again! Would you like to see something?”

“Oh, sure, why not,” Garibaldi replied. Somewhere, he felt another shoe dropping. Maybe a whole sky full of them. Big, metal shoes, full of nasty Vorlon surprises. He made sure his PPG was charged.

Vacit led them into an adjoining room and waved his hand. Several glass-faced alcoves lit up. “This is why I came here,” he said. “I’ve spent the last few years studying them.”

In each alcove stood a skeleton, articulated on a wire stand. One looked Human, another had to be

Narn. One *might* be Minbari. The others he didn't even want to guess at. It was hard to tell, when they weren't dressed up in skin.

"These were the inhabitants of this planet," Vacit said. "I call them the *Nephilim*. Do you know the reference? In Hebrew tradition, the Nephilim were the bastards of angels and Human women — the giants in the Earth destroyed by the Biblical flood. I've been piecing their story together."

"The bones on the shore," Lyta said.

Vacit nodded. "As you have probably guessed, none of these species originated here. This planet's truly native ecology did not include any land animals larger than a cat." He pointed at the skeleton that appeared most Human. "This fellow, for instance, had ancestors from Earth. Probably archaic Humans, *Homo erectus*."

"Those lived — what? A million years ago?" Garibaldi asked. "How old is this skeleton?"

"Ten years or so. But don't mistake me — this is *not* a *Homo erectus*. It's something the Vorlons made from them. Something that you or I would scarcely recognize as Human."

"It *looks* Human," Lyta said. "Or mostly so."

Vacit shook his head. "Human beings are weak creatures. We have no claws, our teeth are relatively inoffensive when compared to those of, say, a tiger. As animals go, we are not strong, or fast. Instead, we developed tools and intelligence to help us survive. The best tool-users had the most children, and their children were better tool users. Our brains are built around ingenuity, curiosity, experimentation — tool use."

"Monkey see, monkey do. Human evolution in a nutshell," Garibaldi said. "So?"

"Here," Vacit replied, "the Vorlons were interested in none of those qualities. These cousins of ours were bred for only one thing — as hosts for telepath genes." He cocked his head. "Did you know that there are *no* intelligent races in which telepathy evolved naturally?"

Lyta frowned. "I thought there were a few."

"There weren't — for good reasons. A race that develops telepathy and telekenesis doesn't *need* intelligence. If you can sense any predator, then convince the predator you aren't there, why develop weapons to protect yourself from them? If you can sense game and call them to you, why develop complex hunting skills? Like claws or teeth, telepathy is too much a tool for direct-action. Once a species commits to a built-in weapon, evolution tends to continue the process of specialization, building around the weapon. That isn't the road to intelligence — the road to intelligence requires a commitment to generalization, not specialization. Human beings are the most general animals of all, physically. We have the same four kinds of teeth our most remote mammalian ancestors had. We have the same five-fingered paws that we inherited from reptiles. Not claws, hooves, or flippers, but hands, specialized in being *unspecialized*. We *make* our claws. If something comes along we can't eat, we don't evolve new teeth or more stomachs — we pound it or burn it or soak it until we can

digest it.”

“But telepath genes *were* developed,” Lyta objected.

“Yes, but not by evolution. The Vorlons manipulated and bred, experimented, pushed. The creatures they brought here were just germ plasma to them. They made them telepaths, yes, at the expense of every other trait. These poor creatures, I believe, had telepathic powers that couldn’t be rated even by the Vorlons, but not one of them could have figured out how to build a fire or to put the round peg in the round hole.”

“Lyta was pale, studying the skeletons. “That’s horrible,” she said. “What happened to them?”

Vacit waved his hands, and lights went off. The skeletons vanished in darkness. “The Vorlons killed them, of course, so they wouldn’t fall into the hands of the Shadows. They had already gotten what they wanted — the genes to implant in other races, to create beings that were both telepathic *and* intelligent. You see what I’m saying? Those two traits had to come *separately*, then be combined. An intelligent race can develop naturally, a telepathic beast can develop naturally. But you can’t have both together without intervention.”

“You still haven’t told us why you came,” Garibaldi noticed. “Or how you knew about this place.”

Vacit smiled again, his thin, skull-like grin. It did not seem to reflect good humor.

