

Art by Morgan Briarwood



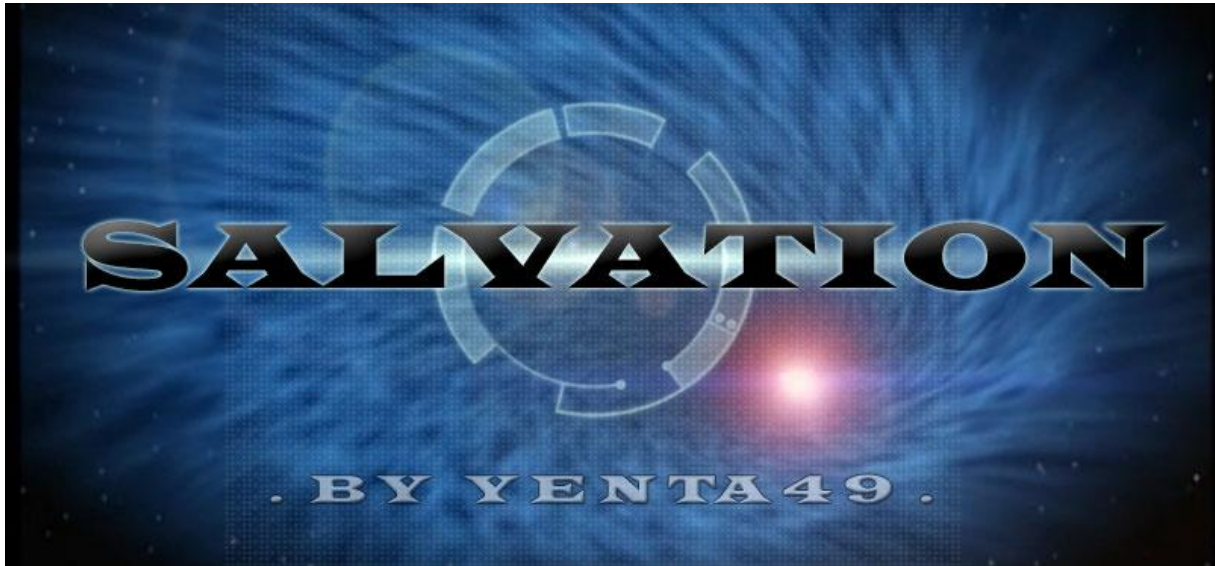
# SALVATION

. YENTA 49 .

# Salvation

By Yenta49

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## I.

The ship wasn't anything spectacular – small, unassuming, and reliable. At first glance, the ship's owner and single occupant seemed to reflect his ship – small, unassuming, and reliable. But as anyone, human or alien, will tell you, appearances can be deceiving. He docked his small ship and prepared to go through the station's security. Settling his well-worn and heavy-laden knapsack over his shoulder, he took one last look around; he wanted to make sure he had everything he might need if he couldn't return to his ship. Thankfully, a childhood and good portion of his adulthood as practically a nomad had him accustomed to packing his life in a single bag, maybe two. With a deep, almost meditative breath he walked out of his ship and onto five miles of spinning metal that he hoped would provide sanctuary.

Two hours later, he was ensconced in an alcove between two bulkheads in the main hallway that lead to and from Babylon 5's C & C. He had to see Captain Sheridan; Sheridan was his last hope before he simply did his best to disappear. He'd heard stories of Babylon 5's Brown Sector and how it had become home to the outcasts, cast-offs, and dregs of the station – a situation he was more than comfortable in. He tried to look at the possibility as a field study, that part of the station had a society all its own; it was the kind of opportunity that anthropologists lived for.

It was pushing midnight Earth Standard Time – at least that's what he thought; he was used to adjusting to the time reference of wherever he was and seldom kept track of EST, he didn't see the point when it had no relation or meaning to the cultures he was studying – and he was tired and hungry. Of course, he'd been tired and hungry before he'd made the last jump to B5. He was about to give in to his body's demands when he heard a voice he hadn't heard in over five years.

"Captain Sheridan," he called as he stepped out into the hallway.

Captain John Sheridan's brow furrowed for a moment before recognition set in. "Blair?"

"Oh, man, you remember," he said with obvious relief.

"You're a little hard to forget." John smiled as he spoke, remembering the animated anthropologist Anna had brought home like a lost puppy after one of her off-the-books expeditions.

Next to him, his companion shifted to offer him a look of mild curiosity.

"Forgive me," John said to the pair. "Dr. Blair Sandburg, xeno-anthropologist," he introduced, "Ambassador Delenn of the Minbari Federation."

Blair's hands automatically formed a triangle at the base of his solar plexus and he bowed slightly. "I'm honored."

"Pleasure," Delenn agreed warmly; there was something about the young man she was instantly taken with.

Blair turned back to Sheridan. "Captain, I need to speak with you, please."

The look of fear in Blair's eyes stabbed his gut. "Of course, we can go to my office."

"No!" he exclaimed with an edge of franticness. "Man, I know I sound paranoid or insane or both, but somewhere else. Please."

Once again the intensity and fear in the young anthropologist's deep blue eyes shook him. "What's wrong, Blair?"

"Captain--"

"John," Sheridan corrected placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

"John. I'll tell you everything, I swear, man. Just not here."

Delenn had been watching the exchange with increasing concern. The young man was obviously terrified and had come to Sheridan for help. "Gentlemen, if I may? You are welcome to use my chambers."

"Delenn?"

She took John's arm and pulled him aside. "John, he's obviously frightened and has something to say that he doesn't feel is safe to share someplace, how do you say, that has more ears than a field of corn."

John chuckled and she smiled.

"My quarters should be well away from any prying eyes."

He nodded and they turned back to the young man.

"Will that suffice, Dr. Sandburg?"

Blair nodded mutely; the recent days – weeks were getting to him, and he felt, he hoped, it was almost over or stalled long enough for him to rest.

Blair let himself be led through the corridors of the station flanked by the Captain and Delenn.

"Ambassador?" a young Minbari asked in surprise when Delenn returned with guests.

"Ah, Lennier, would you mind getting some tea for us?"

"Of course, Ambassador." He bowed and went to complete his task.

"Come," Delenn directed Blair and Sheridan toward her private office.

"Lennier will return in a moment. Please, sit," she told Blair gently.

As soon as they'd entered the ambassador's quarters, Blair had felt himself relax more than he had since this whole mess began. He was taking deep meditative breaths and had to resist the urge to fold into lotus at Delenn's gentle instruction. He didn't remember closing his eyes, but they shot open when he felt the hand on his arm.

"Forgive me, Blair," she apologized, crouching in front of him. "Here," she pressed a drink into his hand, "you'll feel better," she assured him with the air of someone who had absolute faith in their words.

Blair took the cup readily, wrapping both hands around it; delighting in the warmth and rich aroma coming from it. "Mirka ris," he said offhand and smiled at Delenn. "Thank you."

"Pleasure," she said standing. "We'll leave you to your talk. Captain. Blair." She hesitated as if she wanted to add something, but shook her head once and smiled before turning to leave.

The doors whooshed shut, leaving the two men alone.

John moved a chair so he could sit directly across from the anthropologist. After a few moments of silence, John prompted, "Blair? What is it? You can tell me. You came here to tell me." He placed what he hoped was a reassuring hand on his knee. "I'm listening."

Blair nodded, taking another deep breath and letting it out hastily.

"I was on K0632 out on the Rim, simple job. Their survey had turned up possible artifacts and I was there doing a preliminary evaluation." His eyes closed at the memory. "Oh, man, you have no idea. The things I found. Most anthropologists spend their entire lives dreaming of finding these kinds of artifacts. A new civilization. That's what it was, man, and advanced, more advanced than anything I've ever heard of, never mind seen. Except for maybe Vorlon tech, that's what I thought it was at first, some sort of ancient Vorlon technology, but it was darker. Don't ask me how, man, but that's what it was." The young man paused in his narrative to delve into his pack. "Here," he said holding out the object to the Captain. "Tell me you've seen anything like this."

Sheridan took the small, leathery object – about the shape of a data crystal, but on a much larger scale – and set it carefully on Delenn's desk. He swallowed and asked more calmly than he felt, "What happened?"

"Oh, man, you have." Blair wasn't sure whether to be comforted or scared. "That's why they're after me," he said softly. Abruptly jumping up from his chair, Blair began pacing and running his fingers through his long impossibly curly hair. "Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit," he chanted.

John was out of his chair a moment later. "Blair," he tried taking the man by the shoulders to get his attention and halt his frenetic movements. "Blair," he tried more insistently. He waited for the young man to look at him. "It's going to be all right." He clapped his hands on Blair's shoulders reassuringly. "Okay?"

Blair nodded his head jerkily; not at all sure anything was okay.

"Who's after you?"

"I can't be sure, man, but I think it's IXP. They're the only ones who'd have any interest – or the resources."

Sheridan massaged his forehead – IXP. He knew enough from Anna's time freelancing for them that IXP was virtually synonymous with Earthgov and not one of the more noble facets of Earthgov. He looked at the object on Delenn's desk, and at Blair, with barely contained tension. Coming to a decision, he strode to the door, as soon as it opened he spoke calmly, but urgently, "Delenn, you should see this."

The Minbari ambassador paused in her conversation with Lennier, brow furrowing at John's tone. She gave a quick nod to her aide and joined the two men in her office.

The doors had yet to whoosh closed when her eyes fell on the object on her desk. She sucked in a quick breath and looked to Sheridan for confirmation.

The Captain nodded slowly, his eyes traveling to Blair.

Delenn approached the young man, who'd crossed his arms protectively across his chest, his hands gripping his upper arms, and resumed his pacing, albeit slower and more deliberate; Delenn had the feeling his mind was racing behind the temperate exterior. "Dr. Sandburg," she said, placing a hand on his arms where they crossed. "Blair." She smiled softly when his fiery blue eyes met hers. She squeezed her hand where it laid on his arms and pulled him toward the tiny sofa, settling them down on it facing each other. "Tell me. From the beginning," she instructed.

And he did. He told her about the mission, what he'd found, every innocuous incident and close call and the increasingly frequent overt attempts on his life. When Blair finally finished he was pale and shaking.

"Blair," Delenn's voice was strong and insistent, adamant that her words be heard and believed, "you will be safe here. As long as you are in these rooms you are under *my* protection and the protection of the Minbari government."

Blair inclined his head in acknowledgement, eyes never leaving hers. "Not that I'm not immensely grateful, 'cause I am, you have no idea how grateful, but why?"

Delenn sat a little straighter, preparing to stand. "All in good time. At the moment you need to eat and rest."

Blair was about to protest when he caught the look she was giving him – it was the same look he'd seen countless times on cultural Elders when dealing with a favored if troublesome son.

"When was the last time you slept properly?"

Blair's bluster deflated and, man, did sleep sound good.

"As I suspected. Come," she gently tugged his arm, encouraging him to stand, "you'll be more comfortable in my private quarters while Lennier arranges something more suitable."

Blair wasn't sure, but he thought he might be going into some form of shock; months of being alone, chased by shadows, seemed to be rapidly crashing down on him. He barely registered being guided to the ambassador's private quarters, or her quietly spoken instructions to her aide, or being seated on another much more comfortable sofa. Gods, he was tired. 'Soon,' he told himself. 'Soon.' Soon he'd be able to sleep, in a real bed no less. He let his eyes drift closed at the thought.

"Blair," a soft, calming voice called him from his dreamless sleep.

He sat up blearily. "Sorry, I didn't—" he began, remembering where he was.

Delenn cut him off with a call of his name and a reproachful look. "Blair, I'm just glad you felt comfortable enough to sleep, however fleetingly." She smiled sweetly and pointed to a small table near the counter. "There is food; you must be famished."

"I could eat," he admitted.

"Good."

They stood and Delenn extended her hand toward the table in invitation.

Blair bowed his head slightly and followed the Minbari's direction. "Man, what is that? It smells delicious," he said excitedly. The smells seemed to rush up to meet him now that he'd made his intentions known.

"I believe it is called canne-loni ricotta?" she answered a bit unsure. "Mr. Garibaldi has taken it upon himself to, how did he put it – 'educate me on the finer points of Earth cuisine.'" She smiled playfully as she spoke. "Last week it was 'chili dogs' – messy, but strangely appealing."

Blair laughed through a mouthful of pasta. "Most of Earth's better foods are."

"So Mr., Garibaldi tells me."

"Mr. Garibaldi sounds like a smart man."

"In many ways," she said solemnly. She took a deep breath then raised her head proudly. "Enough about Mr. Garibaldi, tell me about you."

"Me? Not much to tell, really. I'm a xeno-cultural anthropologist. I went freelance as soon as I got my credentials; I know IXP is like *it* when it comes to expeditions, but, man, I can't work for someplace like that. I'm all for change from within, but some places are just too dark and any light that gets in is eaten by that darkness. Not for me, man, not by a longshot."



She pursed her lips thoughtfully; she wanted to ask more about IXP, but now was not the time. "How do you know John, Captain Sheridan?" she asked instead.

Blair swallowed slowly around his food. "His wife, Anna," he said quietly. "She was lead archeologist on my first professional expedition." He took a moment to eat and take a much needed drink. "Anna was great," he said eventually. "She was the first one to treat me like an equal."

Delenn cocked her head curiously and Blair smiled – the first time Delenn had seen him smile a true smile since they'd met several hours ago, she quickly decided that it was something he needed to do more of.

"I was the youngest member of the expedition, including the students," he explained. "It's only natural for members of any kind of hierarchical society to have trouble accepting a person or situation that disregards those perceived norms." Blair shrugged and took another bite of Garibaldi's cannelloni. "It's life, man. Sometimes the best you can do is try to endure it. It's like the pan-ultimate graduate course, mandatory for sentient beings."

Delenn sat back, her soft smile making her eyes shimmer, listening and watching her guest as he spoke about the universe, life views, and belief systems, expressively gesticulating, speaking with his whole body, yet there was a serenity under all that energy. Blair was an interesting young man – intelligent, amusing, open, passionate, and moral. She had hopes for him if he was interested and agreed, but that would come later, after he'd rested and they'd talked – about the war and the Shadows.

Blair was just scraping the last vestiges of cannelloni from his plate when the door to Delenn's quarters chimed and Lennier entered.

He gave a small bow in their direction. "Ambassador, I have secured quarters for Dr. Sandburg," he nodded to Blair in acknowledgement, not trying to talk around him, "here in the diplomatic area." He said the last to Blair himself. "Since you are under Minbari protection and it is the most secure area outside of the Ambassadorial residence, it seemed only appropriate.

Blair stood, his hands once again automatically forming a triangle at the base of his chest and bowed to the young Minbari. "Thank you. Both, for everything. For believing me."

Delenn moved forward, linking her arm with his. "Come, let's get you settled. You need sleep; we can talk more after you've rested."

The young anthropologist nodded and let himself be escorted to the rooms they had arranged for him; Delenn asking him about his travels and the places and societies he'd seen as they walked.

Blair collapsed on the warm couch set against the far wall and simply tried to breathe. If ever he needed to process it was now – and he had the feeling that after he talked to Sheridan and Delenn tomorrow he'd have even more information and feelings to sort through.

Sighing, he stood. A shower, some candles, and some serious meditation was in order.

Half an hour later and Blair was folded into lotus in front of the low table in the main room of the quarters, three candles burning softly in the center. His mind calming and analyzing everything that had happened these past weeks then putting it aside until his consciousness was clear and he could simply *be* in the small slice of serenity he'd created. He stayed like that – floating, *being* – until his body and mind fully relaxed. Only then did he pull himself back to the here and now. Tomorrow would be a challenge and he knew his life would change forever in its wake, but he could handle it, he *would* handle it and come out stronger for it. For now sleep beckoned. He was asleep as soon as he hit the plush bed; he slept and dreamed of things older than time, dark and hungry, and a thousand shining points in the darkness – a living breathing nightscape.

John smiled at the door to his office as it opened, or, more accurately, he smiled at the woman who entered. "How's our guest?"

"Resting comfortably," Delenn informed him.

"Good. That's good. Poor kid's been through Hell and back."

"He is a strong individual." Delenn's elegant features schooled themselves into intense lines. "We need to tell him."

Sheridan puffed out a breath and nodded once. "How much?" he asked, though from Delenn's posture he knew the answer.

"Everything. He is in this now, regardless of his wishes. The darkness has touched him; he *deserves* to know."

The chime of John's hand link cut off their conversation for the moment.

"Sheridan."

"You need to get down here, Captain."

"On my way," he spoke into the link.

"I had Garibaldi go over Blair's ship. Sounds like he found something," he explained to Delenn.

"I'm going with you."

"I hoped you would."

"Captain, Ambassador," Garibaldi greeted; indicating they should head to his office.

"What did you find, Mr. Garibaldi?" Delenn asked directly.

"Those," he said, inclining his head toward the two containment boxes on his desk. "The small one's clearly Vree tech, but the other, it's like a little bit of everything. Whoever put that together is either a genius or certifiably insane, possibly both."

Sheridan looked at the devices; he didn't need to be an expert to tell either one would've destroyed Blair's small ship.

"That one," Garibaldi tilted his head toward the larger device. "That could have taken out half the docking bay. Whoever's after this friend of yours doesn't care who or what gets caught in the crossfire."

Delenn looked to the Captain curiously. "You think it is this IXP."

John sighed. "I *hope* it's IXP. Blair's right, they have the interest and the resources."

"But," Delenn prompted.

"But IXP is financed almost exclusively by Earthgov," Garibaldi answered, "which means there is someone with interest and greater resources."

"Blair's not going to be safe here. We need to get him off the station."

Delenn smiled. "It is being taken care of. *If* he wishes."

"Minbar?"

Delenn inclined her head in affirmation.

"We should talk to him as soon as possible."

Placing a gentle hand on Sheridan's arm, she spoke. "He needs to rest. A few hours won't make a difference. These people, whoever they are, already know he's here, and he's as safe as he can be until my ship is ready. Let him sleep."

He sighed a smile; nodding.

