

Splinters of the Past

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A story for for femslash08 and LJ user netgirl_y2k.

The year is 2272. It's long after Susan left Babylon 5, and she's been put in charge of the second expedition to former Vorlon space.

Featured fandoms: Babylon 5

Featured pairings: Ivanova/Winters

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: PG

Colonel Susan Ivanova leaned back in her command chair and looked out through the viewscreen. It was the middle of the night shift, and with most of the crew down at the research base she was the only one on the bridge. Heck, she was almost the only one on the entire ship. She'd assigned herself this shift to give herself some peace and quiet to write the daily reports President Sheridan had insisted on. It worked, as far as getting peace and quiet was concerned. But she had no idea what to write.

Outside, the space station slowly rotated around its own axis. The *vorlon* space station. The entire thing was yellow, swirly, rounded and vaguely alive-looking. Like Kosh's ship had been, except yellow instead of green. Possibly the color had a significance, but if so they hadn't the first clue what.

She sighed. Maybe just start with the traditional boilerplate. She pulled the keyboard closer.

"Second Interstellar Alliance Expedition to former Vorlon space," she typed. "Mission Day 33. Second day in Vorlon Space. Almost spring back in Geneva, I think. Expedition Commander Colonel Susan Ivanova reporting."

What more? Well, the things they *hadn't* done needed to be put in there. Might as well get that out of the way.

"We have not yet found any trace of the first expedition," she wrote. "Given that their target was the homeworld itself and we have not yet attempted an approach to that, this is not surprising. We remain at the edge of Vorlon space, in stationary position roughly one hundred kilometers from the outermost Vorlon presence we've found. This presence is a station, as previously reported. The exoarcheologists have boarded and established a base camp in what appears to be a landing bay. A *huge* landing bay, it's easily a kilometer across. We have nowhere near the time to do a detailed investigation of the station, but the science people want to spend some time on it to get a feel for the kind of things we may be finding further along. I've given them four days before we proceed inwards."

She rested her hands in her lap.

And I can feel the damn thing *looking* at me, she added mentally. It's kind of like when Bester tried to sneak a scan, except so much more subtle I'm not a hundred percent sure it's even there.

She didn't want that in the report. Sure, the Vorlons were well known to have used living technology, but none of the other sensitives on the expedition felt anything, and they were all P5 or higher. That they should feel nothing while P-bugger all Ivanova felt something was just ridiculous.

Unless the station was singling her out. Which was something that wasn't entirely impossible, after all. She'd been closer to an actual living Vorlon than nearly the entire human species, while they'd had Kosh on Babylon 5. A few had been closer, of course. President Sheridan. Doctor Kyle. Lyta Alexander. G'kar.

They'd all been changed by the contact. Changed *a lot*, mostly. Just the thought that a Vorlon artifact might be paying her special attention gave Susan the creeps.

She put her hands back to the keyboard.

"Next report scheduled in 24 hours. Expedition Commander out," she typed. She hit "send" quickly, before she could change her mind. The signal would be picked up by a ship waiting far outside Vorlon space and relayed from there to Minbar and Geneva.

The ship was also keeping a constant eye on the four expedition ships, in case they vanished without a trace like the first expedition.

Ivanova sighed. Why the Hell had she let Sheridan talk her into doing this? The entire thing was insane. The chances of finding something useful were slim at best, and the risk was far too high. She wished she'd brought more vodka. Failing that, that the crew engineers would get around to arranging an illicit still. Which they so far hadn't. Curse her reputation for knowing *everything* that went on aboard her ship.

The communication system crackled to life.

"Colonel Ivanova?" a voice said. Lieutenant Commander Jones, her executive officer and currently the commander of the on-station base. She sounded nervous.

Susan had never heard her sound nervous before. Afraid, yes. Angry, yes. Exasperated, often. Nervous, no.

"Speaking," she said. "What is it, Alice?"

"Um," Jones said. "The science people. They've found something."

"They're on a space station several kilometers in diameter built by incredibly advanced aliens," Susan said. "It'd be pretty strange if they *didn't* find something."

"It appears to be a human female," Jones said.

Susan frowned.

"It *appears* to be? Is there something strange about her? Apart from being here at all?"

There was an unusually long pause from Jones.

"I think you'd better come take a look yourself, Colonel," she finally said.

Susan had been aboard the Vorlon station once before, shortly after they first arrived. She'd been stunned by the sheer unimaginable size of the place then, and she was now. Everything the expedition had brought in was dwarfed in comparison.

When she stopped to think about the place the feeling of disquiet just got worse. What had the Vorlons needed a space this size for? And why was it filled with what was almost exactly an Earth-normal atmosphere? Given that they chose to live in environment suits anyway, they could have filled the place with anything they wanted. So, obviously, they wanted an Earth atmosphere. And she was back at the disturbing.

With, this time, an extra strong feeling of being observed.

"Sir?"

She snapped out of her thoughts. Alice was standing at attention next to her.

"At ease, Lieutenant Commander," she said. "And why are you standing at attention in the first place? You know you don't need to do that when it's just us."

Alice nervously licked her lips.

"The... thing... is this way," she said, indicating a direction. "It's a bit of a walk. Maybe we can get started?"

Susan shrugged. "Sure," she said.

They started walking.

"There is something I haven't told you, sir," Alice said.

"I sure hope so," Susan said. "You'd be a terrible XO if you didn't know what to keep from me."

"No, not that," Alice said. "Er... You remember the movie? *Voice of Freedom?*"

Susan utterly failed to stifle a pained groan.

"Oh God," she said. "Don't tell me you're a fan."

The movie had been made a couple of years after the civil war against President Clarke's regime, and Susan had always suspected that Sheridan had secretly financed it. It gave an only slightly propagandized version of their side of the war -- except on one point. It had painted Susan herself as a capital-H Hero. A warrior who would brave anything, do anything, fight anyone for what she thought was right, for those she loved and for capital-F Freedom. And the worst thing about it was that she couldn't even point at a single fact in it and say "There! That bit is wrong!". It was all in the editing, in the presentation, in the selection and use of what material they had. They'd even used a damn *recording* of that impromptu "Who am I?" speech she'd given when the White Star fleet went up against Clarke's Shadowtech-augmented destroyers.