“I knew the Shadows were coming, and I knew we telepaths were going to be needed. I made Psi Corps what it was to meet that need. I had nearly reached the end of my life, and everyone I had ever cared for was gone. My enemies in the government and the corps were legion, and I understood that in time they would catch me alone, with my guard down. I felt there was one last thing I could do. Like you, I came here expecting to find the secret of enhancing our abilities, and I thought I would make one last discovery for my people. As you see, I did. But it’s all gone. Nothing remains of the Vorlon records or laboratories, only the bones. I suppose those could be scraped for DNA, but I suspect all you would find is the same sequence every telepath has.”

Garibaldi nodded, sickened. They had once thought the Vorlons were the good guys. As it turned out, ideas like good and evil were as irrelevant to beings like the Vorlons and Shadows as they were to the low-life scum he had busted as security chief.

Something suspicious in Garibaldi had been demanding his attention for awhile, but he just now saw what it was. “Mr. Vacit, tell me again how you know we beat the Shadows. You’ve been isolated here since before the end of the war, and you had to have been out of touch before that. So how did you know all of this recent history?”

“He hasn’t been entirely forthcoming with you,” a new voice said.

They all turned. For an instant, Garibaldi thought it was Bester standing there, but it wasn’t, only some middle-aged Psi Cop he had never seen, in uniform complete to the gloves. Seven more appeared, from various doorways Garibaldi hadn’t noticed or which hadn’t been there. They were all

armed with PPGs.

“Don’t blame Mr. Vacit,” the fellow went on, a bland smile on his roundish face. “He really couldn’t help himself. My name is Mr. Diamond and I want both of you to keep very still. Mr. Garibaldi, I would not count on your troops for help. They have all been subdued. Ms. Alexander, the same goes for your blips.”

“What’s going on, Vacit?” Garibaldi snapped.

The old man inclined his head. “There was another landing craft. It’s hidden below this installation, near the reactor, where they knew you would have trouble detecting it. I’m sorry for the deception, but they were monitoring my thoughts, of course. Lyta, I’m truly sorry. I owe your family better than this, but I’ve grown weak.”

“Baloney,” Garibaldi said. “You’ve cut a deal with the corps. They’re your babies, after all.”

“That’s enough from you, Garibaldi,” Diamond said. “I’ll need you to send some messages to your ship, and —” he suddenly turned and fired his PPG. The blast grazed Lyta’s shoulder. She gasped in pain and fell back, half stunned. Garibaldi swore and moved to help her, but a warning shot hissed into the floor at his feet.

“Stop there and live, Mr. Garibaldi,” Diamond snapped. “Ms. Alexander, do *not* try that again. I may not be as strong as you, but I am a P10, and full trained. I’ve read your file — you can probably stop me from firing this weapon again. You can probably stop two or three of my people as well. You *cannot* stop all of us.”

“I can,” Vacit said, quietly. “Mr. Garibaldi, you should take their guns, quickly.”

Garibaldi blinked. “What?” But then he saw Diamond was sort of frozen, like a statue, and Vacit was trembling, his face gone white.

“Hurry!” Vacit said. “I can’t—”

Then Diamond moved again, firing his PPG. The blast struck the old man in the chest. The Psi Cop changed his aim to Garibaldi. Garibaldi shot him in the heart. Another cop fired at him, missed by a mile as Garibaldi ducked behind the couch. Garibaldi popped up, missed his first shot, then nailed the telepath on the second.

The rest of the cops were down, blood leaking from their eyes. Lyta swayed weakly to her feet.

“Jesus!” Garibaldi said, still not sure exactly what had happened. He walked around the room, kicking PPG’s from motionless hands and taking pulses. They were all dead.

When he finished, he joined Lyta, kneeling with the old man.

“I guess I had a little left,” Vacit managed. He blinked his eyes slowly, as if seeing Lyta for the first time. “Natasha?”

“It’s ok,” Lyta soothed. “You’ll be okay. We’ll get you to the ship.”

“Nonsense.” Vacit’s eyes cleared. “You’ve done death bed scans, haven’t you? You know what death looks like on the horizon. So do I.” He coughed. “Leave my body here. This is where I belong. This is where I want to stay — where it all really began. Where it all ended. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Lyta said. For the first time in many years, Garibaldi saw tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry to have dragged you out on a pointless trip, Michael,” Lyta murmured. The *Toreador* had come out of Jump, and Mars was a red marble in the upper right hand of the viewport. The nameless planet was half a galaxy away.