Blair stretched his arms in a satisfyingly languid move. He seldom had cause to sleep in a real bed, let alone one as luxurious as this one was to him. He'd lived out of his ship; his job kept him in transit or at sites constantly. If he wasn't on expedition he was waiting for the next, and since he refused to work for IXP most of his sites were in 'far away places with strange sounding names' as the old song went. It wasn't as if he'd been a stranger to that lifestyle even before embarking on his chosen career; Naomi, his mother, was a true free spirit, a gypsy, a vagabond, a modern day lovechild. They never stayed anywhere more than a few months before some other place caught Naomi's attention and they were off in search of inner peace or fighting for alien rights or whatever cause had her attention in the moment. His childhood, while unorthodox, exposed him to cultures and societies throughout the galaxy, sparking and fueling his interest in anthropology. All of which had led him here, hiding on Babylon 5 under Minbari protection and fighting for his life for reasons he didn't fully understand, and lounging in a real bed. Man, karma was a bitch.

"You look refreshed," Delenn said sweetly. "Feeling better?"

"Much. Thank you, again, Ambassador."

"Delenn, Blair, please."

He bobbed his head. "Delenn. Thank you."

"I believe I promised you an explanation," she said, taking his hands and leading him to sit with her on the sofa. "The artifact you brought, it belongs to a race known as the Shadows; they are a formidable enemy. A thousand years ago during the time of Valen, they were attempting to overrun the galaxy, destroying everything that stood in their path. A millennia ago Valen came to us and defeated the Shadows, pushing them back to the very edge of known space."

"The black ships," Blair said. "Almost every race, every culture I've studied has had some form of the story – a darkness that screamed through your mind piercing to the soul. I always thought it had to be like Earth's flood myths." He ran a hand through his long curls. "Oh, man, this is so cool. Okay, so uncool, but fascinating, do you have any idea how many doctrines that gives validity to? Man, it'd be a discipline all its own."

"Blair."

"Sorry," he apologized sheepishly. "I just... I shouldn't... Sorry."

"It's quite all right. It is good to see how some good can come from this darkness."

"I like to believe that some good comes from even the worst situation. It's not always a big something," he admitted, "but something."

"It is a good philosophy." Her thoughts turned to rash words and rasher decisions that had led to where they were now; none of them could have seen or imagined the impact those decisions would have. "More people should share it."

Blair tried to read Delenn's eyes, but all he could see was an ancient soul with hidden secrets and knowledge and pain. "Tell me about the Shadows," he said, trying to steer the conversation away from whatever it was that pained the woman he was beginning to consider a friend.



"For a thousand years the Shadows lay dormant. A few years ago we started getting reports and hearing whispers from the outer worlds. The Shadows were waking up. Objects such as your artifact are turning up more and more. Though no sooner are they found than they vanish again, all record and mention of them erased."

"A shadow of a Shadow," Blair said mirthlessly.

"Yes."

Blair's vibrant blue eyes slanted toward her. "There's more," he said after a moment, "isn't there?"

"During the time of the First Shadow War Valen created an order within the Religious Caste whose sole purpose was to ward against the Shadows, to keep watch and give us warning of their return."

"The Anla'shok. Man, I always wondered, but there's so little written about them."

"You've heard of them?" Delenn asked, genuinely surprised and curious.

"Yeah." Blair smiled depreciatively. "Minbari culture always fascinated me. I met my first Minbari when I was nine." He smiled at the memory. "Naomi's boyfriend was a cargo runner out on the Rim; nice guy, always took care of us, treated Naomi right. We were out near Sector 87 when I met Mayhan; we were the only humans at the outpost and of course everyone mistrusted us, can't exactly blame them. Mayhan was kind to me. Hell, he was the only one to *notice* me. Man, he was so cool. He let me ask him question after question and he always answered them, ya know, didn't just brush me off 'cause I was a kid. The first time I came across mentions of the Anla'shok, I thought of Mayhan and wondered if he was one of them."

"The war must have been hard for you," Delenn said.

Blair shook his head. "It could've been *a lot* worse, man, believe me. I was on a long-term expedition when it started. By the time Earthgov caught up with me and got me back to an Earth outpost it was over. Apparently, it wasn't worth the paperwork to charge me with treason seeing as how the worst was over, so they left me there to find my own way back." Blair shrugged. "I got lucky. Probably where all my karma went," he half joked.

Delenn shook her head. "You are a good man, Blair Sandburg. Strong and brave."

"I'm not brave," Blair insisted.

She smiled her knowing smile. "Which is exactly why you are."

As if on cue the door chimed. "That will be Captain Sheridan." She gave Blair's hand a reassuring squeeze before calling out for Sheridan to enter.

Sheridan shared a look with Delenn, nodding in greeting. "Blair." He took a seat in the chair by the sofa, elbows resting on his knees. "How far have you gotten?"

"I was just telling Blair about the Rangers. I hadn't yet explained about Ambassador Sinclair."

"Why do I get the feeling there's a whole other conversation going on here?"

"I'm sorry, Blair. The Captain and I have already discussed how best to proceed. We hope you will agree to our offer, but we want you to know everything that is of importance first."

Blair cocked his head to the side. "Everything important or everything *you* think is important?"

Delenn practically beamed. "Brave and wise."

"That's not really an answer."

Sheridan chuckled. "You should try to get an answer from a Vorlon."

Blair gave a small shrug and head tilt in acceptance.

"Blair, please understand that we will answer any questions you have as best we can," Delenn promised, "but now time is of the essence. The more that can wait until you are safe the better."

"Which brings us to a more pressing matter; we need to get you off the station as quickly and quietly as possible."

The young anthropologist nodded nervously.

Delenn reassuringly squeezed his hand. "I have made arrangements for your safe passage to Minbar. You will receive asylum there if you so wish."

Relief sagged through Blair's body. His wide, bright eyes beamed at Delenn. "Thank you."

"As soon as you're ready we can leave," she informed him.

Blair had been surprised when Delenn had accompanied him on his trip to Minbar, though he supposed he shouldn't have been. The Minbari ambassador had been thoroughly hands-on with him from the moment they'd met. He found it oddly reassuring.

After they landed on Minbar, Delenn took Blair to her family's home. They were met there by another Minbari, older than Delenn, who greeted her with true warmth.

"Delenn." The Minbari beamed like a proud parent. "Radiant as always."

She took his hands in hers and squeezed gently. "Mincal, it is good to see you."

"You as well, child." Mincal looked Blair up and down. "Is this the young man you spoke of?"

"Blair Sandburg, may I introduce Mincal. He oversees our home. Mincal, Dr. Blair Sandburg."

"Welcome to Minbar, Dr. Sandburg."

Blair shrugged his pack higher on his shoulder, freeing his hands to form the triangle sign of greeting and respect.

Mincal smiled. "Come, I have prepared a room for you."

"What? Here?"

"Of course. Is there a problem?" Mincal turned to Delenn with concern.

"Delenn, you've done so much. I can't."

"Blair, how much money do you have?"

Blair looked down bashfully.

"As I thought. You will be our guest indefinitely. No argument," Delenn added sternly.

Blair gave another of his sharp nods in begrudging agreement.

"Very good then. Let's get you settled, then I will try to answer your questions as I promised."

Blair sat in front of a set of slow burning candles thinking. True to her word, Delenn had answered all of his questions and now a hundred more bounced through his head. He remembered something Mayhan had told him years ago, when he'd asked what Mayhan was doing there; all the other faces came and went, but Mayhan was always there. Every time they returned from one of Malcolm's shipping runs, Mayhan was there

to listen to his tales and answer the questions his overactive mind would come up with. Mayhan had sat him down, leaned in close, eyes never leaving his, and told him he was, "watching for the dark in the darkness." Now, Blair thought he understood those words. It was a lot to process. Thankfully he was good at that.

He sat back and watched the flames; three small flares of light casting shadows all around the room. 'Shadows,' he thought as he closed his eyes and began the process of relaxing into a deep meditation.

The candles had burnt down low when Blair opened his eyes again. He still wasn't sure about his future, but he knew he wanted to stay on Minbar and help in whatever way he could with this Shadow War. He may have been a pacifist, but even he knew when that figurative line in the sand had been crossed. It was still dark outside, the depths of Minbari night; he'd wait until morning to talk to Delenn, and hopefully part of that hazy future would become clear. With that decided, he put out the candles and made his way to the small bedroom. He smiled when he saw the bed lying perfectly flat. He knew Minbari belief held that sleeping horizontally gave the soul a chance to escape and it was rare indeed that a bed was altered to accommodate a human. Checking the mechanism, he discovered what he was looking for – a simple sliding lock to hold the frame in position. Releasing the lock, he let the bed ease into its normal angled position. He was on Minbar and would do his best to honor their customs. Besides, it wasn't always easy for him to sleep lying flat. He chalked it up to a childhood spent traveling and an adulthood of expeditions sleeping when and where he could.

The view across the bed was breathtaking. The far wall was open – large windows and an archway that led onto a balcony looking out over the city. The sky was clear as the city sprawled below. Blair's inner hedonist thought he could get used to this.

He looked at the bed longingly, but he felt grimy and disgusting. He honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd had a proper shower. Yesterday, he'd virtually collapsed from exhaustion and today had held its own priorities, but now that he had the chance he was going to take it. Pulling out a well-worn pair of shorts and shirt, the fabric softened with age, to sleep in, he headed toward the bathroom area. At least he would face the challenges of tomorrow clean and rested.

Blair awoke to the aura of afternoon filtering through the open balcony. He felt refreshed and surprisingly calm. He walked out onto the balcony, breathing in the fresh natural air, so much better than the endlessly recycled air of a spacecraft.

Once dressed, he went in search of his hosts. He found Mincal first.

"Dr. Sandburg," he greeted with a smile. "I trust you slept well."

Blair bowed his head in return. "Very well, thank you. I was looking for Delenn."

The older Minbari studied Blair for a moment. To him, as with many Minbari, all humans seemed young; their lifespans so much shorter than a Minbari's. Still, as Mincal examined the man before him he realized how much younger he seemed than when they'd met the day before and he couldn't help the pang of sorrow he felt knowing the kinds of things the young man had already seen and endured. "I believe Delenn is in the gardens. But come, you must eat something first."

Blair was about to decline when a soft rumble from his stomach betrayed his words before they were even spoken.

Mincal smiled knowingly. "Come. I'm certain whatever you need to discuss with Delenn will still be there once you've eaten."

Blair chuckled and again bowed his head.

His smile grew wider as he gently guided the young man down the hall. "Delenn told me you were a wise man."

"So she says," he said self-deprecatingly; his eyes darting down as if in disbelief or denial.

"Humble, as well. You should listen to Delenn. She knows of what she speaks, and I have never known her to speak on such matters lightly."

"She's a powerful woman," Blair said solemnly as Mincal put together a light salad.

"That she is. Strong willed and intelligent – people heed her. They know she is a leader – a good and true one. I understand that is a rarity on your world."

Blair coughed, momentarily choking on a mouthful of salad when he started to laugh. "That's one way of putting it," he said once he'd swallowed and shook off the itch in his throat.

"Humans are very," he began, looking thoughtful before he continued, "young."

Blair gave Mincal a small half smile. "That we are."

"Too many don't appreciate the value and wisdom of youth. They bring renewed energy, new ways of seeing things, fresh viewpoints, and the spirit to act on their convictions. Youth is a valuable commodity; it should be cherished and nurtured, not simply dismissed and ignored."

Blair chuckled softly, his brilliant blue eyes obviously caught in a memory.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no! No. You just reminded me of someone – a Minbari – I knew many, many years ago."

"I shall take that as a compliment then."

"It is, definitely."

Mincal looked at Blair's empty plate and back up at the young man with the same critical eye as earlier. 'Yes,' he thought, 'much younger, much healthier, and much wiser.' "Come," he said, "I'll show you to the gardens."

"Nusen'tall, Mincal."

"Ah'shan, Dr. Sandburg."

"Blair, please."

Mincal bowed his head and led the way to the gardens and Delenn.

Large beeba trees lined the pathway through the gardens, their translucent lavender blossoms in full bloom. Behind them wysa and gal'sha scattered the lawn in a delicate dance of pattern he could only guess at. And everywhere crystal leaves blinked in the sun, making the gardens seem magical. It was one of the most breathtaking scenes Blair had ever seen.

He found Delenn at the center, where the beeba-lined paths crossed, a beautiful flowering tree in a bricked-in plot of soil. "Sen'Kai," he said, taken in by the tree's beauty.

"Blair," she smiled when she saw him. "I take it you slept well?"

"Very." He sat on the small bench next to Delenn.

For a few minutes they sat in silence, enjoying the life all around them.

"What is troubling you?" Delenn's beautiful eyes burned with intensity.

"What am I doing here? What do I have to offer?"

"You are a brilliant and gifted young man. Courageous and honorable. There is a place for you here."

"You have something in mind already," he stated.

Delenn nodded with a smile. "Yes, but I need you to trust me."

Blair chuckled. "If there's one thing you have, man, it's my trust."

"Good. Then there is someone I want you to meet. I'll arrange to have him come by this afternoon. Until then," Delenn's eyes twinkled with mischief as she stood holding her hand out to Blair.

Obediently, Blair took her hand and followed as she led him through the hallways to stop in front of a closed door.

Offering him one last mischievous smile she opened the door and watched Blair's eyes light up like stars in the night sky.

With reverence Blair entered the room; shelves upon shelves of books covered every wall of the two story room.

Still smiling, Delenn watch as Blair walked slowly around the room. "You are welcome to use the library anytime you wish," she answered the question in his eyes, when he pulled his attention away from the tomes to look at her.

"Oh, man, this is so *cool*," Blair said his fingers tracing over tomes serenely. "Sorry, didn't mean any disrespect," he added hastily.

"Nor was any taken. It is refreshing to see such true joy within these walls."

"It's incredible," he said, still somewhat in awe.

"I have some things to attend to."

"Yes, of course," Blair replied, only partially registering the comment, his attention captivated by the sheer amount of knowledge surrounding him.

She laughed softly. "I shall leave you to it," Delenn said in parting.

"Delenn," greeted a surprised Jeffery Sinclair, former commander of Babylon 5, and Earth's ambassador to Minbar. "I hadn't heard you were here."

"Officially I'm not."

"Ah. Shall we take a walk?" he asked, understanding that whatever Delenn had come to see him about needed to be discussed outside the trappings of Earthgov.

"That would be delightful."

"What is it, Delenn?" he asked once they were well away from his office.

"There is a young man, human; I would like you to meet him."

Sinclair cocked his head at her in curiosity.

"I think he would make a good candidate for the Anla'shok." She stopped and turned to him, making certain she had his full attention. "He has seen things. Things your government is not pleased about."

"When can I meet him?"

"He is staying at my family home. I have granted him asylum here on Minbar."

"Is that why we're taking this route?" Sinclair asked with a knowing smirk.

Delenn replied with her own sweet smile.

"At least tell me about him before we get there."

Blair adjusted the glasses on his face, he knew it was unnecessary; the procedure to correct his vision permanently would have taken a matter of minutes, but the first sixteen years of his life had been nomadic, mostly out on the Rim, and by the time he'd left for the university he was too accustomed to the feel of wire frames across his face, and it was just one more in the long line of eccentricities of the young prodigy. He tenderly turned a page, completely absorbed by the text in front of him, finger skimming beneath the words as he read, while his free hand jotted down notes and comments and questions.

Delenn smiled at him from the doorway. "Blair," she said softly, so as not to disturb the reverence of the moment.

"He raised his head, eyes sparkling with excitement. "Delenn, these books, they're amazing, man," He shook his head in wonderment. This was a treasure trove that would take him a while to get used to.

She walked over to where Blair was sitting and picked up the book Blair had been reading. She ran her elegant fingers along the spine. "Nerhat Ra Trita Oore's *Triaera'min ra Fiae*," she read, idly wondering why this of all the books in the library had drawn his attention. "Ever the scholar."

Blair smiled. "It's a curse."

"It's one we all should share, at least a little."

The young anthropologist started at the unfamiliar voice.

"Dr. Blair Sandburg, this is Ambassador Jeffery Sinclair."

Blair eyed Delenn warily. He trusted her. He did. With that in mind he stood and offered his hand to the ambassador.

"Good to meet you. Delenn's been telling me about you. No State secrets, you have my word," he said lightly, hoping to ease the young man's tension. Sinclair pulled out the chair next to Blair's and sat, gesturing for Blair to do the same.

Once Blair was seated, Sinclair began, "Delenn tells me Earthgov is after you. That you found something, saw something, they wish you hadn't."

"You could say that," Blair deadpanned.

"I'd like to help you, if you'll let me."

"Forgive me if I don't jump at the opportunity to trust a member of Earthgov," Blair said wryly, never being one for keeping his emotions and feelings hidden.

"Then don't trust a member of Earthgov."

Blair's brow furrowed.

"Would you be willing to trust the Entil'Zha?"

## II.

Brown Sector fit its name. Dark, dingy, the place where the dirty work bartered, traded, and bought in the open 'cleaner' parts of the station took place. There were plenty of good people in Brown Sector, as well; people who slipped through the cracks or fell on hard times. But for the past three weeks, Security Officer James Ellison had been insinuating himself into the dark places of what was affectionately known as Down Below.

They'd gotten word Beleran Holter, a known slave trader and arms dealer, was attempting to set up a base on Babylon 5. Ellison had joined the denizens of Down Below the next day.

Now, he was a scruffy former dock worker, who was going more than a little space crazy. Exactly the kind of person who never had any attention paid to them, the kind of Brown Sector refuse that was of no more concern than the grime on the walls. He fell into the role quite easily; Earthgov's Special Forces had trained him to survive virtually any situation, and the years spent working undercover on Mars Colony before Garibaldi asked him to come work for him on Babylon 5 held him in good stead. He only wished the space crazy didn't feel so close to the truth. For the past few days everything had felt *off*. He'd find himself lost in conversations that weren't there, watching dust mites floating on the far side of the room. Then there were the headaches. Sharp piercing things that made his world explode with light and sound; his worn clothing felt like sandpaper against his skin. God, he couldn't wait for this assignment to be over. Thankfully it seemed to be coming to a close. Holter was coming in with a large shipment of 'product' as they liked to call it, to solidify his foothold on the station. Jim just had to confirm the date and time of the shipment and get that information to Garibaldi and wait for the net to close. Then home, a shower, and something for the damn headaches.