The two years after the movie came out, Earthforce basic training had been crawling with bright-eyed young women who wanted to be the next Ivanova. There had even been a *fan club*.

"I'm afraid I was," Alice said. "A bad one. I had the movie poster on the wall in my room my entire time at the Academy."

"Which one?" Susan said.

"Sir?" Alice asked.

"Which version of the poster did you have?"

She sneaked a look at her subordinate officer through the corner of her eye. The woman was blushing. Ah.

"The retracted one, I'm afraid," Alice said.

Well, at least she was honest.

Susan grinned at her.

"Do you want it signed?" she said.

Alice looked shocked.

"I don't have it here!" she said.

"I mean," she tried to correct herself, blush growing stronger, "I don't have it any longer."

Susan chuckled.

"Of course you don't," she said.

They walked on.

"I thought you hated that poster," Alice said after a little while.

"Generally speaking, I do," Susan said. "The media agency took a rejected picture and edited it to look even more revealing than it already was, then published it without asking me first. That kind of thing tends to get me into one of my less pleasant moods."

"Is it true that you tried to shoot the head of the agency?"

"Definitely not," Susan said. "I don't miss at a range of two meters. I just wanted to scare the scumsucking bastard. Worked, too. And why are we discussing this again?"

"Right," Alice said, suddenly losing the blush and looking more serious. "While at the Academy, I looked up your actual history in the Earthforce files. There was a lot of stuff there that never went into the movie."

She bit her lip.

"And one of those bits are why I forbid the science people to touch this before you'd seen it," she said.

Susan's eyebrows rose.

"It's got something to do with *me*?"

"See for yourself," Alice said and pointed ahead.

It was a tank. Cylindrical, standing on one end on a waist-high plinth of swirly Vorlon material. The cylinder itself was clear, and filled with a transparent golden-colored fluid.

A fluid in which floated the naked body of Talia Winters.

She was obviously unconscious. She was roughly in a standing position, but floating free in the middle of the cylinder. Her eyes were closed, and as far as Susan could immediately see she wasn't breathing.

More or less on autopilot, Susan walked around the tank. It really was Talia. She remembered those birthmarks. The scar on her buttock.

"I recognized her from files about Babylon 5," Alice said. "Talia Winters, commercial telepath on the station and rumored to have been... close to you."

"Is she alive?" Susan asked.

"I don't know," Alice said. "As I said, when I recognized her I suspended all work on the tank until you got a look at it."

Susan looked around. There was nothing but the plinth and the tank for as far as she could see. Just flat floor, a ceiling far above and a Vorlon tank with her dead lover in it. Suddenly the theory that the station was actually observing her particularly didn't seem quite so far-fetched, but a *lot* creepier.

"Colonel?" Alice said. "What are your orders?"

"Study this thing," she said. "Try not to do anything whatsoever to it except observe it in the most insanely detailed way the science bods can imagine. Focus on her to begin with. I want to know if she's alive. I want to know if she ever *was* alive, and if so who she really is. I want to know everything about this."

"Yes, sir," Alice said. She brought her communicator up to her face and started speaking rapidly into it.

Talia.

On a Vorlon space station.

The more she thought about it, the more disturbing it got.

The next morning, Susan was the first to arrive in the conference room where they held the daily briefings for the expedition's various group leaders. Usually, she waited until the last minute, getting there as late as possible without being too late. But not today. She'd spent the night unable to sleep, pacing through the near-empty ship in an effort to get physically tired enough to get at least a little bit of sleep. It hadn't worked, so when the clock approached seven she gave up and headed for the conference room.

Talia. Talia Winters. Killed by the Psi Corps in the year 2259, mentally if not physically. And now she was here. Or at least her body was. The body that used to be hers. The body that had, for a much too short time, shared Susan's bed.

"Report," she growled as soon as the final attendee walked through the door. "What do we know about the find in the hangar bay?"

"Um," the head of the exoarcheologists said, "we don't actually know if it is a hangar..."

Susan glared him into silence. Rodriguez, his name was.

"You know what I mean," she said. "So report."

"Right," he said. He cleared his throat. "For those here who may not be fully up to date, we have found a Vorlon artifact containing what appears to be the body of a human female. There are, um, many questions raised by this find."

He leaned forward over his notes and ran a hand through his sparse black hair.

"To begin with, it is the only artifact in chamber number one. Considering that the chamber in question has a floor area of almost a square kilometer and the artifact was found in the exact geometric center, we assume that this is no accident. The artifact was placed there in order to be found.

The head of the exoarcheoengineering group, a wiry little gray-haired woman by the name of Francesca Müller, spoke up.

"Are we sure it is a human female?" she asked. "That seems like a strange thing for the Vorlons to put there."

"We aren't sure of anything at this point," Rodriguez said. "But as far as can be ascertained from visual inspection alone, the woman in question is an exact match for a Psi Corps-registered commercial telepath by the name of Talia Winters. Since we know that the Vorlons were heavily involved in the advent of human telepaths, this makes her presence here slightly less strange. That she was officially reported as deceased more than a decade ago pretty much cancels that out, though."

"Do we know where she died?" the head of the exoarcheoinformatics team asked. Susan didn't like him and hadn't managed to remember his name. George something.

"According to the same files holding her medical data, death of personality occurred at Babylon 5 in late 2259 and death of body in the Psi Corps research facility in Syria Planum on Mars a few weeks after that. She is reported as having been buried at the Syria Planum Memorial Grove early in 2261. The reason for the long delay between death and burial is not recorded, but the proximity of the burial time to the date of the battle of Coriana VI certainly raises questions. We have sent a message to the team digging through the old Psi Corps records in the hope that they may find something that clarifies the situation."

"Do we know what she died from?" Müller asked.

Rodriguez sat up straighter.

"I know I've been talking about 'the body of'," he said. "This is because we know so little and the find is so strange. However, we have been able to detect life signs. We can hear heartbeats, and spectrometry of the fluid in the tank shows that it is a known variety of highly efficient oxygen carrier used by among others the Minbari and the Centauri. We are at the moment bringing in equipment to try and detect neural activity, but even a cautious analysis of the available data points towards the artifact -- or, I should perhaps say, Miss Winters -- being, in fact, alive."