“It wasn’t pointless,” Garibaldi said. “I’ll sleep easier knowing what the Psi Corps *doesn’t* have.”

“And that we don’t have it, either.”

“Yep. However the Vorlons enhanced you, whatever plans they had for Human telepaths, I’d say it’s all a moot point now. Unless they come back. But —” he trailed off thoughtfully.

“What?”

“Our earlier discussion about a homeland for telepaths. Are you still sure it’s a good idea?”

“Of course.”

“But think about it for a minute. If Vacit was right — I mean, if telepathy is antithetical to intelligence...”

“You said it yourself, Michael. We haven’t gotten any better as a race since the stone age. Better tools, yes; as a culture, maybe. But as individuals? No. Evolution is adapting to an environment. Human evolution stopped when we started changing the environment to suit us. Normal or telepath, we aren’t evolving any more. And we aren’t like those creatures back there. We had intelligence first.”

“Still, after a million years or so on your own ...” Garibaldi shrugged.

“A chance we’ll have to take,” Lyta replied.

“Yeah.” But Garibaldi couldn’t get the image out of his head. A planet full of being with powers like gods and the brains of chimps. It stuck with him long after that conversation. Years later, when the question of a telepath homeworld came up again, he would remember it, vividly. It would make a difference.

“Director Vacit,” Diamond said, his voice shaking slightly. “The Jumpoint is closed. They’ve gone.”

“Very good, Mr. Diamond.” Vacit sipped the odd, greenish tea the Vorlon food maker had learned to supply him with. It usually did a good job of working from his memory of how things tasted, but somehow had never managed coffee, as such. He glanced back up at the Psi Cop. “You and your men played your parts well,” he told Diamond. “I know it was difficult for you.”

Diamond bit his lip. “Sir, I urge you again — let us go. We’re needed back home in the fight against the rebels. Psi Corps needs us.”

“I need you here,” Vacit countered. “We’ve already discussed this.”

Diamond’s face hid his anguish well, but to Vacit’s senses it flamed like a fusion drive.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

Outside, a powerful thrumming began. It was not sound, not air vibrating, but something more wonderful, deeper, a music greater and more poignant than any symphony.

“Listen, Diamond, they’re singing again.”

Diamond was new to this, and weak besides, so he was wincing. “Please, sir — it hurts us. They are — too loud. Can’t you make them stop?”

“I could. Why should I? It means they’re happy. After what the Vorlons put them through, they deserve whatever happiness comes their way. You’ll get used to it.”

Vacit rose and walked outside. Several troops of the Nephilim were gathered about, wide, guileless eyes greeting him, offering him their limitless strength unselfishly and unselfconsciously. If the Nephilim knew one thing, it was obedience to Vorlons, and Kevin Vacit was enough of a Vorlon to command their unthinking affection.

Diamond stood behind him, shivering at the raw strength of the broadcasts.

“Imagine how it was when I first arrived here,” Vacit said. “There are more than a million of them, scattered through the forests and savannas of this world. The Vorlon attack killed all but a few thousand here. They would have exterminated them if I hadn’t acted. The Nephilim gave me their strength, and with me guiding them we were able to fool even the Vorlons. They left thinking their creations were all dead.” He smiled at Diamond. “After the Vorlons, your people — and even Ms. Alexander — were child’s play.”

“But sir—” Diamond was still troubled. He still had hope of going back to Earth. “What do you want *us* for? Why won’t you let us return home? Or better yet, come *with* us, bring some of these — creatures — with you. With them, we could decimate the rebels in a matter of days. The normals, too. All of Human space could be ours.”

“You think too small, Mr. Diamond,” Vacit said, mildly. “The future of our kind isn’t back there. The nautilus does not move backward in its shell. Our future starts here, and moves forward.” He swept his hand at the sky, at the countless worlds once controlled by the Vorlons, past them to the galactic rim beyond which the elder races had retreated. “It’s there.” He clapped the weeping Diamond on the shoulder. “Now, come. We’ve much to do.”

End

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