Four days later, Holter and his men were being taken into custody, while over two dozen humans and aliens were sent to Medlab.

"Jim, nice work as always." Garibaldi smiled and clasped his shoulder. He cast his eyes around carefully and said more quietly, "You alright? You looked a little off there for a minute."

Jim tried to shake him off. "I'm fine, Michael. It's nothing, just a little sensitive."

"Good, then go with Zack and take our new guests up to Medlab. And have Franklin take a look at you before you leave," he ordered.

"Michael," Jim complained; he didn't like doctors at the best of times.

"That's an order, Ellison."

Resigning himself to his fate, he agreed. "Yes, Sir."

Michael had known Jim for over a decade and he knew if he gave Jim even the slightest leeway it would be a full Earth year before he got checked out.

"Zack."

"Yes, Chief?"

"Make sure he does it."

The blond chuckled and nodded.

"Jim. Jim, can you hear me?" Dr. Stephen Franklin flashed a penlight in and out of the unresponsive man's eyes. "Captain Ellison!" he tried to sound as commanding as possible, on the offhand chance he could reach that ingrained reaction military men had.

"He's been like this since you came in?" he asked Zack.



"Yeah, I came back from briefing you and he was like this."

"Jim," Franklin said quietly, "I'm just going to take your vitals. Alright, let's see." He checked the stats against the baseline from his last physical.

"He doesn't appear to be in any physical danger. Nurse," he said, attracting the attention of the nearest nurse. "Keep an eye on Mr. Ellison here. I want to know the minute anything changes."

"Yes, Doctor."

"Should we be worried, Doc?"

"No, not yet. Three weeks in Down Below," he tilted his head to the side, "it's bound to take its toll. Best thing we can do right now is monitor his condition and wait for him to come out of it naturally."

"And if it he doesn't?"

"We'll face that when it comes."

\*



Jim shook himself, blinked once, and took in his surroundings. Medlab. The refugees. But they were gone now.

"Doctor."

Franklin handed off a chart and came to Jim's side. "Welcome back," Franklin said with a smile. "How do you feel?" he asked and pressed a cup of water into Jim's hand.

"I'm fine," he insisted, a bit harsher than necessary. His brow furrowed as he began to doubt his answer; his free hand came up to rub at the headache trying to split his head in two.

"Thought so. Why don't you tell me what happened."

"There's nothing to tell, Doc. I came in here with Zack and the refugees then this."

Franklin looked at him skeptically, but there was nothing he could do. Once Jim set his mind on something he was as hard to crack as Garibaldi. "Well, I still want to do a full examination."

"Stephen, I'm fine," he insisted.

"That's great. Then you won't mind proving it." Despite his smile, his face and stance brooked no argument.

Jim shook his head. He knew Stephen would get his way. He opened his arms in dramatic fashion, saying in bested annoyance, "Do your worst, Doc."

"Hmph," Franklin half chuckled. "I'd like to think I was better than that."

"Sorry, Stephen. I was just hoping for nothing more complicated than a shower and my own bed."

Stephen squeezed his shoulder. "I know. Let's see how fast we can get you to that shower."

"Thanks, Stephen." He closed his eyes and rubbed his brow.

"Headache?"

"It's nothing. Just need my own bed and some peace and quiet."

Franklin immediately started a cursory examination. Headaches could be nothing or everything and after such a stressful assignment he wasn't taking any chances.

Soon enough Jim was rolling his sleeves down, more than ready to go home. "So what's the verdict, Doc?"

"Extreme fatigue and verging on malnutrition." He made a note on his screen before turning back to his patient ready to deliver the worst blow. "Nothing a week of downtime shouldn't cover."

"Stephen," Jim's ice blue eyes pleaded.

Unswayed, Franklin met his gaze, saying conversationally, "You need more? I'd rather have you off duty for two, but I doubt the station would survive that."

Jim chuckled a little at the truth of the statement; he'd never been good at being static.

"Jim," Stephen began, putting a hand on Jim's arm, "I want you off duty, not dead. Give Michael your report and go see a movie, catch up with friends. Hell, take up knitting for all I care, as long as it doesn't involve Security or Brown Sector. You hear me?"

"I'm not five, Stephen."

"Never can be too sure with you and Michael," he said with a smirk. "Here," he handed over two tablets, "take these, go home, and get some sleep. Doctor's orders," he added sternly.

The door to Jim's quarters chimed.

It went unanswered.

"Jim!" Garibaldi called through the door. It had been over twenty-four hours since anyone had seen or heard from Jim and Michael had enough of pretending he wasn't worried. He swiped his security card over the console and entered the override code. The door had just begun to slide open when Garibaldi pushed his way into the room. His trained eye scanned the apartment. Nothing seemed out of place and there were no signs of struggle; strangely that worried Michael. He drew his PPG as he continued on to the bedroom.

There sprawled face down, half-dressed on top of the bedcovers, was Jim.

Michael sagged against the doorframe and holstered his weapon. With a huffed sigh he went to his friend's side. "Rise and shine, sunshine." Michael's voice was set to its most annoying level of morning cheer. He gently shook Jim's shoulder when he got no response. "Come on Jimmy, up and at 'em." Michael's brow creased; while he was one of the few people to ever know Jim as 'Jimmy,' the use of the name never failed to earn him a growl or a rude hand gesture from the other man.

Without hesitation he activated his link to Medlab.

"Franklin."

"Stephen, I need an emergency med team to Jim Ellison's quarters, now."

"On our way."

\*

The world came back in a haze of creamy white. Somewhere in the distance someone groaned. God, that sounded like he felt. This time the sound was closer. With a different kind of groan, Jim realized the sounds were coming from him.

“Good morning. You know we have to stop meeting like this; people will talk,” Franklin joked as he checked Jim’s eye responses. “How do you feel?”

“Like I went ten rounds with a leati.” Jim shook his head slowly, attempting to clear some of the grogginess.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“Heading for the shower in my quarters, getting ready to spend some quality time with my bed, then the beautiful landscape you see before you,” he said indicating the sterile sight of the Medlab.

“You will be glad to know that quality time you were after – you got it. We just need to figure out why.”

“Wait, what? How long was I out, Doc? Why am I back in Medlab?”

“Calm down, Jim.” His hands mimicking breathing exercises as he spoke. “Garibaldi found you about eight hours ago. You missed your debriefing and weren’t answering your comm or your door.”

“Okay, so the tabs you gave me did a whammy on me.”

“Jim, the debriefing was over twenty-four hours ago. You’ve been out for over forty hours.”

“*What?*” he asked disbelievingly.

“Yes,” Franklin replied. “Now, we’ve already got the blood work and so far everything looks fine; the only anomalies can easily be the result of the stress you put your body through undercover. However, there are some further tests I’d like to run.”

“Stephen,” he pleaded.

“Jim, two days ago you were unresponsive for almost three hours. Now you’re having some sort of reaction to a drug you’ve never reacted to before – and it wasn’t a mild reaction. I should have insisted on the tests after you zoned out on us.”

Jim pushed a huff of air out sullenly.

Stephen tapped Jim’s readouts against his palm. “Let me run the tests. You can go file your report with Garibaldi, go back to your quarters, but I want you back here first thing in the morning, no excuses. Agreed?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really,” Stephen said, entirely too satisfied with the situation as far as Jim was concerned.

“Let’s get it over with.”

“Jim,” Garibaldi greeted, surprised to see his friend in Security.

“Michael.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Last I knew I worked here,” Jim said as steadily as possible. He knew Michael would fight him on this, but staying cooped up in his quarters wasn’t helping matters. It had been three days since Franklin had begun his

tests and he was beginning to go stir crazy and with the way his life was right now, he really didn't need any more crazy.

The Security Chief gave a nod to Zack, leaving the young man in charge as he ushered Jim into his office.

"I know what you're going to say, Michael, but I'm fine. Really."

"Jim, you know I can't put you on active duty until Dr. Franklin clears you. Speaking as your boss it would be against protocol."

"Come on, Michael!"

"Ah-ah. Speaking as your *friend* it would be irresponsible. Since I'm both, it's not happening. Go home, read a book; if you want, you can come by my place around 1900 and I'll make sure you get a real meal." Michael chuckled at his words, realizing he sounded like a Jewish mother.

Jim finally cracked a smile. "Yes, mother."

"Good. Now get outta here before I throw you in lock-up for insubordination."

"I'm going. I'm going." Jim stopped in the doorway. "Thanks, Mike."

Stephen looked over the readout for the thousandth time, but regardless of how much he willed them, the results stubbornly refused to change. He sat back with a sigh, his fingers idly tapping the desk. After a few minutes, he seemed to come to a decision, thumping the desk with finality. He first copied the files to a data crystal then locked the originals under his personal log. If he was right, this was not the kind of information he wanted record of. He'd heard stories, whispers from the teeps running from Psi-Corp that they'd branched out from regulating telepaths to people with any other sensory anomalies. Jim was not going to become another victim of the Corps at his hand.

With the crystal weighing heavily in his pocket, Stephen went in search of Ambassador Delenn.

"Dr. Franklin," Lennier greeted cheerfully.

"Lennier," he replied; his concern for his friend keeping his words distant and distracted. "Any chance I can see the Ambassador?"

"Of course, one moment," he said disappearing into Delenn's private office.

"Dr. Franklin." The Minbari ambassador smiled at him as she came out of her office. "How can I help you?"

"Can we speak privately?"

She nodded and beckoned him into her office.

"I was hoping you could help me," he began once they had settled. "A few years ago, I read a journal article about Trieria'min."

"Yes, they were one of the things we shared our knowledge of after the war."

"What can you tell me about them?"

"Not much, I'm afraid, but what knowledge I have I will gladly offer."

"I have a patient who is presenting with what on the surface appear to be multiple sensory hallucinations. But I don't think they are hallucinations." He leaned forward, warming excitedly to his subject. "He's telling me about conversations between Garibaldi and Ivanova when they're two corridors over, reading me passages from books people have open on the other side of Medlab. Then the next minute he accuses me of simply mouthing words." Franklin sighed despite his excitement; he was dancing precariously close to breaching

doctor-patient confidentiality, but he reasoned it was no different from consulting a colleague on a difficult case. "I've been running every test I can think of, but without something to compare it to I can't be certain."

Delenn nodded. "As I said, I don't know a great deal; however, I may be of some assistance, indirectly. I have an old friend, Calid, she has spent much of her life studying and treating the Trieria'min in our care. I will contact her."

"Thank you," he said with a relieved sigh.

"Stephen," she paused ensuring she had his full attention, "if you have found a Sentinel, you must find him a Ker'mair, a Guide."

Franklin shook his head. "How do I even start? Human Trieria'min aren't exactly common as far as I know and from what I remember reading, these Ker'mair are even harder to find, regardless of species."

"Yes," Delenn nodded sadly. She knew all too well the fate of most Trieria'min. She had visited Calid at the hospital and seen firsthand the kind of thing the future held for a Trieria'min without a Ker'mair. "But without a Ker'mair, he will die."

The sweet smell of fresh spices and garlic rolled through Michael's apartment.

"You didn't have to go to all this trouble, Michael." Jim looked over the bowls and plates of vegetables, meats, and spices and the two large round bready canvasses in the center.

"Are you kidding?" Garibaldi cracked one of his huge smiles. "I've been *dying*," he said with just short of too much emphasis, "for a chance to do this."

Jim shook his head, but smiled. He knew Michael had this on hand for one of his dinner sessions with Ambassador Delenn. "I know I said it before, but thanks."

Michael gave a little single shoulder shrug. "Come on, these pizzas aren't going to make themselves."

"Guess not," Jim chuckled and began strategically piling toppings onto his pizza.

The low, firm beep of his link pushed through Stephen's reading. "Franklin," he said into the device.

"Stephen, you need to get to my quarters right away."

"Michael is everything alright?" he asked even though the urgency in his friend's voice told him everything was not alright.

"It's Jim; he's not in any danger, but you need to see him."

"I'm on my way."

"Did you have to call him? Now, he's going to want to run more tests." Jim flopped back in Michael's sofa, tired and resigning himself to more poking and prodding from the good doctor.

"You just accused me of trying to poison you with the food you *helped* me make. That's not exactly the kind of thing you can sweep under the carpet."

"You're sure about that?" Jim's voice dripped sarcasm.

Garibaldi chuckled. "We'd need a pretty big carpet."

Jim let his own soft laughter join Michael's, knowing his friend was right. "Damn-it, Michael, I just want to know what's happening to me and get my life back."

"I know, Jim. Stephen will figure it out and have you back on duty in no time."

"God, I hope so. I can't take much more of this."

Michael squeezed his friend's shoulder reassuringly just as the door to his quarters chimed. "That'll be Stephen."

"So how's our patient?" the doctor greeted as he entered the apartment.

"I'm fine, Doc."

Michael rolled his eyes. "Let's let Stephen decide that one."

"Yes, let's. Would one of you like to tell me what's going on?"

"I just had a reaction to something on the pizza."

Michael snorted. "And by reaction he means screaming and downing about a gallon of water before he could talk."

Stephen's eyes bored into Jim's. "Is this like with your other senses?"

Reluctantly, Jim agreed. "Yeah, like everything's focused on that one thing."

"Alright," Franklin said, mentally ticking taste, the final sense, off his list of senses that were affected. "I've asked for a consult with an expert on sensory anomalies like yours. I hope to have some answers in the next couple of days."

"Should I be worried, Doc?" Jim asked, hoping he was hiding how worried he really was – the prospect of being told he really was going insane dangerously close to the surface.

"Jim, if I were worried I'd have you in Medlab under twenty-four hour observation."

Jim snorted. "Doesn't feel much different the way things are."

"We'll get answers, Jim, I promise you," Stephen reassured him. "Now, I'm going to run some exclusionary tests on the pizza." He grabbed up a slice from Jim's pizza and put it in a med container then swiped up a piece from the other pizza as well.

"Ah, Stephen, that's mine," Michael spoke up.

"I know," Stephen informed him as he took a bite of his confiscated pizza. "'s really good, too," he smiled around the pizza, knowing he'd suitably relieved the tension over Jim's problem, for the moment at least.

Delenn wove her way gracefully through the staff and patients to Dr. Franklin's office. She stood quietly in the doorway waiting for the doctor to finish his dictation before intruding.

Finishing up his report, Stephen rubbed his hands over his face, using his fingers to knead gently at the throbbing tension in his head. There were not enough hours in the day.

"Have I come at a bad time?" the Ambassador asked sincerely.

"Ambassador," Franklin said in surprise. "No. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, Doctor," she said declining the offer. "I wanted to tell you I spoke with Calid. She was quite intrigued and she's very eager to speak with you. I expect she'll contact you soon; Trieria'min/Ker'mair relationships are her life's work, the avocation within her vocation."

Stephen smiled understanding. "I look forward to it."

"If you'll excuse me, Doctor, I have a meeting I must attend."

"Of course." He saw her to the door. "Thank you, again, Ambassador."

"It is my pleasure. I hope Calid can help you. Trieria'min are people to be cherished and aided whenever possible. They are a gift to all of us," she said in parting, leaving Franklin to await Calid's call.

The rhythmic rap of knuckles on his doorframe alerted Stephen to his visitor only shortly before Jim's words did.

"You wanted to see me, Doc?"

"Yes, Jim, come in."

Jim took a seat across from his friend and waited for him to continue.

"I spoke with the specialist I told you about, and she, perfunctorily, agrees with my analysis, but she'd like to see you herself."

"Another doctor." Jim sighed and shook his head.

Stephen chortled, knowing Jim would love the next piece of news. "It gets better. She's on Minbar; you'll have to go to her."

Jim thought about it for a moment before asking, "Is it worth it?"

The idea that Jim was even considering it told Stephen how badly this was affecting him. "I don't know. Is it worth it if you get the answers you're looking for and the help that you need?"

"Sounds like you can give me some of those answers now."

Stephen inclined his head as he spoke. "I can give you theories and possibilities, but Dr. Calid is the foremost expert on the phenomenon. You need to see her."

Jim chuckled. "I'm a 'phenomenon' now? Should I feel honored?"

"According to Minbari culture – very. The Trieria'min – Sentinels – they were guardians; people with exceptionally heightened senses of taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight, and highly revered."

"Were?"

"It's complicated, Jim. I don't understand all of it – even half of it," he added self-deprecatingly. "That's why it's so important for you to see Dr. Calid. If anyone can help you make sense of your senses, it's her."

Huffing out a sigh as he stood, Jim asked, "When do I leave?"

The main terminal of Fakan'oore Starport was as loud and hectic as any day on B5, and Jim's senses were going wild with nothing to ground himself on and all the foreign input.



Something, a rhythmic beat, caught his flailing senses, pulling him in until everything save that one steady beat went blissfully blank. It was as if nothing else existed, just that one solitary sound. Jim let himself float on it, let it fill him and take over his senses.

Slowly a soft insistent voice began to accompany the welcoming beat.

"Jim, I know you can hear me, big guy. You need to come back to us. Come on, that's it."

As the words began to take form and, in time, make sense, Jim noticed a light massaging touch gripping his shoulder. The world suddenly pulled back into focus. Jim shook his head, clearing the cobwebs, his body tipping forward as his balance adjusted itself.

The pressure on his shoulder increased, offering silent support.

"Man, you scared us there for a minute."

"You and me both," Jim replied.

"Good thing Blair was able to ease you out of it," added a third voice.

"Jeff!" Jim was genuinely surprised; of course he knew Sinclair was on Minbar, but he was supposed to be on the other side of the planet.

"It's good to see you."

"You, too. But what are you doing here?"

Sinclair laughed. "Welcoming an old friend to Minbar," he said, squeezing Jim's free shoulder companionably.

Blair pulled his hand self-consciously away from where it still rested on Jim's shoulder.

"This is Dr. Blair Sandburg. He's a friend."

"Hey," Blair gave a nervous little hand wave, picking up on Jim's stand-offishness.

Jim quirked an eye; the young man with his friend looked more like some hippie throwback than a doctor of any sort. "What kind of doctor?"