For a few moments, the room was utterly silent.

"Do we know how long she's been there?" maybe-George asked. He sounded as stunned as all of them looked.

"No," Rodriguez said. "But the tank and the plinth are connected to the rest of the station, so whoever put it there had full control of Vorlon technology. As far as we know, that means she must have been put there by the Vorlons themselves or by other beings of the same order. Since the end of the Shadow War, no such beings are present in our galaxy. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that she has been here at least since the end of that war."

"This is amazing," Müller said. "She may be an eyewitness to the last days of the Vorlons!"

"I think we should hope very cautiously," Rodriguez said. "She was reported as having suffered the death of personality, and she has been in unattended suspended animation for at least a decade. While the body appears to be alive, it is far from certain that there is any brain function. Or, if there is, that there will be a personality we can communicate with."

"What are you going to do?" Susan asked.

"Observe more," Rodriguez said. "As I said, we are bringing in more instruments. Which, in fact, pretty much means just about every instrument we have or can borrow. Once we have recorded as much as we possibly can, then, well..."

He looked around the table.

"We try very, very carefully to wake her up."

"I bring gifts."

Those words, spoken as Talia walked through the door to Susan's quarters on Babylon 5, had been the real beginning of the relationship between them. They'd talked before that, of course. Been repulsed and attracted to each other from the very beginning. Before, even. Susan had resented Talia before they'd ever met, just because of what she was. She started changing her mind after the Jason Ironheart incident, after watching Bester and his fellow Psi Cop treat Talia just as condescendingly and nastily as they treated everyone else.

Susan had always had a serious soft spot for those treated badly by the Psi Corps.

A soft spot that had, in Talia's case, grown into something much greater. That night, when Talia had come to her quarters carrying glasses and wine, that was when things had changed between them. The watershed. Before, they were good friends. Good enough to drop in announced late at night after a long day. After, they had both found in the other something they hadn't even known they missed in themselves.

She could clearly remember the look of intense nakedness and vulnerability on Talia's face as she removed first her black gloves and then her Psi Corps insignia. In a way, those simple actions had been the first step. Talia had, psychologically if not in fact, distanced herself from the Corps. She who had always belonged to something took one frightening step outside -- and met Susan. Susan, who had always been alone, never letting anybody get truly intimate, until Talia.

And to think that it might never have happened that way if they hadn't both got a bit drunk and ended up together in Susan's bed.

Susan wasn't much of a telepath. Sure, she had the gene from her mother. But she was too weak for it to be useful. At best, she could get some sense of stronger emotions from someone she touched, or tell if a strong telepath tried to scan her.

Unless, it turned out, it was another telepath who touched her. Then, there could be full two-way communication. And so, tipsy and horny, Susan had found out what it's like when telepaths make love. A connection not only of bodies, but of minds. Of complete, uncensored communication.

After the first rush of ecstasy, it scared the living daylights out of her. If it hadn't been someone she was already strongly attracted to, someone she already felt fairly safe with, she might have shot them. But now it was. It was Talia. So brittle, so vulnerable inside. In their minds, Susan held her and protected her. For that, she had to let her inside -- and so she discovered the relief of not having to be standing strong by herself.

Susan had very little idea how long time it had taken according to an outside clock. In the mental space they shared, it felt like ages. In the morning, when they had to leave each other, they looked each other in the eyes and knew that they would have to meet again, investigate what had happened, what they now were to each other.

They were still in that process a few short weeks later when the Control personality destroyed what had been Talia Winters.

Midnight.

Susan couldn't sleep. She was back on the EAS *Orpheus*, sitting in the command chair on the bridge watching a video feed from the base camp in the Vorlon hangar. They'd moved the base camp right next to the tank with Talia in it, and there was activity around the clock. Lots of people she didn't know operating lots of equipment she hadn't a clue what it did.

She turned on the audio feed as well, so she could hear what they said.

"Fazzioli probe node one online," a voice said. "Status nominal."

"Node two online," another one said. "Status nominal. Starting sinus pulse train."

"Nodes three and four nominal," the first voice said. "Receiving pulse train. Switch to modulated wave."

"Switching."

As far as she could tell, the voices came from two people typing on keyboards.

"Node three is a bit warm," the second voice said. "Increasing liquid helium flow."

"Are we still under three Kelvin?"

"Yes. Data should still be good. Are we getting data?"

"Checking... Yes, we are. Running first-approximation..."

Suddenly one of the typists in the picture looked up from her monitor to the tank with the naked woman in it.

"Holy shit," she said. "We're getting delta waves. She's *sleeping*."

"Keep recording," the other one said. "It's just a first approximation. It can still look different once we do a full crunching run on it."

"Not *that* different. This here girl is *alive*, for sure. Hot damn, this is going to make for one awesome entry on our resumés."

"If we ever get back home from here..."

Susan abruptly turned off the feed.

Alive.

She wasn't the slightest bit surprised, she realised. Talia was here for a purpose, and there were precious few purposes served by even the most well-preserved corpse. No, she had to be alive. Alive to fulfil her function. As for what function...

She hit the call button on her communicator.

"Communications Officer," she said. A beep told her that the system had connected her.

"Lieutenant Madison?" she said.

"Speaking," the tinny voice came from the little metal thing on the back of her hand.

"I need a Gold Channel from the bridge to Interstellar Alliance Headquarters on Minbar," she said. "Top priority, and you are to be using the wartime crypto keys."

She could imagine him staring in disbelief at his communicator.

"Yes, sir," he said after a little while. "Who at the IAH end should I be asking for?"

"President Sheridan, if possible. If not, then DeLenn."

"Yes, sir. If none of them are available, then who?"

She thought about it. Who there had been around and on the inside during the early years of the Alliance and during the Telepath War? Lennier, of course, but he was dead. Garibaldi, but she really didn't want him to hear about this, and besides he was on Mars.

"Nobody. In that case, leave a message requesting for one of them to contact me as soon as possible."

Again there was a slight pause.

"Yes, sir," he finally said.

Susan smiled a grim little smile. She wished she could hear what rumors would be flying through the expedition come morning.

"Doctor Rodriguez, report please."