"Xeno-anthropology."



Jim looked the man up and down trying to reconcile all the information before him. "Thank you," he said eventually, with a bit of chagrin.

"No problem, man. I've been studying Trieria'min since I came here. I never thought I'd meet one, let alone a human one; this is so cool," Blair said bouncing on his toes, his excitement refusing to be fully contained.

Jim's head snapped up at the mention of Trieria'min. He looked puzzled and more than a little angrily between the two men. No one besides the doctor he was to meet was supposed to know why he was here.

"Calm down, Jim. It's not like that. Michael mentioned you were coming to Minbar, but not why. It wasn't until Blair came to me about taking a leave to come see Dr. Calid because of the possibility of a human Sentinel that I even suspected. And it was only now, seeing Blair pull you out of whatever that was, that I knew."

Jim nodded, appeased by the explanation. He turned his attention to Blair. "You work with Dr. Calid?"

Blair shrugged. "Study with would probably be more accurate."

"That's how you knew what to do."

"Yeah. But I gotta say academic versus practical application – not even in the same league, man, not even close."

"What's say we get you out of here," Sinclair said meaningfully. The trio was attracting unwanted attention. "Dr. Calid has insisted we all stay at her home."

Jim snickered good-naturedly. "Minbari hospitality."

"Something like that," Sinclair agreed.

Blair spent the journey to Calid's home listening to his companions catching up and reminiscing about their shared past, and trying not to think about how attractive Jim Ellison was. Blair didn't like to think he had a 'type.' He was an equal opportunity kinda guy, but if he did have a type, military guys wouldn't have been it – unless they were tall, frosty blue-eyed, well-built Sentinels, it seemed. He rolled his eyes mentally at himself and counted the steps until they reached their destination.

Calid was waiting for them when they arrived, and Blair practically bounced over to her. "Calid," he greeted with a smile and the customary triangle that had become second nature.

"Drahan." She took his hand warmly then looked to Jim.

"You must be James Ellison. Welcome," she said, bowing her head and beckoning them inside.

"Thank you," Jim said with a sincere smile that almost reached his eyes.

"Come, let me show you to your room."

Calid led Jim through the not insubstantial home. Its walls were a light brown that reminded Jim of brown eggshells. Its rooms were large open spaces – wide windows each with a sheer curtain drawn and heavier ones pulled to the sides.

"Your home is very–"

"Subdued?" Calid cut him off with a playful smile.

Jim chuckled. "I was going to say comfortable."

"It suits my studies," she told him. "Here, this is your room. I took the liberty of having the bed adjusted."

"You didn't need to–" Jim began; he knew just how seriously Minbari took their beliefs about the souls escaping in sleep.

Calid held up a hand, interrupting him once again. "I have worked with enough non-Minbari and enough Trieria'min to know never to underestimate the value of their individual traditions and comforts."

He shook his head and his lips turned up in a pleasant smirk. "Can't argue with that logic, Doctor."

"Calid, please. Make yourself at home. Blair and I will most likely be in my, what does Blair call it," she stopped for a moment, her eyes drifting up as she quickly searched for the words, "my study." A quick smile and nod and she was gone, leaving Jim to survey his surroundings.

The room was that same warm eggshell brown, the windows, bracketed by layered grey curtains, looked out onto a small, tented back garden, the walls were smooth, even what one would expect to be harsh right angles were rounded into soft curves. He took a moment to just listen and breathe the clear non-recycled air. He cocked his head and closed his eyes, listening closely. None of the myriad, raucous noises and sounds he was accustomed to on the station or that had overwhelmed him at the starport were assailing him. Instead he could clearly pick out individual sounds including a familiar slow beating; he was about to lose himself in it when a voice broke through his haze.

"It's the white noise generators. They counter the extraneous noise."

Jim nodded mutely, part of his attention still focused on the beat. He looked up at Blair leaning in the doorway. With his long wild hair barely contained by a thin hairband, his loose-fitting cream shirt laced up the front through some tribal pattern – not a button in sight – Jim had the absurd thought that Blair looked more like some old tribal medicine man from another century than a modern day academic. He mentally snorted and pulled his attention away from Blair and back to his surroundings. "This place," Jim's eyes wandered intently, indicating the building, "she's made it for Sentinels, hasn't she?"

Blair nodded. "She's been studying and caring for the Trieria'min her whole life."

"So I'm guessing, I *am* one of these Trieria'min," he said with dejection rather than pride in his voice.

"Calid will want to run a few tests, but considering how you zoned out back there... yeah, you are." Knowing this was not the news the older man wanted to hear, he invited himself in and sat next to Jim on the bed.

"Look, being a Trieria'min is a gift, man, a powerful one. You're a cop, were part of Earthforce. You protect. That's half the job right there." He shrugged good-naturedly. "Now you just have more tools for the job."

"You really believe that?"

Unhesitatingly, Blair nodded.

"How did you get into all this anyway?" Jim asked and Blair chuckled.

"A book, in Delenn's library. I found it when she first brought me to Minbar. 'Found'," he made a little laughing noise, "more like called to it."

"Ambassador Delenn?"

"Yeah. I stayed at her family's home in Turzan'oore for a while." Blair took a quick look around the room zeroing in on the computer terminal. "C'mere." He went to the terminal and began typing. "Here." He turned the screen toward Jim. "The translation isn't quite finished," he explained a little self-consciously.

Jim looked over the file Blair had called up. His face wore a sardonic expression when he returned his focus to Blair. "How about you give me the Cliff's Notes version, Chief."

"Uh, yeah, okay, sure. Sentinels used to be all over the galaxy, on hundreds of worlds, and in virtually every race. They were guardians and protectors of their cities and villages. According to Nerhat, there was a time when every city or clan had its own Sentinel. They were revered, man."

Jim humphed derisively. "They obviously never had to deal with the haywire senses or the headaches or the thinking you're insane."

Blair smiled sadly. "I'm sorry, man. Really. In the past Trieria'min would begin training as soon as their sense began to show, usually in the first twenty years of their lives, though race obviously played a part in the ages. By the time they reached adulthood they would have full control, or close to it, of their senses and a Ker'mair, a Guide, their partner – someone to help get them through sensory spikes and the zone outs and watch their

backs. It's really been the loss of Guides as much as anything that has led to Sentinels essentially becoming an endangered species."

Jim shook his head in confusion. "A Guide? Sounds like just another warm body," he said incredulously. "I don't see why it's such a big deal."

"Man, a Guide is so much more than that. It's a primal connection. Without that..." he left the sentence off as if he expected Jim to understand the unsaid words.

"Without that what, Chief? What are you not telling me?"

Blair looked genuinely surprised; how could they not have told him? "Maybe I should leave this to Calid," he said hesitantly. How did you tell someone they were probably going to slowly go insane and die, that the odds were against them?

"Tell me," Jim insisted. After a moment of Blair's continued silence, he added, "Please," softly.

Blair sighed, defeated and dejected. "Trier'a'min without Ker'mair eventually lose what control they have of their senses and either get lost in a catatonic-like zone or they get overwhelmed and go insane or kill themselves or both." Blair gulped hard. It was hard enough knowing and seeing those things happening to relative strangers at Calid's hospital; thinking about it happening to Jim made him physically ill and he'd just met the man. "Some try to stop the overflow of input one sense at a time." He hoped to every god and religious icon he knew that he wouldn't have to explain what that meant.

Judging by the way Jim's face paled, he wouldn't.

Jim's mind was reeling, running in circles with the new information. He'd mostly been joking about the insanity, but now it looked like a real eventuality.

"Jim, man, come on. Don't disappear on me," Blair called nervously.

Jim shook himself; looking over at Blair, he was shocked by the concern on the young man's face. "Don't worry, Chief," he said calmly, hoping to ease the pain on Blair's face, "just thinking." He gripped Blair's shoulder reassuringly.

Blair quirked a smile at him. "I've probably delivered enough bad news for the day. I'll leave you to it. Calid and I'll probably-"

"Be in her study," Jim finished.

"Yeah," Blair chuckled. As he left he stopped at the door for an awkward half wave and a nervous, "Bye," leaving Jim to mull over the bombshells he'd laid on him.

Blair landed in the chair with all the grace of one very haggard gazelle.

Calid smiled and chuckled as she went about lighting the candles she preferred to work by. "How is our Mr. Ellison?" she asked sweetly, setting the punk in its rightful place before sitting down.

Blair pinched the bridge of his nose. "Confused, angry, scared, though I doubt he'd admit that even to himself." He sat up abruptly. "Nobody told him," he exclaimed, "then I had to go open my big mouth."

Calid didn't need the 'what' he should've been told explained, but Dr. Franklin wasn't in a position to explain and she would not deliver that message to a stranger over a vidlink. It was too enormous for that. She laid a comforting hand on Blair's. "He should have been told, but in some ways it was probably better coming from you - another human, one who knows about the Trier'a'min."

Blair exhaled deeply, an instinctive action borne of a lifetime of meditation and ritual.

Calid smiled, once again marveling at how so like a Minbari Blair was. If she'd ever doubted that Humans and Minbari shared the same souls, Blair would have banished those thoughts. "Tell me what happened at the starport."

"Jeff told you."

"Yes, but I'd like to hear it from you."

Blair eased back into the chair, making himself comfortable. "We had been waiting at the gate. The main influx of people had come and gone. Then all hell broke loose, man. At least it felt like it. Medical personnel and security came rushing through talking about a Torrbari in distress. We took off after them. It was like we knew." Blair stopped for a moment then chuckled. "Of course, the fact that we were waiting for him and he hadn't come out probably had something to do with it."

She nodded urging him to continue.

"He looked so lost and focused at the same time. His eyes were so clear and intent." Blair paused, losing himself momentarily in the memory.

"What happened?" Calid asked softly.

"Man, it was intense. I didn't know if we could get him back. I wasn't even sure I was doing the right things, but I had to try, man. I couldn't leave him like that."

Calid cocked her head looking at Blair more critically than she had when they first met.

Blair fidgeted under her scrutiny. "Come on, Calid, man, you're making me nervous."

"Have you ever wondered why you were so interested in the Trieria'min? Why Nerhat's book had such an impact on you?"

Blair shook his head, loose curls bouncing with the movement.

"Think about it," she instructed gently.

He swallowed nervously, the enormity of her silent implication was rapidly heading toward overwhelming. "Calid, you can't..."

She quietly wrapped his hands in hers – a soft reassuring pressure. "Think on it." A soft plea in her voice as she spoke.

Nodding mutely, Blair focused on getting his breathing under control. Being a Ker'mair was life altering – and just when he'd settled into the last upheavals. It had only been a year since he'd found asylum with Delenn on Minbar and not even three months since he'd completed his Ranger training.

Calid leaned back, releasing her hold on Blair's hands. "You will find the answer," she smiled stroking the tip of her fingers across the side of Blair's face affectionately, "Drahan. You always do."

### III.

"Ivanova," Commander Susan Ivanova, second in command of Babylon 5 answered the tinny chime of her link.

"Commander," Zack Allen's voice came over the link. "I think you need to get the Captain and Mr. Garibaldi down here to customs check-in, right now."

"What's the situation, Mr. Allen?" she asked in the formal Commander's voice she used when she was in C'n'C.

"Bester."

Susan had to hold back a growl. As if they didn't have enough to deal with, with the Shadows and the conflict with Earthgov – she was waiting anxiously for the day Sheridan had enough and asked them to break away from Earthgov and join Orion VII and Proxima III in declaring their independence. Now they had Psi-Corps on the station. Worse, Alfred Bester, Psi-Cop. Nothing good ever came from one of Bester's visits. "Keep him there," she ordered.

"Yes, Commander."

Zack kept an eye on their unwelcome guest as he went through station security. He was about to pass through the final checkpoint when Zack intercepted him. "Mr. Bester, I'm afraid I have to ask you to wait here."

"I doubt that very much," Bester said smoothly, his snake-like calm and matching smile devoid of warmth and full of condescending mirth firmly in place. "I was wondering when my welcome party would arrive." He peered around the taller man to see Garibaldi and Sheridan quickly making their way toward them, two plainly clothed Minbari behind them. "And there they are. If you'll excuse me, Mr. Allen," he said with a nod, the cold smile never leaving his face.

"Captain, Mr. Garibaldi, a pleasure as always," Bester greeted with glaringly false sincerity. "Still so little trust between us," he said indicating the two Minbari telepaths with them; he knew from past experience were there to ensure that he couldn't attempt even a cursory scan.

"What do you want, Bester?" Garibaldi demanded unceremoniously.

"It's good to see you, too, Mr. Garibaldi," he answered, ignoring the Security Chief's question. His friendly words screamed the disdain he held for the man.

"Bester," Sheridan said calmly, "why are you here?"

"Enough with the niceties then. I'm here on Psi-Corps business. In other words, gentlemen, none of yours."

"This is my station, Mr. Bester, everything on it is my business," Sheridan corrected.

"Well, if you must know, we've been alerted to the possibility of a very 'special' person of interest to the Corps. I'm merely here to determine the validity of the report, and if possible, bring them into the fold as it were."

"You mean threaten them," Garibaldi snapped.

For the first time Bester's smile fell and he calmly turned to face Garibaldi full on. "Mr. Garibaldi, you wound me. I thought we knew each other better than that. I never threaten. I promise," he said matter-of-factly.

Just then a young man approached them wearing a dark uniform with a gold insignia, a mockery of the 'all seeing eye' on an armband clearly visible on his upper arm declaring him a member of Nightwatch – President Clark's paramilitary lapdogs. "Mr. Bester, Matthew Pearle, sir. Mr. Devon is expecting you," he said, summarily ignoring the Captain and Security Chief.

"Another delightful meeting, gentlemen, but you heard the man; mustn't keep Mr. Devon waiting." He gave the two men a curt nod and left with the young man to meet with the head of Nightwatch on B5.

Garibaldi shoved his hand in his pockets and rocked back on his heels as he watched Bester go.

"I want to know what that was about," Sheridan announced unnecessarily.

"You and me both," Garibaldi agreed, eyeing the Psi-Cop's retreating form with suspicion, before turning back to his commander. "I'll find out what he's after. Nightwatch and Psi-Corps in bed together; you sure the Shadows are our biggest concern?" he deadpanned.

Sheridan glared at his Chief of Security half-heartedly. "I want him off my station."

"Mr. Bester." Marc Devon stood from his desk in the Nightwatch's station headquarters. "It's an honor, sir," he said, extending his hand.

The Psi-Cop looked at the proffered hand and smirked, holding his black gloved hands up the way one might with a child. The skintight gloves were as much a symbol of the Psi-Corp as the official insignia, more so for some. Skin to skin contact was avoided by many telepaths and discouraged by the Corps; too much information could be passed and picked up by the unguarded contact. "No offense," he said with an indulgent smile.

"Oh, of course," Devon said dropping his hand quickly and wiping it nervously on his pants' leg. "Sorry, please sit."

"Nothing for me, thank you," Bester answered the yet to be asked question hovering in the forefront of Devon's assistant's mind.

Matthew blanched momentarily and darted a nervous look at Devon, who was still recovering from his faux pas with the handshake.

Devon waved Matthew away with a nervous annoyance.

"It's not every day we get a visitor from Earthgov, let alone a member of Psi-Corps." Devon tried not to think about having a teep in their midst. Teeps were almost as bad as aliens; they weren't natural, not *real* humans, but the Corps was part of Earthgov and as such they were on the same side.

"How fascinating." Bester waited impatiently for Devon to settle.

Devon chuckled nervously at the offhand comment. Once settled behind his desk, Devon seemed to relax, wrapping himself in the false sense of security the desk bought him. "How can Nightwatch help the Psi-Corps?" Devon asked, his bravado sliding into place.

"A report generated from this office mentioned medical files discovered in Dr. Franklin's personal logs which suggested he was doing research on human Sentinels. I want to know why. If he has found one, then it is the Corps' duty to see that he or she is treated with the utmost care. You have a copy of the files?"

"Of course," Devon said pressing the small call sensory on the desk.

A moment later a reluctant Matthew returned to the room. "Sir?"

"The data crystal with Dr. Franklin's personal logs."

Matthew nodded and turned on his heel, returning almost immediately with the requested crystal.

Devon inclined his head toward Bester, indicating for the young man to give the crystal to him.

"That's all of Franklin's personal files we've been able secure over the past six months."

Bester stood as he took the crystal in a black gloved hand. "The Corps thanks you, gentlemen." He offered them a smirking, capricious smile as he left. "Be seeing you."



In one of the open bays of Medlab, Dr. Franklin was reassuring a young Brakiri mother that her son's arm was going to be fine. "He'll be sore for a few days, but keeping it immobile will help. Come back in three, four days and we'll check him out." Franklin smiled at the child.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said, relieved. "Thank Dr. Franklin, Kilesh," she instructed her small son.

"Thank you, Dr. Franklin."

Stephen chuckled at the boy, "You're very welcome, but no more sneaking into the cargo decks."

"Yes, sir," he said softly.

"Good, we've got that settled." A slim, dark-haired woman interrupted them with a touch to Franklin's arm and a whisper in his ear. "Why don't you and your mom go with Melanie and see if you can't find a treat."

The nurse held her hand out to the boy and led mother and son away.

Franklin tossed a look and nod at the Minbari standing stoically on the far side of the room.

A moment later a small familiar black-clad figure settled himself on the doctor's examination table.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Bester?" Franklin asked as neutrally as he could manage.

Bester looked at the Minbari telepath in exasperation. "Is this really necessary?"

Franklin simply glared.

"Very well," he acquiesced on a sigh. "I wanted your medical opinion on a matter."

Stephen wrapped his arms around the medical tablet, pulling it against his chest and slipping into a more open stance. "I'm listening."

"If a patient came to you complaining of oversensitivity to various random stimuli, what would you say?"

The moment Bester mentioned 'oversensitivity,' Franklin knew he was looking for Jim and was able to temper his reaction. "That's awfully vague. I'd need more specifics, run some standard sensory tests, of course test for any of the likely biological infections that can affect sensory input."

"Have you ever had cause to run these tests?" Bester asked as innocently as a snake in the grass could.