Another day. Another status meeting. This one far more well-attended than usual. Everyone wanted to know what was going on. Including Susan herself, so she might be able to keep herself awake in spite of having slept really badly when she finally fell asleep at all. She'd kept dreaming about Kosh.

"Right," Rodriguez said. "As I said yesterday, we brought in neural-scanning equipment. And we have a result from it."

"And this result is?" Susan said. She didn't have the patience for dramatic storytelling.

"She's alive," Rodriguez said. "No question about it. As far as we can tell, she's in a state of slow-wave sleep. And she's waking up."

Commotion erupted around the table. Everyone was shouting out questions at once, and none were being answered. After a little while of this, Susan's temper got the better of her. She brought out her nastiest Commanding Officer voice.

"Everyone shut up!" she shouted.

Silence.

"Good," she said. "Doctor Rodriguez, please explain what you mean about her waking up."

"Exactly what I said. The distribution of wavelengths is changing in a way that greatly resembles the normal process of waking up, except that it is proceeding very slowly. If nothing changes, we expect that she will gain consciousness in about 48 hours."

Susan kept her face impassive.

"Is there anything else noteworthy about the neural results?" she asked.

Rodriguez visibly hesitated.

"Um," he said. "Yes. There are patterns that are similar to those associated with telepathic ability. Which we expected, with her being a known telepath, but they look... odd."

Susan took a data crystal from the inside pocket of her uniform jacket. She held it out to him.

"On this crystal you will find two sets of neural scans," she said. "I want you to compare both of them to Talia's and let me know what you think."

He received the crystal as if it might bite him.

"Who are they of?" he said.

"That is classified," Susan said.

Maybe-George from exoarcheoinformatics frowned.

"Classified?" he interrupted. "How can it be classified? We all had to be cleared for Top Secret material just to come on this expedition!"

Susan just glared at him.

"Um," Rodriguez said. "It would help a lot if we knew *something* about the people these were taken from. Their species, if nothing else."

That was a fair point, Susan had to admit. And when Delenn had called in the small hours of the morning, Susan had only promised to say as little as possible. Delenn knew better than to demand that she say so little that the data became worthless.

"The scans are from two human telepaths," she said. "The first was male, the second female. They are both deceased. At the respective times the scans were taken, they were both classified as P-13."

Maybe-George interrupted again.

"13?" he said. "I thought the scale only went to 12."

"It does," Francesca Müller said. "P-13 is an informal classification used to describe individuals whose abilities go beyond what we can measure."

Susan didn't comment.

"Doctor Rodriguez, do you have anything further to add?" she said.

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "We will keep observing, but at the moment I think any action would be extremely ill advised."

"I quite agree," Susan said. "Ok, this meeting is over. I'll see you all the same time tomorrow. Dismissed."

That last bit wasn't strictly correct, since none of the people at the meeting were actually military, but she'd found that it had a tendency to actually get people moving. This time, it seemed to get everyone except Francesca Müller moving. Susan looked up from her papers at her.

"Yes?" she said.

"I lived on Mars during the Clarke regime and the Telepath War," Müller said. "I saw... many things. One of them was a woman by the name of Lyta Alexander."

Again, Susan worked hard at keeping her face impassive.

"She had passed through the telepath underground early in the Clarke days, I was told," Müller said. "And that after that she had gone to the Vorlons. That she came back from there... changed."

Susan kept looking at her face as she talked. She wasn't at all sure what the woman wanted to say.

"When I first heard the rumors about her, I dismissed them as fairy tales. But then I met her."

Müller looked Susan into the eyes.

"At the start of the Telepath War, the Psi Corps would send large groups of soldiers and Psi Cops into our settlements to look for rogue telepaths. I was with a group of rogues when they were found. We were completely surprised. I was sure we were all going to be killed. And then she appeared."

Müller made a gesture as if she was lacking words.

"It was a slaughter," she said. "Forty or fifty bloodhound troopers and eight Psi Cops. At first we didn't understand what was happening. The bloodhounds just started screaming in horror and firing at each other. I don't know if the Cops did anything. I suppose they did, but that it was all telepathic. Nothing we mundanes could see."

She wasn't looking at Susan any longer. Her gaze had gone somewhere else. Into memories, most likely.

"And then she was just there. One moment, nothing. The next, it was as if she'd been there all along. Standing in the middle of the Corps people, an empty space all around her and lit by a strange light coming from nowhere. Smiling. The Psi Cops looked at her, and one by one their faces filled with the most complete terror I have ever seen, before or since."

Müller closed her eyes and swallowed.

"And then they exploded," she said. "For no visible reason. They just exploded. Blood and guts and bone splinters flew all over the room. I found..."

She fell silent for a moment.

"Never mind. The bloodhounds who hadn't been shot by their friends just died. Like that."

She snapped her fingers.

"Just fell down and weren't alive any more. We... we were nearly as shocked as the few surviving Corps people, I think, only we were alive and unhurt. 'Who are you?' one of us whispered. I have no idea who. It may even have been me. She looked at us, smiled the creepiest smile I have *ever* seen and said 'My name is Lyta Alexander. Tell the Psi Corps to remember Byron.' And then she wasn't there any more."

Müller opened her eyes again and looked at Susan.

"I think you're afraid that what's in that tank is someone like her. Someone completely beyond our ability to stop, perhaps beyond our ability to even comprehend. And you'd rather know before she wakes up. That neural scan you gave Rodriguez, the female one, it was of Alexander, wasn't it?"

"You know I can't confirm or deny that," Susan said.

"I guess not," Müller said. "I can even kind of see why it'd be a good idea to keep something like Alexander secret."

"Good, I suppose," Susan said. "Was there anything else?"

Müller shook her head.

"No," she said. "Nothing else."

Of course the female scan was of Lyta. Who else would it be? As far as Susan knew, Lyta Alexander and Jason Ironheart had been the only two psionically superpowerful humans. Or, at least, the only ones outside Psi Corps laboratories.

What worried her was that they had started out as ordinary telepaths. Ironheart had been P-10 before the Corps started experimenting on him, and he ended up transforming into some kind of energy being. After almost destroying Babylon 5, due to seriously lacking control of his powers.

Lyta had been P-5 before she went to the Vorlons. She'd certainly never displayed any problems controlling her later powers, but then she had been modified by beings who had a far better idea of what they were doing than the Corps had when they changed Ironheart.

When she died, Talia *wasn't* a normal telepath. Sure, officially she was still only a P-5 commercial telepath. But Ironheart had done something to her. Susan knew that she had been able to block Bester's scans without him noticing, and that she had had weak but useful telekinetic powers. As far as Susan understood the scale, that meant that she had been P-13 even then, since mentally stable telekinetics were extremely rare and nobody at all was supposed to be able to block a P-12 undetected.

It might be those changes that Rodriguez and his team saw, of course. But somehow Susan couldn't really believe that. She felt sure that the Vorlons had modified her further. Possibly a lot further. If Talia was now as far above what she had been as Lyta had been above her earlier P-5 state... It kind of made her wonder were you'd draw the border between a very powerful human and a living god.

Which would be pretty neat, if she was still Talia. If the body instead held the Control personality... Then it would be very, very bad.

Thirty-six hours to go. Susan paced the still growing lab camp around the Talia tank. She'd tried sleeping, but she'd given it up after the fourth time she woke up from dreaming about Kosh talking to her.

"*You are the line,*" it had told her. "*The arrow flies both ways.*"

Damn cryptic Vorlons. They'd been gone from the galaxy for a decade and change, and they *still* managed to bug her.

"Yes..."

She spun around, her heart suddenly racing. Kosh's voice had come from right behind her, complete with strange sounds!

"You there!" she barked at a technician who happened to be walking past nearby. "Did you just hear a strange voice?"

He shook his head and walked on, looking at her as if she was crazy.

Maybe he was right. She hadn't been sleeping well for a couple of nights. Lack of sleep could cause auditory and visual hallucinations. She'd experienced that before.

She sighed.

But only after much longer than a couple of days.

The place was getting to her. The creepy surroundings, the constant feeling that the station was looking at her, it was all adding up. Maybe she should call Sheridan and tell him she was unfit for command. That she'd gone nuts. "Sorry sir, can't do this any more, off to the funny farm."

If it hadn't been for her experiences with Kosh's ship, she really would have thought that she was crazy. But lots of people had had the feeling that that ship had whispered to them, so it seemed well within the possible that the station did the same.

The bothersome thing was that nobody else seemed affected. She'd asked, indirectly. As far as she'd been able to tell, she was the only one.

Her pacing led her past the tank again. The space around it was getting crowded with instruments, very few of which she had any idea what they did. All of them trained at her naked ex-lover. Talia would have hated it intensely, had she been conscious. She had been a very private person. Not exactly shy, but hiding her inner self behind many layers of defenses.

Came from growing up in the Corps, most likely. Lots of telepaths, very few of them trustworthy.

Out of the corner of her eye, through the tank, she saw something move. She turned to look.

Kosh. Clear as day, or at least as clear as the liquid in the tank allowed. Just as he'd looked back on Babylon 5, with environment suit and all. She closed her eyes, shook her head and looked again.

Gone.

Ok, that was enough. She brought her communicator to her mouth.

"Executive officer," she told the computer.

"Lieutenant Commander Jones here," Alice's voice said a moment later.

"I'm going to bed," Susan said. "Again. This time, if I come out again before morning, you have permission to knock me over the head with something hard."

"Will do, Colonel. Will do."

In her dream, Susan was back in her old primary school in St Petersburg. The old, worn desks that had probably seen the *first* Russian revolution. Windows that hadn't been cleaned in so long that it always looked like there was a fog outside. The smell of sweaty children and slightly burned sausages. It was all there, every detail. Many of them she'd had no idea still lurked in the lower reaches of her mind.

"Susan Ivanova!"

She jumped at the sudden shout. She was sitting in the desk she'd used to have, third row from the front by the window. If she pressed the side of her face to the glass, she could almost see the sea. She tried it. The glass was cold, and it looked like there was a storm brewing over the harbor. The dream had an almost hallucinatory clarity to it. Plus, she was perfectly aware that she was dreaming. She couldn't remember that ever happening before.

"Susan Ivanova," the voice said again. "Will you listen?"

Susan looked towards the front of the classroom. Mrs Petrovna was standing there. Immeasurably old to nine-year-old Susan, in reality probably no more than sixty. She'd died before the Earth-Minbari War.

"A palimpsest is a manuscript page which has had its writing removed and then been used again," Mrs Petrovna said. "Mostly, it was done to parchment or vellum, since they, being made from animal hides, were far more durable than those made from paper or papyrus. In the early Middle Ages, the manuscripts were washed using milk and oat bran. Later, they were washed with powdered pumice. The earlier process left significant but initially invisible traces of the previous writing. The latter did not, since it much more efficiently abraded the surface. Thus, the earlier palimpsests are those most valuable to us, since it is on them we can retrieve the earlier text. Generally speaking, the dividing line between the older and the newer washing technique can be drawn at the year 2262. Anything newer than that is almost certain to only carry the immediately visible text. Do you understand, Susan?"

2262? What the Hell? And why was Mrs Petrovna lecturing on history at all? She'd taught Susan's favourite subjects, mathematics and physics!

Mrs Petrovna's mouth moved, but only a series of musical sounds came out.

"Do you understand, Susan Ivanova?" a male voice said after Mrs Petrovna had closed her mouth. And then came another series of musical sounds.

And suddenly, without transition, she was sitting up in her own bunk in her own quarters on the *Orpheus*.

That had been a Vorlon voice, but not Kosh's voice.

"We've had to revise the schedule," Rodriguez said. "Our current guess is that the subject will wake up in about eighteen hours."

The meeting was, if possible, even better attended than the day before. If that trend kept up, Susan would have to institute limits.

"Could you clarify 'about'?" someone she couldn't even remember seeing before asked.

Rodriguez sighed.

"Yes," he said. "Plus or minus six hours. If the pace doesn't change again."

"That doesn't sound very certain."

"That's because it's not."

Susan managed to keep her own sigh contained.

"All right," she said. "So we're not sure when she's going to wake up. We'll deal. Doctor, do you have any results from the neural scans I gave you yesterday?"

Rodriguez shuffled his papers.