"What are you getting at, Bester?" Franklin asked carefully, letting a hint of his annoyance slip out.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Though I find it particularly interesting that when Mr. Ellison came to you with similarly vague symptoms you did none of that."

"What I did or didn't do in treating Jim Ellison is none of your or Psi-Corps' business. We still have this little thing on B5 called doctor-patient privilege," he answered with calm anger.

"No need to get defensive, Doctor. I was merely expressing concern over one of your patients," he said, insincere concern and hurt rolling off of him. "We both want him to be properly cared for."

"Yes," Franklin tried not to growl the short word. "Though I prefer my patients to have a choice in the matter."

"My dear, Dr. Franklin, all telepaths have a choice to join the Corps where we can train and monitor them; create our own family." Bester's voice took on a rare passion and honesty. "The Corps is Mother. The Corps is Father," he recited the Corps' mantra with conviction.

"Mr. Bester, if you don't mind, I have real patients with real problems."

"Now that you mention it," he began scoffingly, "but, no, I'll leave you to your patients." He smiled one of his many self-satisfied smiles – in truth they all seemed to be self-satisfied – and left.

Franklin let out a heavy breath once he was sure Bester had left Medlab. Someone knew about Jim, more importantly someone had informed Psi-Corps. He nodded respectfully at the Minbari telepath. If it wasn't for their assistance, Bester and Psi-Corps would be privy to much more than Jim Ellison. He hated to lose the protection, even knowing Bester had left the immediate area, but he needed to get word to Delenn and Garibaldi, now that he knew what the weasel was after.

"Mr. Terell," he said to the Minbari, "I need to get a message to Ambassador Delenn."

"Come on, Jim. We need to do this."

"We *always* need to do this, Chief."

"Jim, man, there's a lot to cover. We're just finishing up your baselines. We still have a bunch of distance and accuracy tests to get through. Not to mention working on zeroing in on one piece of sensory input without zoning."

"Are all Ker'mair as pushy as you?" Jim asked teasingly.

"Yup, but I'm cuter," Blair teased back.

It had been three months since Jim had come to Minbar, yet it felt like a lifetime to both him and Blair. After Calid had explained her suspicion that Blair was a Ker'mair and more specifically Jim's Ker'mair, there were tests, tests, and more tests for both of them; though Blair suspected it was harder on Jim. Jim after all still viewed his heightened senses as a curse. Most of the time Blair let his researcher take over – the more he knew and understood, the more he could help Jim. His biggest fear was letting Jim down; that something he did or didn't do would lead him to insanity. It was also why he pushed his feelings for the older man down as far as he could. He had a job to do and wouldn't risk Jim because of his own feelings.

"Hey, Chief." He snapped his fingers in front of Blair's face. "Earth to Sandburg."

Blair batted Jim's hand away.

"I thought I was the one with the zoning problems?"

Rolling his eyes, Blair chuckled. "C'mon, one more set of tests and I'll set you free."

"Fine. One more. Then we're going to that Klenn place for dinner," he said, grinning like a fool when Blair beamed and bounced on the balls of his feet in response. Oh, yeah, he had it bad, but Blair was his Guide and he couldn't risk scaring him off. So he settled for dragging him out after whatever battery of tests he had for him that day and putting that one specific smile on his face; if he got a bouncing Blair, even better.

"How are they doing?" Jeffery Sinclair asked with a nod toward Calid's garden.

Calid smiled as he watched the two men. "They are doing well. I have never seen Trieria'min-Ker'mair bond so quickly or fiercely. I have every faith they will do great things."

"Jim's never been easy to work with, even back on Mars, he's always been like that. Distant and hard. It takes something special to connect with him," he said watching his friend smile and ruffle Blair's hair. "I've never seen him smile so much." Jeff chuckled. "There was a time I wasn't even sure he could."

"Drahan seems to be good for him. Just as he is good for Drahan. He has spent so much of his life roaming without a home or stability. I think he has found that in Teingati."

Jeffrey sighed.

"What is it Entil'Zha?" Calid used his formal title as head of the Anla'shok and the Chosen of Valen, sensing what troubled him was more than his how his friends were doing.

"We haven't heard from the Ranger in Sector 87 in several weeks."

Calid nodded slowly. "I thought you recalled all the Anla'shok stationed that close to the Rim."

"I tried to," Sinclair corrected, "but many requested to stay now that the threat they'd spent their lives watching for was here."

"Mayhan."

"Yes." He looked out the window again. "He's not going to take this well. Mayhan meant so much to him."

Calid nodded. "We will be here when he needs us," she told Sinclair; following his gaze to the men in her garden, "He will be there," she added.

"I hope it's enough. Has Naomi contacted him?"

The Minbari shook her head. "He hides his concern well. I believe Teingati senses it, but he does not know what to do with it. For one so naturally sensitive he is very--"

"Repressed? Anal? Out of touch with his emotions?" Jeff offered with a smile.

Calid chuckled softly. "Yes, 'out of touch' is an apt way of putting it."

They sat companionably and watched their friends in the garden.

Jeff was struck by the surreality of the situation and had the distinct feeling he was watching a scene from one of Garibaldi's old twentieth century films about space and battles between light and dark. He half expected a tall gorilla to walk across the garden. He smiled to himself softly and shook his head. If anyone could come through what the universe threw at them it was those two.

Beside him, Calid sipped her tea; smiling approvingly at all three men.

"Chief!" Jim called after his friend as he hurriedly left the room.

Jim had been concerned the minute he'd seen Sinclair's face. He'd known Jeffrey long enough to know that look; he'd seen it too often on Mars when he'd had to deliver bad news to families. He'd been right, He was just glad it wasn't Naomi.

With a quick nod to Calid and Sinclair he took off after Blair. Just as he knew the look on Sinclair's face, he knew Blair's reaction. He'd want to 'process' preferably somewhere outside in nature. But what he needed was a friend – he could process later.

He found Blair in his room, shoving a blanket in his backpack alongside a couple bottles of water.

"Going somewhere?" Jim asked leaning against the doorframe.

"Jim, man, don't. I need to do this."

"I know," Jim said, knowing Blair would start talking on his own.

A moment later, Blair dropped onto the bed. "Mayhan, man. I'd only gotten to know him again."

Sitting down next to Blair, "I know," he repeated, gently rubbing a comforting hand across his shoulder. To his surprise, Blair leaned into him, turning his strokes into an embrace. He gave the man now in his arms a gentle squeeze, laying his cheek against Blair's soft curls, and sat quietly holding him as Blair tried to place Mayhan's death in the order of things and then into his life.

"Stay." Blair's voice was just above a whisper.

Jim had to push down the part of him that demanded he seek out and destroy whatever had put that sadness in his Guide's voice. "Where else would I be?"

Blair let out a sharp outburst of breath and pressed closer to Jim – he knew he shouldn't be asking. "Anywhere but here."

Jim pulled back and with a finger under Blair's chin brought his face up to look him in the eye. "I'm here for you, Chief, and not just because of the Sentinel thing. I'm here because you're my friend."

When Blair pulled away from him, Jim was afraid he'd overstepped some boundaries, but was instantly relieved when Blair laid his head on his shoulder.

Jim slid his arm back around Blair's shoulders, content to simply hold him as long as he needed.

Garibaldi made his way through the hallways of Blue Sector, dodging and bypassing people with practiced ease, his Minbari shadow keeping up admirably. Once at his destination he ducked into the open door of the Minbari Ambassadorial office. He gave a quick nod to Lennier. "The Ambassador wanted to see me."

"Delenn is expecting you," he said, getting up to close and lock the door while Garibaldi showed himself to Delenn's office.

"Mr. Garibaldi," she greeted in her ever-calm voice. "I received a message from Dr. Franklin. He says he knows why your Mr. Bester is here. He's been making inquiries about Captain Ellison."

"Damn-it." If eyes could lock their jaws and gnash their teeth that would have been what Michael's were doing. "Nightwatch," he said with a slow shake of his head, tongue pressing the side of his teeth in an effort not to grind them. After a moment his grey eyes calmed as his more sensible instincts won out. "Can you get a message to Jim?"

"Of course."

"Tell him Bester's here, and he knows."

When Garibaldi got back to his office he was met by more unpleasant news. "Should I bother asking how you got in here?" he asked his visitor coldly.

"I often find Security offices are the least secure," Bester said thoughtfully, leaning back in Garibaldi's chair and propping his feet up on the desk. "Don't blame yourself, Mr. Garibaldi, good help is so hard to find."

"What do you want, Bester?"

"Captain James Ellison."

"He's not here."

"Surprisingly, I realize this. What I'm wondering is why he's not here. He is your second in command, or has young Mr. Allen taken that post?"

"Last I knew, that was none of your business."

"Of course not." Bester paused for a moment. "Unless he happened to be exhibiting signs of," he made a show of circling his hand in the air as if he were mentally searching for a word, "heightened senses – just as an example."

Garibaldi slid into his best poker face. "Bester, do you have a point with all of this?"

"Merely a friendly reminder that if Captain Ellison was exhibiting such symptoms, then it is up to the Corps to help him."

Michael snickered. "And we all know how you 'help' your own."

Bester stood, his demeanor changing ever so slightly, a stiffness under the infuriating calm. "Mr. Garibaldi, in all of the known universe there are four humans with all five senses enhanced. If Captain Ellison is a Sentinel he needs guidance and the Corps can give that to him."

"I've heard about how you 'guide' them. Mind control. Trying to enhance their abilities further and to trigger other senses in people who only show one or two heightened, turning their minds to mush in the process. If Jim Ellison was a Sentinel – and I'm not saying he is – but if he was, I damn sure wouldn't tell you. Now, if you don't mind, some of us have actual work to do." He stood by the door impatiently.

Stopping at the door in front of Garibaldi, Bester tapped the side of his gloved forefinger against his lips. "You surprise me, Mr. Garibaldi – the Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father; what kind of parents would do that to their children?"

"You wanted to see me, sir," Devon said as he entered Bester's quarters, not realizing the voice inviting him in was only a projection in his mind.

"Mr. Devon, sit, please." Bester brought over two glasses and sat across from the Nightwatch commander. "How good are your resources?"

"They could always be better. This place," he said with distaste, "is overrun with subversives spreading their fallacies. As long as there is an alien influence on Earthforce personnel there will always be more we can do and deeper we can infiltrate."

"Captain James Ellison," Bester said out of nowhere. "We believe he's at a facility on Minbar."

Devon nodded, not really understanding.

"As I'm sure you understand, the Corps can't simply rescue him. But I'm willing to bet that a man like you, with your resources, could find a way." The strategic platitudes rolled off his serpent's tongue – so many people failed to see how much the Corps used words to control people and not telepathy. The right words said the right way could move mountains; all he needed was Ellison moved from Minbar back to Babylon 5.

"I know just the man to assist us," Devon said, a hint of over-eagerness in his words; he was like a puppy trying to impress its master.

Bester smiled coolly. "They can't know this is a Psi-Corps mission, only that it is for Earthgov. There's a facility on the outskirts of Fakanor, we believe Ellison is there. Most likely he won't come willingly; he probably believes they are the only ones who can help him."

Devon snarled. "Minbari. Always thinking they know best for the entire galaxy."

"Indeed. Are your men up to the task?"

"Absolutely."

From the doorway to her small private library Calid watched Blair surrounded by books and data tablets, taking notes in his scratchy handwriting. He was so intent he didn't notice Calid sit next to him until she spoke.

"What's troubling you, Drahan? I have never seen you so consumed."

Blair gave a small gasp of surprise and sucked in a deep breath. "Calid," he exhaled. "I'm just trying to find out more about the Trier'a'min-Ker'mair relationships. There's so little outside of 'Trier'a'min need Ker'mair to survive'. There's nothing about their relationships, man. Nothing." He laid his glasses on top of an open book on the table and pinched the bridge of his nose with his other hand.

Calid covered his hand with both of hers. "Drahan, you and Teingati have the strongest connection I have ever seen between Trier'a'min and Ker'mair."

Blair let out a weary sigh, speaking softly, "That's the problem."

"How is that closeness a problem?" she asked soothingly; though she suspected the answer.

"Calid..."

She squeezed his hand encouragingly.

He pulled his hand from beneath hers – he was a kinetic creature and needed the option to *move*. Shoulders slumping, Blair closed his eyes and raised them toward the ceiling "I love him," he finally said. He opened his eyes and looked directly into Calid's. "I'm in love with him."

Calid smiled brightly, relieved that Blair was finally admitting his feelings. "This is not a bad thing, Drahan."

"Isn't it?" He huffed and slouched back into his chair. "It's not like I can tell him."

"Why ever not?" Calid demanded.

"Why?" Blair mimicked with a depreciating chuckle. "I'm his Guide! What if I tell him and he doesn't feel the same? How can I be his Guide with that awkwardness? What if he does feel the same and we break up? 'Detaching with love' won't even be an option, man. I can't risk leaving him without a Guide."

"Drahan," she chided, "this isn't like you. Ever the optimist. Always so sure things will work out for the best."

For a moment Calid let silence permeate the room. When she finally spoke it wasn't exactly what Blair expected.

"If you are trying to find out if your feelings are because you are his Ker'mair and he your Trier'a'min, you won't find the answer in those texts."

Blair's brow furrowed; he had copies of every known text that even mentioned Sentinels in front of him.

"A Trier'a'min's life was public enough; there was no need to write about their private lives. Still, there are references to married or mated couples."

"I know," Blair sighed. "But there's nothing specific about those relationships."

"Perhaps they thought it didn't matter."

"How can I risk him?" Blair asked plaintively.

"Drahan," she scooted to the edge of her chair, placing her hand against Blair's face, "You are a good man. You have a good heart – follow it. There is a time for logic and a time for emotion – know which is which." She stood and kissed Blair's cheek. "Goodnight, Drahan."

"Mr. Devon, Kent Browning is here to see you," Matthew informed him.

Devon nodded absently and crooked his fingers in a 'come here' motion.

"Mr. Browning," Matthew called.

Kent Browning wasn't an overly large man; he was incredibly average and unnoteworthy. He was just under six feet, short mousy hair; he would never be called thin, but he was far from fat. Kent Browning was an all-around nobody. That was, of course, until you looked into his eyes. They were sharp and empty with a touch of insanity – the cold calculating kind. The kind that knew every bone in your body and how to break each one – slowly and enjoying every second of it.

"Thank you, Matthew," Devon said, dismissing his assistant.

"You have a job for me and my boys," Kent said as soon as Matthew was gone.

"Yes," Devon answered. "It's a bit different from your usual work. It's a rescue mission of sorts."

Kent's left eyebrow raised in curiosity. It was a rare day indeed that Nightwatch called on his kind for more than sabotage.

"Jim Ellison has been missing from the station for some time," Devon began.

"Good riddance. The man's a menace," Browning growled.

"He is important to Earthgov," Devon snapped.

Browning clenched his jaw, but held his tongue. He might be a thug, but he knew which side of Nightwatch and Earthgov he wanted to be on.

Once Devon was satisfied Browning understood, he continued. "We've discovered he's at a facility on Minbar. He needs to be brought back to Babylon 5. We have reason to believe he won't come willingly."

Kent's face slowly broke into a malicious smile. "Any means necessary?"

"Alive and in one piece." Devon clarified. "Here's what we know," he handed Browning a tablet.

Smiling, he nodded once and turned to leave.

"Browning," Devon called after the man, "get this done quickly and quietly and Earthgov will be *grateful*."

Browning's smile grew wider and more malevolent. "Pleasure doing business with you, Devon. Always."

Blair paced the hallway outside Jim's door, wondering what he was going to say.

After Calid had left him, he'd straightened up the small library, so it looked more like a library and less like the aftermath of a college students' all night study session, then returned to his rooms – his candles, incense, and music. He needed to process. Calid's words hit home in a way he wasn't sure he could describe. He'd needed to get it all sorted in his own mind before he went to Jim, which was how he came to be pacing the hallway almost a full day later.

He stopped in front of the entry pad for what had to be the five-hundredth time.

Before he could decide whether to ring the buzzer or walk away, yet again, "For Christ's sake, Chief, just come in already," came from the other side of the door.

"How did you know it was me?" His curiosity temporarily quelled his nerves.

Jim sent him a withering look. "Who else would be wearing a hole through the floor?"

Blair didn't look convinced, but didn't press the matter; there were bigger things on his mind.

"What's going on, Chief? You've been locked in your room all day, except for the hour you've been out there." He nodded toward the hallway.



Blair closed his eyes and tried to center himself. Calmly he opened his eyes, locking his gaze with Jim's. "We need to talk."

Jim was certain all the air rushed out of the room, or at least out of his body. Telling himself not to jump to conclusions, he forced out, "About what?"

Blair tried not to flinch at the coldness in his voice. "Come on, man," he said placing a hand on Jim's arm, "it's not like that." He guided him to the sofa. "At least I hope it isn't."

"Spit it out, Sandburg. Your heart sounds like it's going to beat its way out of your chest." And take mine with it, he mentally added.

"I'm sorry, man." He scoffed quietly, "You'd think with my reputation this would be easy."

"What reputation?"

Blair shook his head dismissively. "Nothing. I guess you could say I was another person before I came here."

Blair's evasiveness only served to pique Jim's interest all the more. "No, no, Chief, you don't get to say something like that without explaining."

"Jim, man, can we not talk about this right now? Trying to get this out is hard enough without the side trip to my sordid past."

"Sordid?" Jim sat back, enjoying the turn the conversation had taken and not a little relieved by it. "This just gets better and better."

Jim was smiling his brightest, widest smile – the one that seemed to involved every muscle in his face, the one that made the butterflies in Blair's stomach go into overdrive. It was only marred by the smug air it had taken on. All Blair wanted to do was wipe the smugness out of it. With no further thought than that Blair virtually launched himself into Jim's personal space until their lips met.

The kiss wasn't chaste, it wasn't proprietorial, it wasn't slow or urgent; it simply was – a primal method of expressing emotions hard to name and even harder to explain.

Blair was breathing heavily when he broke away, but neither man said a word.

"I..." Blair began after a moment, nervously rubbing his hands on his legs. He felt two large hands cup his face and raise it until their gazes met. The joy and gentleness Blair saw in those ice blue eyes told him his message had been received, accepted, and the feelings returned.