"Yes," he said. "Although I'm not sure what, if anything, it tells us. There certainly are similarities. In some sense, there seems to be a progression. Some aspects of the scans are pretty fuzzy in the male, pretty clear in the female and almost sharp in the present subject. That may be important, totally irrelevant or a scan artifact. We just don't know."

He frowned.

"That said," he said, "I'd bet a fair amount of money on the current subject also being a P-13. Which leads to the question of what we do when she wakes up. Colonel, can you say anything about what the scanned P-13s were capable of doing?"

Well, Jason Ironheart totally obliterated a squadron of Black Omega Starfuries. Lyta Alexander took on the Psi Corps and won, mostly. If Talia woke up in the same class as either of them or even stronger...

"No, I can't say anything about that," Susan said. "But believe me when I say that you'll sleep better for not knowing."

She stood up.

"The estimate is that she'll wake up in twelve to twenty-four hours," she said. "I want everyone off the station and on board their respective ships in nine hours. The ships will move away to a distance of three hundred lightseconds. On the station will remain any equipment you can rig up to be monitored or controlled via tachyon relay before the nine hours are up."

She looked around the room, meeting as many eyes as possible.

"That equipment," she said. "And I."

They protested, of course. Just about everyone from Alice down to the janitors. Or, well, at least the various expedition group heads. She explained that it was much too dangerous to have the ships close to the station when Talia woke up. Susan knew her and might be able to talk to her, and if that went well the ships could return. If it *didn't* go well, then Lieutenant Commander Jones could take them all home to ponder what data they had collected so far. Which was a good deal better than the previous expedition, which they *still* hadn't found a single trace of.

And if they had a problem with that, she still commanded the expedition, and anyone who didn't like her orders could try to figure out how to breathe vacuum while they were swimming home.

They'd ended up making love that night Talia came to her quarters. She'd claimed she'd come to talk, and they sure enough did that. Talia had a lot she needed to let out. Listening to her that night, Susan for the first time understood that the phrase "The Corps is Mother, the Corps is Father" wasn't just propaganda. To Talia, and probably all other telepaths who grew up in the Corps, it was plain truth. The Corps was the nearest thing to a parent they'd ever known.

And now Talia had suddenly found out that they'd lied to her. Used her. That they did horrible things in the name of a cause she found abhorrent. Her parents had, in a real enough way, betrayed her. No wonder she turned to Susan, who had shown herself from the first time they met as an enemy of the Corps but a friend of Talia. Or, well, almost the first time they met. She'd been cold enough at first. But it had soon changed. Subtly, at first, so that Susan herself hadn't realised that her feelings for the telepath were more than just an animal attraction to a pretty blond.

She did after the Ironheart incident. After she'd seen Talia be as much a victim of Bester and Kelsey as any of them, if not more. After she'd seen her actually go behind the Psi Cops' back in order to help someone she loved and do what she thought was right.

After that, there was almost a year of increasing tension between them. A very different, much more pleasant and considerably more frustrating tension than that of enmity. Susan had spent more than one meeting following every curve of Talia's severe

dress with her eyes, both hoping and fearing that the telepath would pick up her desire. But Talia never did, and the game of is she isn't she will she won't she kept going month after month.

Until, finally, Talia sat almost crying in Susan's quarters, gloves laid aside and Psi Corps insignia removed. Susan couldn't stand seeing her like that. She sat down on the armrest of Talia's chair, and pulled her into a comforting hug.

It hadn't even occurred to her that, given the mechanics of the situation, this put Talia's head right between her breasts. Breasts that were only covered by a thin silk nightgown.

At first, that didn't matter. Talia needed comfort. Needed the warmth and presence of someone kind and understanding. Susan gave it to her, to the best of her ability. Maybe there was even then some telepathic contact between them, below the level of the conscious. Talia relaxed. Was comforted.

And at some point, the need for comfort dropped below the level of accumulated attraction. Suddenly, without a single movement, the situation changed drastically.

"I should probably move," Talia said, not doing the slightest to put her words into action.

Her breath warmed and teased Susan's nipple.

"Away or closer?" Susan asked.

Talia turned her face up. Their eyes and minds met. Strong emotion was always the hardest for a telepath to keep out, and at the moment what was between them was strong enough even for Susan's rudimentary powers.

Together, they moved Talia's arm and pulled Susan's head down into a kiss.

"Colonel Ivanova?"

Lieutenant Commander Jones' face flickered into existence on a screen nearby. Susan was sitting on an unopened crate of something technical, absent-mindedly staring at Talia's sleeping body.

"Yes?" she said.

"The expedition is holding at three hundred lightseconds' distance," Alice said. "And Rodriguez has revised his estimate again. He's now thinking that she may wake up in less than an hour."

"Were you ever close to a Vorlon, Alice?" Susan asked.

"Er, no," Alice said. "I got into the service long after they'd left the galaxy."

"I was," Susan said. "For almost three years, we had Kosh around."

"I know, Colonel," Alice said.

"Even after he'd been murdered by the Shadows, he kept helping us. And from the day he came to the station, there was talk about his ship whispering to dock workers. It got to the point where we had to give his ship a docking bay of its own, because we couldn't get people to go near it."

"That's all in the records, Colonel."

Susan sighed.

"Yes," she said. "The records... I don't think you can give those things the proper credence if you've only read about them. The Vorlons didn't have at all the same concept of identity that we do. They could split off parts of themselves, and their ships were, as far as I understood it, equal parts machines, pets and body parts."

"That's kind of creepy, sir."

Susan snorted.

"'Creepy' doesn't even begin to describe it," she said. "But what bothers me right now, is that after Kosh died, the Vorlons clearly considered him dead and gone -- but parts of him were still around and active. After Coriana, the Vorlons left the galaxy with the rest of the last of the First Ones. But what did they leave behind that *they* didn't consider sentient but which we *would*?"

By now Alice was looking worried.

"Do you have a point, Colonel?"

"I'm pretty sure this station is alive, Alice," Susan said. "And while the Vorlons may have considered it to be just a large machine, it's almost certainly smarter than we are. And..."

She paused to swallow.

"...and I think it's been trying to talk to me," she said. "Telepathically."

"None of the... other telepaths have sensed anything, Colonel," Alice said.

"Say what you mean, girl," Susan said. "You mean none of the *real* telepaths have sensed anything."

"Well,..." Alice said. "Yes."

Susan drew a deep breath.

"I have no idea why that is," she said. "And I'd be happy to consider it just the imagination of a skittish old woman. If it wasn't for what's in that tank."

She stood up and turned to face the communicator Alice was looking through.

"Why is it *Talia*, Alice?" she said. "We know there were thousands of telepaths experimented on or just plain vanished by the Psi Corps. Any one of them could be here now. Maybe they are, we haven't seen even a fraction of what's in this station yet. But it's not them. It's *her*. It's my long-dead *lover* in there, and I can't help but suspect that this is not a coincidence. This was deliberately set up."

Alice looked taken aback by the outburst.

"That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it, sir?" she said. "There's no way they could've known that you would be leading this expedition."

"Except that the first expedition didn't find Talia here," Susan said. "As far as we know, anyway. We did. Plus, I was hand-picked to lead this expedition by President Sheridan, who used to have Kosh *living in his head*. My way here was hardly untouched by Vorlon immaterial appendage."

It seemed Alice couldn't find an objection to that.

"So what do you think it means?" she said.

Susan shook her head.

"If I knew that I wouldn't be nearly as annoyed," she said.

"Colonel?" Alice said. Something in her voice made Susan turn to look at her. She was looking past Susan, at something behind her.

"The tank is moving," Alice said.

Susan turned around.

The tank was changing position. The liquid-filled cylinder was tipping over, and the plinth it was resting on had flowed around it as if to hold on to it. As she watched, the tank assumed a horizontal position, with the plinth having formed a band around it. Inside it, the liquid was draining.

"I think she's about to wake up," Alice said.

Her face faded from the monitor as all the equipment the expedition had brought in suddenly stopped working.

A late night long ago, Sheridan had tried to tell her what it felt like when he was on Z'ha'dum. Alone, unimaginably far away from friends and allies, surrounded by forces he could hardly comprehend doing things he had only a vague understanding of.

Standing alone in the silence on a Vorlon space station, Susan finally understood what he had been trying to say.

"It is time."

By now, the Vorlon voice hardly even surprised her.

"Kosh?" she said out loud. "Is that you?"

"We were all Kosh," the voice said. She couldn't tell where it was coming from.

"Right," she said. "Of course."

The tank looked like it had finished draining its liquid. Some of it had hardened instead of draining, it looked like, and Talia was now lying on a transparent gold-colored bed. The upper half of the tank had vanished at some point. Susan could see a strand of Talia's hair move in a near-undetectable air current.

"She's been in a tank of liquid for over a decade and she comes out with her hair dry?" was the first thought that came into Susan's mind. The second was "Damn, but she's pretty."

Talia's eyelids flickered. Susan's heart jumped into her throat. She suddenly wished she'd had the wits to bring something for Talia to cover herself with, even if only a blanket.

Stiffly, Talia sat up, then opened her eyes. She looked around.

"Where am I?" she said. Hearing that voice again brought tears to Susan's eyes.

"We are on a Vorlon space station," she said. "It was abandoned ten years ago. The year is 2272."

"Seventy-two?" Talia said. "Well, I guess that explains your gray hairs, Commander Ivanova."

Susan's insides froze solid, then shattered into a million pieces. Talia would not have called her that. Control, though, certainly would have.

"Control," she said.

"Yes," Talia said. "Were you perhaps expecting someone else?"

Susan didn't say anything. Slowly, she moved her hand to her sidearm.

"Winters is dead, Commander," Talia said. "Her brain was erased and written over with me. Accept that fact."

Susan frowned. Written over...?

"Oh," Talia said. "And we don't want you using that thing, do we?"

Susan's PPG was torn out of her hand by a force far too strong for Susan to resist. It flew a few meters away, then disintegrated into a cloud of dust.

"Well, that's a nice surprise," Talia said. "I don't remember being able to do *that* before. Someone's been upgrading me, it seems."

She climbed down from the tank turned bed. Susan stood as frozen, her thoughts racing at a million miles a minute. Mostly in circles, unfortunately. "*...a manuscript page that has had its writing removed and then been used again,*" was what a vorlon had said through the voice of Mrs Petrovna in her dream. That and the year 2262. It must have been referring to Control, who had taken over Talia's body in 2259.

"Let's see what's happened since I was last awake," Talia said. "Those aren't Commander's insignia you're wearing, are they? You should be well enough informed. Not that I seem to have anyone else to chose from at the moment..."

She looked intently at Susan for a few moments, then frowned.

"You're blocking me!" she said. "How can you be blocking me? You're nowhere near that strong."

Susan did her best not to let on that this was as much a surprise to her as to Control.

"Do you seriously think I'd even be here if you were a threat?" she said.

"*Hurry,*" a Vorlon voice said from nowhere. "*We are holding you. But not for long. Act soon.*"

There was no reaction from Talia. Apparently the voice was only for Susan. And, also apparently, it seemed to be helping her block out Talia's mind probes. But what on Earth could she do that the station couldn't do just as well or better?

The answer struck her like lightning from a clear sky. What she could do better than a leftover piece of intelligent equipment from a super-technological eons-old civilisation was to be herself. To be Susan Ivanova. To be Talia Winters' beloved.

Acting on pure instinct, she took a couple of quick steps forward, put her hand behind Talia's head and not particularly gently pulled her into a deep kiss.

Strong emotion was hard for a telepath to keep out, she knew that. Inside, she let all her restraints go. All her control. She let it all out to play, from the memory of finally finding someone who understood and needed her, over the grief of her death, via the grief of others being less than Talia and still dying, by way of year after year of loneliness and longing, to the hope of a miraculous gift in an alien space station. She let it all overwhelm herself, and as a cherry on top of it all she had the pure animal joy of once again holding Talia's naked body to her own. Her own uniform-clad one, but that was a minor detail.

All that, in a kiss.

Talia staggered backwards, until she hit the edge of the tank-turned-bed. Her eyes opened and closed repeatedly. Muscles in her face spasmed. It looked and sounded like she was trying to say something, but didn't have full control of her mouth or breathing. Susan looked on, astonished. She hadn't really expected anything to happen.

"Susan," Talia gasped. "Help!"