Blair only had a fraction of a second to realize this before Jim's fingers slid into his hair and their lips met again. This time it was about possession, heat, and claiming each other, body and soul.

"Sordid?" Jim asked breathily when he pulled away from the kiss. His hands never left Blair's face, thumbs caressing Blair's wide cheekbones.

Between ragged breaths, Blair chuckled, "Shut up," and went in for a third round of kissing as he began to show his Sentinel some of the things that sordid past had taught him.

"According to Devon's information, our target's being held here." Browning pointed to a spot on the map spread on top of a crate in the hold of the smuggler's ship taking them to and from Minbar. "He won't be guarded; he wants to be here."

"Traitor," one of the other men muttered.

Browning shushed him with a look. "We've all tangled with Ellison at some point, so do not underestimate him. Seth, I want you and Morgan to do recon; make sure nothing's changed. Peter, you help Holstern – need to keep the captain happy."

Morgan slapped the back of his hand against Seth's chest. "Let's do this. I don't wanna be on this Godforsaken planet any longer than I have to be."

A chorus of grunts and snorts echoed the sentiment.

Shortly before dark, Seth and Morgan returned.

"What did you find?"

"Just what you said, except there was a second human, but I don't think he's a threat."

"Yeah, just some bookworm by the looks of it," Morgan agreed.

"Where was he?" Kent demanded.

"Opposite end of the building, on the second floor. Like Seth said, not a threat."

"Probably, but I don't like surprises." He turned back to the diagram of the building. "All right. This doesn't change the plan. Our primary target is Ellison. Seth, Morgan, and I will go after him. Pete, you wait here." He pointed to a room near the unknown human's. "If anything goes wrong with Ellison, you grab the Minbari. Ellison's too much of a goody-two shoes to let anything happen to someone because of him – he'll come after her. Are we clear?"

He received enthusiastic 'Yes, sir's' from his men.

"We leave in three hours."

For possibly the first time in his life, Jim was thoroughly content. They had done little more than kiss before falling asleep wrapped in each other, though Blair's kisses could be classified as an orgasmic experience all their own. Jim wasn't sure what had woken him, but he was thankful for the chance to watch his partner sleep.

As beautiful as Blair was when he was bubbling over with personality just being himself, seeing him still and relaxed, a warm smile on his face as he slept, was simply endearing. Every few minutes Blair would push back into Jim's body in an effort to get closer or prove that Jim was still there, he didn't know, but Blair would push against him and he'd tighten his hold causing Blair to let out a small breathy sigh, so he counted it a good thing. With a soft kiss to Blair's cheek, Jim settled back down, closing his eyes to sleep.

When his senses had first come on-line, Jim had found it harder and harder to sleep. The constant flow of every changing noise on Babylon 5 had threatened to drive him insane. But here, in this place designed for Sentinels, where curves and colors soothed the eyes and white noise soothed the ears, he could let his senses roam freely – always seeking out a familiar heartbeat. Tonight, for the first time, he was getting to explore that heartbeat with more than just his hearing. He could feel the heat of his skin and the **thump**-thump of his heart like a human metronome pulling him toward sleep.

Jim was teetering on the edge of that abyss when he heard the approaching footsteps and smelled what he swore was machine oil.

"Chief," he spoke just above a whisper into the sleeping man's ear.

Blair jerked slightly with a sudden start. "Jim?"

"Someone's here," he told him as he slid out of bed.

The younger man sat up quickly. It may have been over a year since he'd had to run from IXP and Earthgov, but his body and mind still reacted instantly to the threat.

"Four of them." Jim cocked his head listening intently. "Three of them are coming this way. The fourth," Jim's brow furrowed, "he's upstairs."

"Calid."

Jim nodded. "We've got to get past these three first."

Blair returned the quick nod as he slipped his shoes on, glad for having fallen asleep still dressed.

Quietly Jim motioned for Blair to take up position on one side of the door while he took the other. Jim held his hand up ready to give Blair the signal to act. Jim knew that, despite everything he'd been through, Blair was a pacifist at heart; violence did not come naturally to him. He also knew that Blair had been granted special training in the denn'bok by Sech Durhan himself and owned one of the rare Minbari fighting pikes. The world hadn't made life easy for Blair, but he never showed it. When they'd heard about Mayhan, Jim had gotten a taste of it. But now, the look in Blair's eyes told so much of his story. Jim had seen the look before, back on Mars; he was getting ready to fight for his family.

A whisper outside the door called Jim's attention back to the men in the hallway. With a twitch of his fingers he told Blair to be ready.

A moment later the door slid open and a PPG appeared.

Blair didn't hesitate, locking his hands together and bringing his arms up against the intruder's forearm, sending the weapon flying as Jim yanked him into the room, so his friends couldn't use him as a shield. Blair followed the man as he tripped and stumbled further into the room, tackling him to the ground, and landing three blows before he passed out.

At the door the other two men were trying to subdue Jim and failing.

A second PPG lay on the floor just inside the door. Blair made a grab for it, hoping to get it out of reach of their attackers, when the one closest to him slammed his knee into Blair's chin and sent him falling backwards, PPG in hand. As he hit the floor, the gun went off, sending a blast of energy into the arch of the doorway.

The third man reacted fast, activating the comm device in his ear. "Green," was all he said before taking aim at Blair and firing.

The two men had just enough time to hear Jim growl like some wild beast before the true onslaught began. Jim wrenched the arm holding the gun, relishing the hard snap it made as the bones broke. His hand slammed into the other man's throat, choking him and throwing him back against the wall.

The man with the broken arm used the momentum of his friend to push him down the hallway, retreating amidst badly-aimed PPG fire.

Jim knew he should go after him, check on Calid, but Blair was shot and their unconscious assailant was waking up. Calmly he went over to the groggy man, fisted his shirt to pull him off the ground and punched him. Satisfied that he would be out for several minutes, he went to Blair's side.

"Chief?" He began examining the damage from the PPG blast and checking quickly for other wounds. "You're okay," he soothed.

Blair winced as he sat up, clutching his side. He let out a labored sigh. "If this is okay, man, I *really* don't want to see bad." His face scrunched in pain as a jolt shot through his body. The wound was fairly superficial; thankfully their weapons had not been set to kill. Blair would still need medical attention, but that was better than the alternative.

Jim pulled Blair into a tight hug, murmuring against his hair, "You're okay," over and over.

Blair smiled into Jim's neck. It didn't take telepathy or an advanced degree in anthropology or Sentinel senses to know Jim was repeating the words as much to reassure himself as to calm Blair. Holding Jim as tightly as he could without causing further pain, he spoke quietly and meaningfully, "Yeah, big guy, I'm okay."

"Calid?" Blair asked after a few moments, when they'd both seemed to calm down.

Jim shook his head. "I had to make sure you were alright," he said without shame. It was a decision he knew he would make again and again when Blair was involved. "But we've got him." Jim indicated the man on the floor, still out cold. "He can tell us where they took Calid."

Blair's brow furrowed.

"She's not what they came for," he explained, remembering the warning they'd received days earlier.

Blair closed his eyes and leaned his head heavily on Jim's shoulder. "You," he exhaled, then snarled, "Psi-Corps."

## IV.

Slowly, eyes swimming and head pounding, Seth began to regain consciousness.

Seth hadn't managed his first groan before Jim was quieting Blair with a motion toward their guest.

Lifting his head with a low, drawn out, pained sound, Seth blinked his eyes open and immediately wished he hadn't.

It wasn't the first time he'd been on the receiving end of Ellison's harsh gaze. The experience was far from pleasant, but that's not what scared him. That honor fell to the man standing next to him.

The man he'd dismissed as a bookworm was now dressed in the rich brown garb of a Minbari Ranger. The distinctive figures were becoming a more common sight in the darker areas of B5, waiting for ships to ferry them to God knew where. Seth had seen firsthand what could happen if someone interfered or crossed a Ranger – he did not want to become one of those people.

"Seth," Jim snapped, standing between the man and Blair, breaking the thug's focus.

"What?!?" he squawked.

"Where's Calid?"

"The alien?" he chuckled darkly. "Kent said you'd care about it."

"Her name is Calid," Jim corrected angrily. Calid and Blair had returned his sanity, he'd be damned if he let this idiot refer to her as an 'it.'

Calmly, Blair placed a hand on Jim's arm. "Jim, come on, man."

Jim turned harshly to face Blair, but one look at his Ker'mair and he deflated. He nodded once, telling Blair he was okay. He turned back to Seth, humphed, and shook his head before turning away and walking out of the room.

Blair waited for a moment before speaking. "You know, you really shouldn't antagonize him like that."

Seth looked up at Blair through lazy eyes full of disdain. "Why should I care? It's Jim Ellison; he's not going to do anything."

"Jim is a good man," Blair acknowledged. "But what about me?"

"You?" Seth snickered. "You're a bookworm in a silly costume," he said, his bravado returning with Jim out of the room. "You couldn't hurt me if you wanted to."

Blair chuckled as he approached their captive and gently touched the still coloring bruise on his cheek, a silent reminder of who gave it to him. "Man, you really need to get past these preconceptions. It's not healthy." As he stepped back, Blair reminded himself of the plan and why he was doing this, why he'd made himself meditate as he dressed in his Ranger uniform, focusing on getting Calid back, knowing he'd have to remain calm and detached for this to work. Deftly he pulled a short metallic cylinder from his robes. "Do you know what this is?"

Seth puffed out a derisive noise.

"It's a Denn'bok, a Minbari fighting pike," Blair explained with a flick of his wrist, triggering the weapon to extend to its full length. "Only a handful of these are made every year, sometimes none. F'hursna Durhan presented me with this one when I completed my Anla'shok training. I was the third Torrbari to be granted the honor." He studied the staff for a moment, weighing it in his hand as his brow furrowed. "I've been so wrapped up in my work with Jim that I've been neglecting this." He flipped the staff so it ran straight along the outside of his forearm as he took a fighting stance, the tip of the staff pointing steadily at Seth. "Now, let's try this again."

Seth watched as the weapon arced in a gleam of silver stopping less than a hair's breadth away from his neck. He could feel the weight of the staff against his skin, never actually pressing into his flesh. He was quickly re-evaluating his assessment of the 'bookworm' in front of him.

"Where's Calid?"

As the door slide closed behind him, Blair shook himself as if he could physically shake off the mask he'd been wearing with Seth. He flicked his pike closed and sagged against the wall.

Jim laid a hand on his shoulder squeezing it reassuringly. "You did good, Chief."

When Blair looked up into Jim's eyes and gave him a quick nod, Jim found himself once again marveling at the strength underneath the loving, carefree spirit.

"You think he was telling the truth? That they took her back to B5?"

Jim nodded. He'd been monitoring Seth's heart rate and breathing with his senses and when he admitted they were headed back to B5 to report to Devon was the only time they were anything close to steady. He knew Blair hadn't been off-world since he came to Minbar over a year ago and he knew why. Returning to B5 would be dangerous – for both of them.

Blair let out a shaky sigh. "Okay," he said straightening up. "I'll call Jeff."

"Chief, you don't have to come. I'll bring her home."

Blair looked up angrily, eyes half hidden by his long lashes doing nothing to soothe the hardness that flashed in them. "Jim, if you think I am going to let you go off on this rescue mission without me, you're crazy. Besides, I'm your Ker'mair – you need me."

Jim made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a snicker. "I guess you'd better call Jeff then."

"Damn-it, Morgan!" Kent bellowed. "You said he was just a bookworm, no one to worry about."

Morgan shrank back, cradling his broken arm. "There was no way we could've known," he protested.

"It was your job to find out!"

"Kent-"

"Shut up." He squat down in front of Calid. "At least we've got you. Ellison will come for you soon enough; the quicker we get you back to the station the better. We'll have our own surprise for Ellison and his bookworm," Kent sneered.

"Pfft," Calid huffed. "You don't seem the kind to learn from your mistakes. You underestimated them once for lack of humility. You will do so again."

Kent snorted. "Then you underestimate me."

Calid simply looked up at her captor defiantly, smiling slyly, confident that together Jim and Blair could handle anything these thugs tried to dish out.

In one swift move the back of Kent's hand slammed across Calid's face, hard enough for his knuckles to break skin, leaving a bloody cut on her cheek as he stood.

The defiance in Calid's green eyes only intensified.

Kent gave a jerky nod to Peter, who quickly slid a heavy cloth bag over her head.

"Morgan, find out how much longer until we dock." As Morgan turned to leave, Kent added, "Try not to screw that up, too."

Jim found himself in the same crowded starport he'd been so lost and overwhelmed in three months earlier. This time, however, he was able to filter through the sights and sounds, turning down or tuning out anything that wasn't important. It felt so strange, almost like hearing for the first time or seeing properly after a lifetime of fuzzy sound and blurred images. Everything was clear, clean; the constant hum of tense, nerve-wracking static that had seemed to engulf his senses was gone, just threads he could sort and navigate. And it was all because of the man walking beside him. He looked over at his friend and stopped in his tracks. Blair's body was a study in tension, in stark counterpoint to his easy going, free-spirited nature and his bright blue eyes burned with something as close to anger as Jim had ever seen.

In a swift move Jim grabbed Blair's arm, spinning him around to face him. Before Blair could protest, Jim's hand was sliding into his hair and pulling him in for a deep, slow kiss.

"What was that for?" Blair asked breathlessly.

Jim let his thumb caress Blair's cheek. "Because I love you. Because you gave me my life back. Because you needed it and I needed to give it to you."

Blair squeezed Jim's wrist lovingly and smiled up at him.

It was a small thing, a slight upturning of the lips and nothing like the blindingly joyful smiles Jim had gotten used to, but small as it was, it was the first real smile he'd seen since Browning had invaded their home.

"C'mere," Jim said, dragging Blair into a nearby alcove.

"Jim, wha-" His words were cut off by Jim's finger to his lips.

"No," Jim said gently. "You are going to listen to me." He removed his finger and placed his hands on Blair's shoulders. "You need to stop this. This tension and anger. I know you're angry; so am I. I know you're willing to do anything to get Calid back. And we will, I promise you, Blair, we *will* get her back. But this, this isn't you and I need *you*." He chuckled softly. "Use your dials."

Blair ducked his head with a small laugh. "You're an asshole sometimes."

"I know," Jim pulled Blair in for a quick hug, "but you love me anyway." The words so often said with humor were suffused with a self-aware honesty.

"Yeah, I do." He pulled Jim in for a short, but meaningful kiss. "We'll get her." Blair shook himself and let out a slow, heavy breath.

"Ready?"

Blair nodded. "As I can be."

"Good 'cause I think I hear Jeff."

"Wow, really? Can you tell where he is?" He practically beamed.

Jim let out a full laugh, of course bringing up his senses would set Blair on a more even keel. Jim cocked his head, listening intently. "He's coming from a hallway up ahead," his brow wrinkled, "but it's not one of the main corridors. Maybe a private entry?"

Blair smirked. "There's a personnel corridor they use for dignitaries sometimes, when their visits are unofficial."

Jim looked at him.

“What?”

Shaking his head and rolling his eyes affectionately, Jim started toward Jeff's voice.

“Practical application, man. We don't get to practice with your hearing enough.”

“Trust me, Chief; you give all my senses a workout on a daily basis.”

“Was that a compliment or an insult?”

Jim gave a small snort in response.

Thirty yards later they reached the mouth of the secured hallway Jeff's voice had emanated from.

The man himself appeared a few moments later followed by two Anla'shok. “Jim,” Sinclair smiled as he gripped Jim's hand and gave his shoulder a brotherly squeeze. “Blair,” he greeted the other man with a quick hug, knowing how familial Blair was with his friends. “It's good to see you. I just wish the circumstances weren't what they are.”

“Yeah,” Jim agreed softly.

“Where's your friend?’ Sinclair asked.

“Him, oh, he's back in the house.”

Sinclair nodded and made a little motion with his fingers indicating the two Rangers with him should go fetch their prisoner. “Come on, we can wait for them in the shuttle. It'll be easier to talk there, too.”

They settled into the transport shuttle to wait for the Rangers to return with Seth.

“What's your plan?” Jeff asked, his voice retaining its calming timbre even under the circumstances.

“Get Calid back,” Jim answered succinctly.

Jeff chuckled. “Always the easy solution,” he replied jovially.

They shared the light laughter for a moment before Jeff's expression turned somber. “You know it's a trap.”

Giving his friend a short nod, he looked over at Blair. “We know.”

Jeff took a deep breath. “I spoke to Michael earlier. He's expecting you. He'll help any way he can. Blair,” he took out a small data crystal, “give this to Delenn, she'll know what to do with it.”

Blair took the crystal, asking, “What's on it?”

Jeff's answering smile held a hint of conspiratorial mischief. “Back up.”

“Thanks, Jeff,” Jim said.

“Don't mention it.”

“Yeah, thanks, ma-” Blair cut himself off, quickly correcting, “Entil'Zha.”

Sinclair chuckled and shook his head knowing there was no point in trying to reassure Blair that the title was far from necessary between them. Jeff sat back and studied his friends. “You look good,” he said, “all things considered. Calid's right, you are good for each other. I almost feel sorry for Browning.”

His words were met with twin looks of confusion.

“I doubt he realizes the dragon he's woken.”



"Marcus," Garibaldi called, clapping a firm hand on the other man's shoulder, giving him a furtive look.

"Why, Mr. Garibaldi, I didn't know you cared." His thick British accent made his playful words sound that much more sarcastic. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"A friend of yours is sending a package from Minbar. I thought you might want to pick it up personally, make sure it doesn't get damaged."

"We can't have that," Marcus agreed with only slightly less sarcasm. Despite his persona of arrogance and derision, Marcus was one of the most intelligent and gifted Anla'shok. It was a persona that allowed him to move through different societies and social classes with ease. "So, when can I expect this package?"

Michael rolled his eyes at Marcus' typical dramatic turn. "Here," he said, handing Marcus a small pad with the ship, docking information, and manifest.

Marcus' eyes widened for a moment, not quite understanding, but he recovered quickly. "I suppose you'll want to see my treasure once I retrieve it."