She covered the distance to the tank at a speed that would've made an Olympic sprinter proud. She took Talia's hands in her own.

"I'm here," she said. "Lean on me."

Even as the words left her mouth she felt Talia's presence in her mind. Without the slightest hesitation, she let her in, let them join into the loving unity she had missed so terribly all those years. Outside, slightly distantly, she felt the Control personality scream and rail and fight and, amazingly, growing weaker and fainter.

She felt hands undoing her uniform jacket and shirt, reach inside and touch her skin. They kissed again, and again, and over again. Her hands followed the never quite forgotten forms of Talia's back. Soon, Susan was no longer sure if they were helping each other fight or just making love.

In the end, she didn't even notice when the Control personality finally dwindled into nothingness and disappeared.

"My Susan," Talia said.

They sat on the tank-turned-bed. Both naked, both constantly touching the other.

"You look older," Talia said.

"I am older," Susan said. "It's been almost thirteen years since you last saw me. Although it seems you kind of skipped those, because you don't look a day older than you did then."

Talia smiled.

"Thank the Vorlons," she said. "They did this."

"How do you know that?" Susan said. "I thought you were dead at the time."

"I was," Talia said. "But the traces of the events are still echoing through the cosmos."

A sinking feeling appeared at the edge of Susan's mind.

"The what?" she said.

"Everything is connected," Talia said. "And I can see it all."

"So you can give me next month's lottery numbers?"

The joke sounded weak even to Susan.

"I'm sorry," Talia said. "But I can't stay. It is not yet the time for those like me."

There was a white glow around her. Soft, barely visible, but definitely there.

"You're leaving me again," Susan said. The euphoria of a few moments ago was fast turning into numbness.

"Yes," Talia said. "I'll follow Jason. I'm afraid I can't explain where that is. The concepts..."

Her voice trailed off and she looked frustrated for a moment.

Susan felt tears on her face.

"Do you have to go *now*?" she said. "Can't you wait just a few days? Or hours?"

Talia reached out and wiped tears from Susan's cheek.

"I could stay for a little while," she said. "Less than an hour. To give you a gift. The only gift I have to give."

Susan tried to bring herself under control.

"Good," she said. "I've always liked gifts."

Talia smiled and pulled her into an embrace.

Outside the window of the conference room the plants of Geneva were in the full bloom of summer. The sun was shining, and Susan could see plenty of people out enjoying it. Quite a few of them were also obviously romantically enjoying each others' com-

pany. She turned away from the window, back into the room. Sheridan put down his communicator, whatever business had interrupted the meeting apparently finished for the moment.

"So that's it?" he said. "You find a great big space station and a long-dead telepath. The telepath wakes up, tells you that this is the final warning and further expeditions will not be tolerated. She and the entire station then vanishes in a huge flash of light that, somehow, doesn't damage anything."

"Yes, sir," she said. "That's it."

Arranged around the table were lots of important people, both from EarthGov and from the Interstellar Alliance. None of them looked particularly pleased.

"What about the first expedition?" someone she thought she'd seen on the news a couple of times asked. "Did she mention them?"

"She said they will return home," Susan said. "Eventually."

"And how long might *that* be?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, sir."

She'd said all this before, of course. Repeatedly. The debriefings of the entire expedition had gone on for over a month by now.

"We find it rather suspicious," Admiral Weng said, "that most of this took place while the recording equipment was conveniently not functioning."

"The station itself disabled it," Susan said. "Forensics came to the same conclusion, I believe."

"Ok, ladies and gentlemen," Sheridan said. "We seem to have ran out of new questions to ask. If any appear in the future, I'm sure Colonel Ivanova will be happy to answer them then."

He stood up.

"This meeting is adjourned," he said. "Susan, if you'd stay for a moment."

She got more than a few less than pleased looks as the various VIPs filed out of the room. When only the two of them were left, Sheridan turned off the official recording device.

"So," he said. "*Have* you told the full story?"

"Pretty much," she said. "There were a few personal things between me and Talia that I didn't think were for the consumption of bureaucrats."

"Really?" he said.

She glared at him.

"Really," she said. "I thought that if they *really* need to know about that, they can go out and buy their own damn pornography."

"Ah," Sheridan said. "That kind of stuff."

She kept glaring.

"I think we can let that slide," he said.

He put his feet up on the table.

"So what are you going to do now?" he said.

"Take some time off," Susan said. "I've got almost a year of leave coming. Thought I'd go home to S:t Petersburg and see if I can get some order into my father's old garden."

Sheridan's eyebrows just about hit the ceiling.

"You?" he said. "Gardening?"

"Hey, don't act all surprised," she said. "You were more than happy to drink the coffee from the plants I grew on Babylon 5, as I remember it."

He broke out into his by now fairly famous grin.

"Yeah," he said. "Forgot about those. That was good coffee. Send me some if you grow more, will you?"

Susan smiled.

"It just doesn't get the same taste when you haven't roasted the beans in the exhaust from a Starfury engine," she said. "But I will."

They both got up and walked out of the conference room. The top floor of the building was spacious and well-lit, with plenty of plants and even a couple of aquariums.

"You'll have to come visit us on Minbar," Sheridan said while they waited for the elevator. "Delenn keeps asking about you."

"We'll see," Susan said. "But to be honest, I think that'll have to wait until after my leave. I really want to get away from it all for a year."

They got into the elevator. Sheridan pushed the button for a couple of floors down, Susan for the entrance level.

"Take care, Susan," he said. "And try to be happy."

"I will," she said as they shook hands. "I really will."

He got out. The elevator doors closed. It started moving downwards again.

She leaned against the back wall and let out a sigh. In the end, she hadn't told him. She hadn't known when she went into the meeting if she would or not. In the end, it had just felt too personal.

Half-consciously, her hands went to her lower abdomen. *The only gift I have to give.* At the time, she'd thought Talia meant the pleasure of their lovemaking. It wasn't until almost two months later she realised that that was not at all it. When she, standing in her cabin on the *EAS Orpheus*, kept cursing at tests that in the face of all possibility insisted on turning out positive.

As she stepped out of the elevator and into the Geneva summer, she smiled and wondered how long it would be before she could actually feel the little life growing in her womb.