"Curiosity may be bad for the cat, but it is essential for a security officer."

Marcus smiled a true friendly smile. "I'll contact you once I've picked it up."

Michael nodded and squeezed his shoulder again. "Be careful."

"I always am, Mr. Garibaldi."

A grimy hand waved Devon over to a table set in the ample shadows of the Brown Sector bar.

"Christ, Devon, can you look any more conspicuous?"

The Nightwatch captain looked like a rat in a room full of cats.

"Sit down," Kent grabbed the other man and yanked him into a seat, "before someone takes a pot shot at that bull's-eye painted all over you."

"Why are we meeting here?" He didn't like meeting people like Browning outside the confines of his office. He knew Browning was a dangerous man no matter where they were – at least when they met in his office it was on his home turf. "Do you have Ellison?"

"We're meeting here because I don't think you want to have this conversation in the middle of the Zocalo."

Devon gave a begrudging humph.

"We don't have Ellison, yet; we will soon. We have something he wants. Once he's here, he won't be leaving."

Devon suppressed a shiver at the malice in Browning's tone. He knew there was no love lost between the two men, but sometimes he wondered if Browning didn't take it to extremes. "If you don't have Ellison why are we having this meeting?" Devon asked, hoping his blustering would conceal some of his discomfort.

Browning snickered darkly at Devon's squirming. "There was a problem."

"A problem?"

"There was somebody else there," he explained. "I don't like surprises, Devon. They have one of my men."

"How much does he know?" he asked tersely, his surroundings momentarily forgotten.

"About the job? That Nightwatch wanted Ellison," he virtually spat; he was beginning to realize there was more to this job than simply retrieving Ellison.

Devon glared at Browning as he stood. "Fix it," he demanded and walked away.

Devon barreled into the Nightwatch offices, ignoring Matthew's attempts to speak to him, barking at the young man as he passed, "Who do we have in the docking bays and customs we can trust?"

"I'm not sure, sir," he eked out. "But Mr. Bes-"

"Find me someone!" He snapped, voice rising angrily to drown out Matthew's words.

"I wouldn't bother. Mr. Ellison has enjoyed a certain place among the people on the station; he won't be easily caught boarding Babylon 5," Bester explained calmly. His smooth, patronizing tone ticked along mental boxes that set nerves on edge like teeth reacting to nails on a chalkboard.

"Mr. Bester. I didn't realize."

Bester ignored him. "I take it things have not gone according to plan."

"A minor setback," Devon lied, retreating to the safety of his desk.

Bester held his finger up to his chin as if in deep contemplation. "I find that often when someone uses phrases like 'minor setback,' the reality is anything but, don't you, Mr. Devon?" he asked, leaning forward toward Devon in an overly dramatic play of sincerity.

Devon swallowed, remembering that unlike regular teeps, Psi-Cops followed their own set of rules, cursory scans were a matter of course for them, and Bester wouldn't spare a thought to doing a deeper scan if he thought it would get him what he wanted. Devon sat down heavily in his chair, willing his hands to stop shaking and his mind to stop thinking about how much he hated telepaths.

"I can assure you, your opinion of telepaths matters very little to me. I'm here for Captain Ellison; you are merely a means to an end. Perhaps you would feel better if I dealt with Mr. Browning directly."

Devon jerked up straighter.

"Don't be so shocked, Mr. Devon. I need Ellison; do you honestly think I'd keep myself out of the loop?"

Devon nodded rather numbly.

"Now, where can I find Mr. Browning?"

If the atmosphere in the bar had been tense when the head of Nightwatch entered, it was deathly frigid when the Psi-Cop walked in.

He smiled too brightly at the frozen occupants, saying, "Don't stop on my account, gentlemen. Please, continue," he added, hand waving entreatingly.

Slowly, in quiet whispers, conversation returned, and Bester wound his way to the darkened corner where Browning and one of his men were drinking cheap synthetic whisky. "Mr. Browning, I presume."

"That depends. What do you want, Psi-Cop?" Browning snarled.

Bester helped himself to a seat at the small table. "Mr. Devon commissioned you to procure an item. I want it."

Browning glared at the black-clad figure.

"Think of it as cutting out the middleman," he said cheerfully.

Browning looked into his tumbler thoughtfully before knocking it back in one go. As he reached for the bottle and poured himself another drink he admitted, "We don't have it."

"I'm well aware of that, Mr. Browning. I also know you are expecting him."

"If you know so much, why don't you just take him?" Browning asked sardonically.

"I wouldn't dream of depriving you of your finder's fee, Mr. Browning. Besides, this work is more suited to your skill set."

Browning grunted. "So why are you here if it's not your 'skill set'?"

"I want Ellison; you want your fee. As I see it you've rather complicated the situation. I am merely here to assist in resolving this mess."

Browning held back a shiver as he was sure he heard 'your' at the same time Bester said 'this.' "And exactly how do you think you can assist us?"

"You're expecting Ellison and his friend on one of the arriving transports, correct? And I take it you have something, or more likely someone, they care for, which means you're planning on Ellison coming to you."

"That's the idea."

"Quaint. And if Ellison and his friend bring reinforcements?"

"We'll be ready; don't you worry."

"Possibly. But wouldn't it be fortuitous for you and your men to know in advance."

Browning raised a curious eyebrow.

One of the things you could always count on with men like Kent Browning – they could be so easily played. Bester's smile widened like a snake watching a mouse scurrying helplessly into its path.

The Minbari transport docked in one of the smaller cargo bays.

On board Blair was breathing deeply. He hadn't been prepared for the intensity of his reaction to being back in Earthgov territory. He knew that neither Delenn nor Sheridan would allow any harm to come to him from Earthgov or their representatives. Even without that reassurance he knew he had Jim, a point driven home by the heavy hand on his shoulder. He let out a weak chuckle after another deep breath. "I thought I was the one who was supposed to ground you?"

Jim smirked and squeezed his shoulder. "You ready for this?"

"I'll let you know when it's over," he quipped, a small smirk of his own tugging at his lips.

"Come on, Michael's supposed to have someone meeting us."

Blair smiled up at Jim opening his arms toward the door. "Age before beauty."

Jim rolled his eyes and led the way. Before they'd even cleared the loading ramp, Jim was extending his senses.

Hearing first. Machinery rumbled all around: forklifts, torches – cutting and welding, resistors, the natural sounds of engines coming, going, waiting. And no less than eight heartbeats, only five of which were nearby.

Then vision, eyes adjusting quickly to the dark bay. The captain of their transport was talking in hushed tones to one of the dock workers. That left one other body. He scanned the bay, letting his sight stretch out, following the sound of the unknown heartbeat. Jim was dialing his sight up, like Blair had taught him, to see through the shadows to locate the heartbeat, when a man dressed in the same brown garb as Blair stepped out from between the wall and a high stack of crates.

Blair saw their escort and smiled brightly. “Marcus,” he chirped happily, going in for a quick hug.

Marcus returned the smile and the hug. “It’s good to see you, Blair.”

“Jim, man,” Blair said tugging Jim by the arm, “this is Marcus Cole. We trained together.”

“Pleasure,” Marcus greeted.

Jim shook the offered hand and gave a nod.

“I thought you were on special assignment with Entil’Zha?” he asked Blair.

“I was, man, I was. But I guess you could say something came up.”

“Must’ve been important for him to give you up,” Marcus said, calculating eyes sizing up Blair’s companion.

“It is. And you can stop trying to intimidate each other.”

“Whatever are you talking about?” Marcus quipped indignantly.

Blair rolled his eyes dramatically. Don’t you have someplace to take us?”

“Right this way, gentlemen,” he said, with sarcastic insincerity.

“Smartass.”

Marcus flipped his dark hair back. “But darling, would you have me any other way?”

Jim grit his teeth as Blair chuckled at what was obviously an old joke between them.

Unceremoniously, Blair jabbed Jim in the side with a pointy elbow, giving him a wide-eyed ‘What’re you doing? Knock it off’ warning.

Jim shrugged a silent apology and forced his jaw to relax even as he admitted to himself that he was being unreasonably possessive. He relegated himself to the background, taking the opportunity to use his full senses to experience the place he considered home. The smells, sights, and sounds that composed the pulse of the station, now in Surround Sound, Technicolor, and Smell-o-vision. It was a throbbing, living, metropolis. More than that, it was *his* metropolis; it was where he belonged. The realization and repercussions hit him like a physical force, stopping him in his tracks.

Blair felt Jim still and immediately turned to him, placing a grounding hand on his arm. “Jim? Everything okay, big guy?”

Jim shook his head. “Yeah, Chief, fine,” he half lied; he knew he’d have to talk to Blair about his epiphany, but now they needed to focus on Calid. “How much further?” he asked Marcus, deflecting the conversation before Blair could push the matter.

Blair gave him a disapproving look, letting his Sentinel know they would be returning to the topic.

“Just up ahead.” Marcus smiled to himself, recognizing a Blair-inspired distraction when he heard one. He had no doubt that Jim knew these hidden, disused passages as well as, if not better than, he did.

True to his words, a few yards ahead they emerged into one of the Ambassadorial sections.

“Delenn?” Blair asked somewhat surprised. “Is that a good idea?”

"It's the smart one," Jim assured before Marcus had the chance. "The Ambassadorial chambers are the one place Nightwatch doesn't have full access."

"Give the man a cigar," Marcus said with a small smile.

Up ahead the sound of doors opening caused Blair to stiffen.

Jim placed a hand on his shoulder, giving Blair a gentle nod when he turned toward him.

Blair returned the nod and exhaled slowly. He relaxed even further seeing a familiar Minbari approaching them.

"Marcus. Dr. Sandburg. Captain Ellison," Lennier greeted each in turn. "Delenn is expecting you. Please." He indicated for them to accompany him.

"I hate to break up the party," Marcus chirped, "but I have to see a man about a dog. It was good to see you, Blair. Take care of yourself; I expect to hear all about this little adventure of yours." With a quick half bow Marcus left in search of Garibaldi.

Bester slowly walked a circle around the Minbari blindfolded and tied to a chair in the middle of the room. It had only taken a few choice words for Browning to bring him here to inspect their bait. Bester cocked his head thoughtfully before speaking. "I know Captain Ellison was with you because of the probability of his being a Sentinel. Trieria'min, I believe you call them." He smiled as Calid's thoughts confirmed it. His forefinger tapped his lips before stretching out in an authoritative gesture. "What I don't know is who your other guest was and what he has to do with Ellison." He came up short as Calid's thoughts turned to Blair. "A Ker'mair. Fascinating." Bester's lips turned up in a true smile. A Sentinel *and* a Guide. It was unprecedented.

"How did you," Calid began before stopping herself. Psi-Corps were the ones after Jim, so she shouldn't have been surprised these men had a telepath with them.

"You told me. You're concern for them is touching, and right on the surface."

Calid glared through the blindfold, her thoughts just this side of murderous, knowing the telepath would read them.

Bester chuckled. "Why thank you," he said with a nod of his head. "This has been *very* enlightening," he said in a voice that oozed saccharine self-satisfaction.

Delenn got Jim and Blair situated in her office before begging off to examine the data crystal from Sinclair and tossing the two men a knowing smile.

"I think she knows," Jim said conversationally.

"Oh, I *know* she knows."

Jim snickered and turned a protective eye to his partner, lacing the fingers of one hand in Blair's thick hair. "Good, then she won't be surprised by this," he said his voice dropping to a dark, sultry purr as he pulled Blair into a deep kiss.

It was possessive, as if Blair could be claimed with only a kiss.

When Jim finally pulled away, Blair's eyes sparkled with his smile and he licked his lips. "You know," he said breathlessly, "you don't need to be jealous of Marcus."

"Who said I was jealous?" Jim demanded indignantly.

Blair chuckled. "Jim, man, just because I don't have super senses doesn't mean I'm blind or deaf."

Jim grunted.

"Marcus lost his little brother to a Shadow attack. Marcus was the only survivor." Blair shrugged. "That's why he joined the Anla'shok; his brother, William, was one of us. When we met, man... baggage and so unfocused. Jeff asked me to work with him on it. Marcus used to say I reminded him of Will. He's treated me like a brother ever since. Tell you the truth I think it's one of the things that helped him focus."

Jim looked at him curiously. "Why have you never talked about him?"

Blair gave a little shrug. "It never came up, and I hadn't heard from him since he got his assignment. Besides, man, it's not like I haven't been a little preoccupied."

Jim gave a small snort in acknowledgement. "Fair enough." Jim snaked a hand around the back of Blair's neck, gently bringing their foreheads to touch. "But now that it *has* come up, you'll have to tell me about him."

"Deal," Blair huffed, too taken with the newness of being this close to Jim to give much protest.

A cough came from the doorway, startling Blair, but Jim didn't move, save to turn his head toward the door.

"Am I interrupting?" Michael asked nonchalantly. "I can come back later," he said, pointing out the doorway where he stood.

"Michael," Jim gave a breathy chuckle as a layer of tension slid from his body. Releasing Blair, he went to greet his friend, sharing a handshake and a one armed hug.

"How've you been?"

"Good. Better than I've been in a long time," Jim found himself saying, and meaning it. He smiled at Blair.

"I'm glad, Jim, truly."

Over by Delenn's desk, standing bashfully where Jim had left him, Blair returned the smile.

"Michael, this is Blair – my Guide, my partner."

Blair gave Michael a little wave. "Hi." He knew how much the Security Chief meant to Jim and he knew all too well that he was not the kind of person a military man would expect to be on the receiving end of Jim's affections. For the first time in his life Blair worried about meeting a lover's family.

Jim could almost feel the change in Blair – his heart sped up and his breathing took on a forced calm. He returned to stand next to Blair in a show of solidarity.

Michael just smiled, coming over to shake Blair's hand. "It's good to finally put a face to the name."

"Same here," Blair replied, his nerves calming with Jim's proximity and Michael's warm, accepting welcome.

Turning his attention back to Jim, "We've checked Browning's known boltholes, and he's being smart enough not to use them," Garibaldi informed them. "I've got my feelers out; we should have a line on him soon."

"And this Bester guy?" Blair asked.

"Oddly enough he's disappeared, too. Best guess is he's wherever your friend is. We find one, we find the other."

"I want to help."

"Jim, I don't know if that's such a good idea. After all, you're the one they're after."

Blair looked between the two men. He could easily see how important aiding in the search was to his Sentinel. "Jim's senses would make it easier," Blair offered, despite his unease.

"Come on, Michael. I can't just sit around and wait."

Michael huffed; he knew when he was on the losing side of a battle with Jim Ellison. "Alright. But I want to know where you are at all times. And you're taking one of our telepaths with you."

"If that's what it takes," Jim agreed.

Garibaldi stuck his head out the door and called, "Mr. Katine, could you come here?"

A moment later, a Minbari joined them.

"Mr. Katine, Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg."

Katine bowed. "A pleasure."

"I want you to accompany Mr. Ellison," he told the telepath. "He's about to do something foolish and he's going to need all the protection he can get."

"Of course."

Michael handed Jim a small comm device. "That's calibrated to my personal secure channel. If I don't hear from you every half hour I'm sending out a search party."

"Yes, mother," Jim said, rolling his eyes. "Well, Mr. Katine, shall we?"

"Thanks, man," Blair said to Michael, following Jim and Katine, only to have a hand press against his chest stopping him.

"Where do you think you're going, Chief?"

"With you," he answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Jim shook his head. "You're staying here." The 'where I know you're safe' went unsaid.

"Like Hell. You need me. What if you zone? This is the first time you've been faced with this much input." He put what he knew was a grounding hand on Jim's arm. "You *need* your Ker'mair."

Jim sighed, hating that Blair was right. He handed Blair the communicator. "If something happens you hang back and call Michael."

He took the device with a roll of his eyes. "It's not like I can't defend myself."

"I know, Chief, but knowing you're out of the fray will allow me to focus," Jim said gently.

Somewhat placated, Blair nodded. "As long as we find her."

"That's the plan, Chief." He offered him a reassuring smile.

## V.

The Zocalo was teeming with activity as always, and Jim found himself taking calming breaths and searching out Blair's presence. Hearing his Guide's quiet whispers telling him to dial down his senses or to tell him what he was picking up on, helping him focus.

They were approaching one of the lesser used connections to Brown Sector, when Jim stopped.

Blair was instantly at his side with a simple touch letting him know he was there. "What is it?"

"Machine oil."

"It's Brown Sector, man," he responded in confusion.

Jim shook Blair's words off. "This is different – biting," he explained. "I smelled it on one of Browning's thugs." Jim grimaced as the first scent was overtaken by the muddled scents associated with Down Below. "I lost it."

Blair moved closer until he was almost speaking into Jim's ear. "You can do this, Jim. Just focus on that scent, let your other senses fade into the background." Blair's voice calmed him with a smooth serenity Jim never failed to latch onto. "Now, think about the smell, the bitterness of it."

Jim opened eyes he hadn't realized he'd closed; turning to the right, he said, "This way."

Blair smiled proudly as he messaged Garibaldi with their new direction, telling him Jim was onto something.

Soon they were entering the bowels of Down Below, a place where few save the desperate ventured. Even Command comms only functioned sporadically at best. The air was fetid and greasy just like the corridor walls. The oppression and desolation there was like a physical thing.

Jim stopped suddenly, his arm flying out to stop Blair as he made a shushing motion with his other hand. Cocking his head to the right he listened intently to two men in the distance.

*"I don't like it. I don't care how 'useful' he is. They're unnatural."*

*"Don't you think I know that, Morgan," the other man hissed. "But if Kent says we need him, then we need him."*

*"Working with a teep," the first voice – Morgan, Jim reminded himself – huffed out. "It's a sad day Pete. It's a really sad day."*

*The man identified as Pete snorted. "Finish your drink. Kent's already gonna chew you a new one for drinking."*

*"Not like I'm alone in that," Morgan snickered as his glass chinked onto the table.*

*"Yeah, but I hold my liquor better." Pete huffed; the sound of chairs scraping over corrugated steel echoed.*

Jim flinched back in reaction to the harsh sound.

"Jim, man, what is it?"

The big man gave his head a little shake as if shaking away a fly. "Two of Browning's men. They're coming this way."

Jim hadn't even had a chance to look for cover when Blair piped up, "The bulkhead."

Giving a jerky nod they slid behind the convenient structure.

"Teeps!" Morgan cursed, shaking his head.

"God, Morgan, give it a rest. We're still getting our share and if this Bester guy has such a hard-on for Ellison, and Kent thinks he can help, so be it. Now, would you *please* shut up about it. The last thing I want is the creep to pick up on this conversation; I doubt it would end well for either of us."

The threat of being on the Psi-Cop's radar shut Morgan's protests with a snap.



As soon as the two were out of earshot, Jim turned to the Minbari, "Mr. Katine, can you tell if there are any other telepaths in the vicinity?"

"None at the moment," Katine informed them.

John nodded. "The moment that changes..."

The Minbari ducked his head in understanding.

"And you," Jim turned to Blair, "stay back and try to get Michael."

"Alright. Okay," Blair answered quickly, hands up in a gesture of surrender. Jim didn't need to worry about him any more than he already was and Blair was willing to take his chances on getting forgiveness before getting permission when it came right down to it. Even so, Blair did hang back as he tried to raise Michael on the comm.

"Where the Hell have you two been?" Browning snapped when his two wayward men appeared.

"Geez, Kent, chill out. We just stopped for a drink," Peter explained and Morgan flinched. Nobody talked to Kent Browning that way if they didn't want to spend the next six months eating from a tube, but Peter had come to Babylon 5 with Kent years ago and he'd known him even longer. "Any word on Ellison?"

"He's getting closer. Someone saw him in Brown 14. He's got a Minbari with him and that *bookworm*."

Peter grunted.

"Where's the teep?" Morgan blurted out.

"Christ, Morgan!" Pete exclaimed, rolling his eyes. "You really have no concept of self-preservation."

Kent sniggered, clapping Peter's shoulder. "He's just saying what we're thinking. He's in the back with the Minbari."

"What is it, Jim?" Blair's voice soothed.

"It's Browning. Bester's with them – in a side room with Calid." He turned to the Minbari, who gave a slow nod confirming the telepath was close by.

Blair grabbed Jim's arm before he could make a move on the three men. "Wait," he said simply, turning away, heading back along the corridor they'd come from.

"Damn-it, Sandburg," Jim swore.

"Just stay put. I'll be right back."

Jim glowered, trying to split his senses between following his infuriating Ker'mair and the men they'd been searching for; grudgingly, he let Browning and his men, and more importantly Calid, win out.

Blair returned minutes later only to be greeted by Jim grinding out, "Did you have fun not getting a hold of Michael?"

"Give me five minutes," Blair said, completely ignoring Jim's question.

Jim had the good sense to look confused; there was no way Michael could have men he trusted down here that fast and that was assuming Blair even gotten through to him.

"Trust me. Five minutes and we – *you* can take care of them. Katine and I will hang back."

He eyed his friend carefully. Jim knew he was up to something; he just hoped it was worth the cloak of mystery. Still, Jim agreed to give him his five minutes, keeping his eyes and ears on the men in the compartment ahead. After several minutes he gave a perturbed sidelong glance to his partner.

Blair rolled his eyes. "You're Special Forces; you're trained to wait patiently."

Jim cocked an eyebrow. "Sorry, my patience tends to be tested by this annoying, hyperactive Ker'mair I know."

Any retort Blair may have had died on his lips when Jim held his hand up and focused everything on the men up ahead. "Bester," was all he said at first. "Something about moving Calid."

"So much for waiting." Blair flourished his fighting pike, ready to disregard his promise to stay back.

"Chief." Jim placed a warning hand on Blair's chest. "No."

Blair glared, but closed his pike.

"Thank you," he said in earnest. "Mr. Katine?"

The Minbari nodded his affirmation and the two men took off down the darkened corridor.

As soon as they were out of sight, Blair flicked his pike back open and went after them. He may have promised to stay back, but he never said how far. And it wasn't as if Jim actually thought Blair would let his Sentinel out of his sight under the circumstances.

Jim stopped at the entrance to the cargo room. "Damn-it, Sandburg, do you ever listen?" he growled softly into the darkness behind them.

"Hey, I'm back!"

"When this is over we're going to have a long talk about what 'stay back' means."

Blair snorted.

Jim stuck his head around the door to get a visual to go with what he was hearing. "Okay, there's one by the door – he'll be easy to take out, but it will alert the others. Browning and one of his goons off to the left with plenty of crates they can use for cover. There's a door in the far right corner, that's where Bester is, so most likely where Calid is." Jim sighed. "I can draw Browning's fire. Bester's not going to risk himself in a firefight; he doesn't like to get his hands dirty unless he's sure he's got an out, but we still have to get past him."

"Katine, right now you're concealing mine and Jim's thoughts, right?" Blair asked, barely waiting for Katine's 'yes.' "You could block Bester directly if you could see him?"

Katine nodded.

"Could you maybe, like scramble his reception without seeing him?"

"I believe so. It will not be as effective," Katine answered.

Blair nodded and looked at Jim. "It's our best chance."

"Fine," Jim huffed. "There's a low row of crates running parallel to walls on the right; they should provide you some cover – just stay *down*."

"Yes, mother." Blair's caustic tone was tamed by the fond look in his eyes. "I'll be fine and we'll get her back." He squeezed Jim's shoulder.

Jim smiled. "Isn't that my line, Chief?"

"Yeah, well, I thought I'd borrow it."

Shaking his head, Jim wrapped a hand around Blair's nape. "Be careful," he whispered softly.

"I promise."

Jim peered around the door, PPG drawn, and left hand raised to give the signal for them to go. With a quick double shake of Jim's fingers, Blair and Katine darted in a crouch to the safety of the crates.

A moment later the first of Browning's men hit the ground.

Blair poked his head over a crate. He told himself he just wanted to get his bearings and locate the other men in the room. In truth he wanted to make sure Jim was alright before he left on his own errand. Peering over the crate, he could see the exchange of PPG fire and allowed that to be comfort enough. He inhaled deeply, before huffing it out with a definitive nod.

They reached the first corner easily enough, the sounds of PPG fire a constant, almost reassuring backdrop. At the corner there was a large gap between the crates to allow machines and workers easy access. It was a brief exposure in the scheme of things, but it was still exposure. Blair's fingers rubbed soothingly over the cool surface of the closed pike in his hand as he pushed all thoughts except Calid to the wayside. With a quick look to Katine behind him, he rounded the corner – Katine on his heels – and was greeted by the sight of Bester only a few yards away. "Stay here," he told Katine. "If anything happens, get back to Jim." He didn't wait for the Minbari's response, creeping toward the Psi-Cop with surprising speed.

Thanks to Katine, Blair made it almost two-thirds of the way before he drew Bester's attention.

Bester let off two rounds before squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head. It felt as if someone was breaking down the barriers and filters that protected a telepath from the white noise of the world. "Damn-it," he swore, sending a wild shot in Blair's direction before retreating through the doorway to the adjoining room. Immediately he went to the bound figure dominating the room, releasing the cuffs around her wrists and ankles.

"I hope you don't expect my thanks," Calid said, rubbing her wrists and eyeing Bester's PPG warily.

"Not at all. I expect Captain Ellison's."

"Teingati has nothing to thank you for," she snapped.

"Not yet, but I'm sure the safe return of his mentor at the hands of the Psi-Corps, and yours truly, will be worth it."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"I think you should reconsider. I'm not a violent man. Violence is the last out of a desperate man." He raised the PPG almost thoughtfully. "But as they say, desperate times."

Calid's eyes hardened, but she stood. "Well?" she demanded.

"Thank you," he said excelling at making sincerity sound self-satisfied and anything but sincere. He walked over to a set of floor to ceiling lockers. "If you'd be so kind." He indicated for Calid to move the lockers aside.

With a thoroughly underwhelmed huff, Calid scooted the lockers away, revealing a second door.

"Always know your surroundings," Bester said, grinning.

"Calid!" Blair called from the doorway.

Calid's first instinct was to answer him, but she waited for Bester's reaction.

"Go on," he instructed calmly. "The last thing we want is for your friends to worry unnecessarily."

"I'm alright," Calid answered.

Blair crouched by the door, weighing his options. He had no way of knowing the actual layout of the room or if there was any cover. The best he could do right now was wait and hope his own form of back-up was in place.

Never taking his eyes off Calid, Bester opened the uncovered door. Before the door could complete its opening swoosh a staff came seemingly out of nowhere, crashing into Bester's wrist. The shock of it caused Bester to drop his PPG and turn toward his attacker.

On the other side of the 'secret' door stood three Anla'shok, all with their staves pointed at him.

He gripped his abused wrist, shooting impotent daggers with his eyes.

"How are you?" Blair asked when he reached Calid and bent to pick up the fallen PPG.

"Much better, now," she said with a soft undertone of relief in her voice.

Outside, the PPG fire had stopped, and within seconds Jim was standing in the doorway. His eyes swept over the group. "Everyone okay?"

"We're fine," Blair answered.

"Chris," Blair said to one of the Rangers as Jim took charge of Bester, "thank you."

The young woman smiled at him. "Our pleasure." She smirked. "Entil'Zha always said you were trouble."

Blair rolled his eyes. "Calid. Christine, Necine, Donald."

"Pleasure."

"Likewise, ma'am," Donald replied.

"Go with them, they'll take you to Delenn."

Calid offered Blair a small smile and a touch to his arm. "Thank you."

"Browning and his men are safely tucked away awaiting extradition to Minbar," Jim informed Blair as he took a seat across from Bester.

Bester snickered, back straight, expressive arms pulled close to his body; even the hand punctuating his words was held mere centimeters from his chest. "I doubt Earthgov will allow that; not with their current agenda."

"Then it's good their extradition forms have been expedited; their transport leaves for Minbar in a few hours."

"Bravo, Captain. I'm impressed. That's a skill set the Corps could make use of."

Jim cocked an unamused eye at the telepath.

"Very well. But if you change your mind... I trust Ms. Calid is well."

"No thanks to you," Blair growled.

"On the contrary, after all, it was I who released her."

"At gunpoint," Jim added calmly.

"A misunderstanding, I'm sure."

"Mr. Bester, you were a party to the kidnapping and captivity of a Minbari citizen. That is *not* a misunderstanding."

Bester smiled slyly. "I had nothing to do with Mr. Browning's actions while he was on Minbar. How could I? I just met the man yesterday." Bester touched a thoughtful finger to his lips. "In point of fact, who's to say I didn't simply overhear Browning and his men and then create a plausible scenario to gain access to Ms. Calid in order to rescue her?" He preened. "You could even say I was the hero of the story."

Slowly Jim stood to lean over the table separating him from the Psi-Cop. "You are anything *but* the hero."

Bester smirked and leaned closer to Jim almost whispering, "Hero or villain, you have no right to hold me here."

Now it was Jim's turn to smirk. "We're not holding you. You're free to go whenever you want. But you should know, there are two Minbari outside that door ready to take you to see Ambassador Delenn – Warrior Caste, wasn't it, Chief?"

"Yep." The young man smiled broadly, every muscle in his face seeming to turn up as if his whole body was smiling.

Jim nodded. "Nothing holding you here."

Bester rubbed his thumb and forefinger together thoughtfully. "What is it you want, Captain?"

"I want you and Psi-Corps to leave Dr. Sandburg, Calid, and me alone. Forever. I never want to see or hear about you or any other member or representatives of Psi-Corps looking for or asking about us."

Bester stayed quiet for long moments as he calculated what would be involved in succumbing to Ellison's terms and if it was worth it. "I'm afraid I'll have to report back that our intel was greatly exaggerated and that unfortunately Captain Ellison's sensory anomalies were merely the result of a prolonged undercover assignment and the accompanying fatigue." He met Jim's cool blue eyes once he'd finished speaking. "Will that suffice?"

Jim looked to Blair for his reaction.

With a brief hesitation, Blair gave a slow nod.

"Glad that's settled. Now, there's one last thing I need from you."

Bester offered a bemused smile. "My bags are already packed."

"I know." Jim's voice turned cold, as icy as his eyes. "Get off *my* station."

Jim, Blair, and Michael watched as their unwanted guest from Psi-Corps passed through customs and disappeared into the embarkment area. They were quiet as they waited with the friends and family of other passengers for the transport to leave. It wasn't until the ship vanished into hyperspace that they relaxed.

Garibaldi let out a long-suffering huff. Bester might be gone for now, but he'd be back – he always would. "So, what's your plan?"

Jim put a hand on Blair's shoulder before answering. "I'm not sure, Michael. We've," he indicated Blair, "got some talking to do." He squeezed Blair's shoulder when he felt him tense.

Michael smiled and nodded, rocking back on his heels. "You know where to find me," he said before leaving.

"Jim," Blair began hesitantly; Jim wanting to talk was throwing up warning bells he didn't even know he had. He was the talker, not Jim.

"Chief," he said softly getting Blair's attention. Jim trailed his fingers along Blair's strong jaw, tilting his chin up and placing a gentle kiss on his lips. "We need rest. Then we'll talk. Come on, it'll be nice to sleep in my own bed again."

\*

Years of military training had seen to it that when Jim woke up it was with a start, his body and mind on full alert. So finding himself slowly coming to with a warm weight on his chest and strands of dark hair that always seemed to hold some warm woody scent tickling his nose was a decidedly unique experience and he took the time to savor it. He let the feel of skin on skin flood his senses, Blair's breath, slow and warm and just a little moist, brushing over his chest like rolling waves of warmth, his long hair falling over him in wild tendrils.

Blair made a small noise, so soft Jim doubted he'd have heard it if not for the senses he so often cursed. Jim smiled. Maybe Blair was right about them being a gift if it meant he got to have moments like this. Dropping a kiss on his head, Jim called his name softly, "Blair."

The young man murmured into Jim's chest, causing Jim to chuckle. The rumbling in his ear had Blair pulling himself toward wakefulness.

"Morning, sunshine," Jim offered with another chuckle.

"Mmm," Blair answered noncommittally, but he looked up at Jim with a smile.

"What do you say to some breakfast?"

"Depends on who's making it."

"That depends on whether or not Michael thought to stock the fridge. We might be reduced to dry cereal."

Blair laughed playfully. "It's a good thing I'm a cheap date."

Wrapping his arms around the younger man, flipping them easily, "You are not a cheap date," he told Blair emphatically, his eyes softer than his tone might've implied.

Looking at Jim's face, relaxed in a way he rarely saw, his pale blue eyes lit by some fond emotion, Blair felt truly at home. It was then Jim's words from the day before came crashing down – Jim wanted to 'talk' to him. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed the lump trying to form in his throat.

"Blair?" Jim's brow furrowed when he didn't answer. "Chief?" he tried the nickname. "What's wrong?"

Blair blinked up at the man he loved. "You said we needed to talk," he said simply.

"That."

"Yeah."

He gave Blair what he hoped was a reassuring kiss before rolling to the side. "You know how you're always telling me that Trieria'min meant to watch over a tribe or village?"

"Yeah, man, of course." This was not the conversation Blair had been expecting and he pushed himself up on one elbow to look at his friend.

"I realized something when Marcus was taking us to see Delenn. This place is where I belong. This station, these people are my tribe."

Blair watched Jim thoughtfully for a moment. Even though Jim had been learning to control and use his senses, he'd always fought their purpose; now, he was talking about tribes and where he belonged.

"Hey, Chief," he reached out and brushed Blair's cheek with his fingertips, "you still with me?"

"Yeah." He blinked once, giving a mental shake. "Yeah, Jim. This is just major, you know."

"I know." Jim's fingers fell from Blair's face. "And I can't ask that of you."

"What!?" Blair snapped and virtually threw himself into a sitting position facing his thick-headed Sentinel. "That's what you're worried about? You can be such an idiot sometimes," he said, rolling his eyes heavenward and shaking his head in long-suffering fondness. He jabbed a long finger into Jim's chest. "You Triera'min. Me Ker'mair," turning the finger on himself with the final words. "I go where you go," he added just in case Jim's bull-headedness missed the point. "Besides, man, I love you. I'd follow you to Hell and back for that alone."

"Blair," Jim tried to sooth his lover; twining their fingers together he tugged Blair back down to lie next to him. "It'll be dangerous, especially for you. What would I do if something happened to you?"

"Jim," Blair breathed more than spoke, innately understanding that Jim wasn't referring to losing his Guide. Breathing a kiss across Jim's knuckles, he answered him with absolute conviction, "You'll never let that happen."

"You really want to do this?"

"Jim, have you ever known me to do something I *didn't* want to do?"

Jim snickered. "Come 'ere, you." He pressed their foreheads together. "You're impossible, you know that."

"All part of the Sandburg charm."

Smiling, Jim shook his head and went in for a deep kiss full of promises for now and for the future.

## Epilogue

Throngs of people, human and alien, mulled about the Zocalo. Some were here to seek refuge, some merely passing through, and some called the station home. And on the gangway above it all a figure stood in the black and silver-grey uniform of an independent Babylon 5. Jim smiled, hearing a familiar cadence of footsteps approaching.

Blair slid up next to him, shoulders almost touching.

Uncharacteristically, Jim wrapped his arms around Blair as they looked out over the busy Zocalo – Jim was not known for public displays especially while they were on duty. He hooked his chin over Blair's shoulder and asked, "Are you still glad you came?"

Blair smiled softly and tilted his head to press against Jim's. It was a familiar question; one Jim asked him at least once a week. By now, Jim knew the answer, but Blair suspected he sometimes needed to hear it. "This is where we belong. And I'm with you. Of course, I'm glad I came."

Jim placed a small kiss on Blair's neck with a quiet, "Thank you."

Blair turned in Jim's arms. "Jim, man, is everything alright?"

The bigger man looked chagrined, but answered truthfully. "It's just been a rough couple months."

"Jim, for us, it's been a rough couple years. But we made it. We're here."

"Yeah," Jim snickered with a chuckle, "that we are. So should we get some work done?"

"Hey, you're the Sentinel; I'm just along for the ride."

"You're more than that, Chief."

Blair simply smiled at him.

"Now, let's go see what Michael has for us," he said, throwing his arm around Blair's neck and dragging him off toward the Security offices.