

"I can assure you, without hesitation, that I was in no way trying to seduce your chieftain's mate."

G'Kar said this with complete sincerity and a tone of casual friendliness that seemed utterly oblivious to the pair of meaty fists wrapped around his throat.

The Kurlin bodyguard assigned by its government to prevent indiscretions by the royal Kurla family - a family noted for a history of indiscretions so varied that they left native historians breathless and shaking - had seen G'Kar's hand on the knee (third knee from the left, to be precise) of the Kural Enfal (what humans would call a princess) and responded accordingly.

In G'Kar's defense, Lyta thought, the incident was indeed an accident. Oh, he had placed his hand there deliberately; that much was certain even without scanning his thoughts as it happened. But at the time he did it, he didn't think it was her knee.

Lyta decided it was almost good to see G'Kar back to his womanizing - femalizing? Alienizing? - ways. Since leaving Babylon 5 six weeks earlier, the tall Narn who had gone from warrior to priest to political figure to leader in self-imposed exile had begun to enjoy himself for the first time in years.

Unfortunately, seducing females of any race and getting into fights about it seemed to be the Narn idea of enjoying oneself.

Why knew they were so Human in that respect? Lyta thought just as G'Kar was thrown past her, colliding head-on with the wall. For a Human, it would have been a devastating blow; for Narns, with their leather-tough and spotted outer skin, and their resilient, almost catlike bone structure, such an impact could almost count as foreplay.

But Lyta knew they didn't have time for this. One of the things they desperately did not want was to draw attention to themselves. Although G'Kar might not be recognized for who he was this far from home, Lyta - with her bright red hair and distinctive, aquiline features, a face that had been plastered across wanted posters in every Psi Corps field office in this sector - would definitely be recognized.

It's not like there were a lot of Human females traveling with Narns, after all.

She had to break up the fight, but without drawing attention to herself. So far everyone in the small bar that was the watering hole for Durk 3, a tiny commercial space station near the Earth Omega Colony, was intent on watching the fight. As long as any other telepaths weren't in the room, and she couldn't feel any at the moment, she could act.

She sent out a mental probe, carefully touching the mind of the Kurlin bodyguard. She was repelled by the naked violence she found there, but pushed past it to the primitive - the even more primitive, she corrected herself - parts of his brain. She found the neural on-off switch that would shut down the synaptic relays to the voluntary nerve receptors. But she couldn't shut him down all at once, or it would draw attention to the presence of a teep in the audience of onlookers.

She waited until he started after G'Kar again, then cut the impulse to the right side of his body. His legs kicked out from under him. Then she cut the rest as his head hit the floor. The vidtapers would record that the bodyguard tripped, fell, and knocked himself out.

G'Kar picked himself up off the ground and caught her gaze. She psi'd at him, We have to go. Now.

He nodded and moved quickly out of the bar, pausing only to gather his bag, containing his ever-growing Book of G'Kar, and to nudge the bodyguard with his toe, reassuring himself that he would not be tackled again. After he was gone, Lyta waited for a moment, then finished her drink and followed.

"And where would you like to go now, Lyta?" G'Kar asked once they were safely inside their ship, a compact little explorer G'Kar had purchased back at Babylon 5 when it became clear

that neither of them could return to their respective homeworlds without causing considerable problems for themselves and others. Their alliance, born of convenience and necessity, had proven strangely comfortable for them both.

While they waited to see what the universe had in store for them, they took the opportunity to see what was out there. Lyta had the resources, and G'Kar had the time. And now it was her turn to choose their next destination.

She paused to consider. While at Durk 3, she had heard rumors about a colony world in sector 843, settled long ago by telepaths from various worlds. The dream of creating a homeworld for telepaths was one of the goals she had set for herself since her lover, Byron, had died in pursuit of that dream nearly a year earlier. G'Kar wouldn't approve, of course; he had invited her on this little jaunt among the stars because he felt she needed to rediscover her own Humanity before she could help her people ... but she didn't have to tell him.

After all, he hadn't warned her about the chieftain's mate, now, had he?

"Sector eight-four-three," she said at last.

"Eight-four-three it is," G'Kar said, and hit the thrusters.

The small vessel - christened by G'Kar the Na'Toth - emerged from the wheel-shaped space station and arced toward the local jump gate, disappearing from normal space into the violent maelstrom that was HyperSpace.

G'Kar estimated it would take eight days to reach sector 843. He nodded in satisfaction. It would give him time to work on his book. Since the early - and unauthorized - publication back home of his personal journal, he had decided to use these later chapters to correct some of the more intemperate chapters written earlier, when he had been a much angrier Narn. These early chapters were being used to justify all kinds of disagreeable notions back home involving Narn superiority, and he didn't much care for the idea.

Stylus in hand, he paused, remembering the events at Durk 3. He sometimes wondered if he was trying too hard to destroy the image of the holy figure so many of his people believed him to be. He'd had no real interest in the Kurla woman. He was trying to find the Narn he had once been, not to embrace or recapture it, but to create a balance in his own life. If in his past he had been too much the - what was the word Lyta used? Ah, yes - if he had been too much the rascal, and if he had become too much the priest, then perhaps finding a median between the two would allow him to create a G'Kar that he, and his people, could accept equally.

He was about to begin writing this newest revelation when the proximity alert on the Na'Toth sounded. Typical, he thought, turning to the controls. No one understands the writer's need for silence and privacy.

G'Kar was calling up the image from the aft monitor as Lyta appeared in the door to the main compartment. "What is it?"

"A ship," G'Kar said, checking the instruments. They looked up as the image of the nearby vessel grew on the monitor, emerging from behind a HyperSpace veil.

The type of ship was one G'Kar had seen before, a Human vessel of the Asimov class, usually owned by commercial transport companies. But there was a major difference: This one featured a large Psi Corps symbol across the bow.

He glanced to Lyta, saw her eyes widen at the sight. The Corps had been pursuing her vigorously since her departure from Babylon 5. So far they had managed to avoid detection, but that seemed about to change.

According to the scanners, the approaching ship was bristling with weapons. G'Kar concluded that they couldn't beat it in a fight and couldn't outrun it.

This should be interesting, he thought, and smiled. Nothing brought out the best in G'Kar more than the prospect of a hopeless battle against overwhelming forces.

Then he noticed that the ship wasn't approaching under power. It was drifting, its engines

cold.

"Lyta," he started, "it's-"

"I know."

He looked to her, and then remembered that HyperSpace amplified a telepath's abilities. He tried not to think about it too much, because the idea of Lyta's Vorlon-enhanced abilities being heightened any further was almost too much to bear.

"I can only sense one mind on board," she said. "Badly wounded, almost dead. The rest..." She frowned.

"Dead?" G'Kar asked.

"No. A ship like that should have a crew of a hundred or more. But there's no one else on board."

"Shall we investigate?"

Lyta hesitated. Though he was not a telepath, G'Kar could tell she was weighing the balance between curiosity and fear. There was always the possibility of a trap.

"Take us in," Lyta said finally.

G'Kar smiled as he angled the thrusters to take them into the gaping docking bay of the derelict starship.

Lyta's heels clicked on the metal floor of the Psi Corps mothership, the sound echoing down the deserted hallway. It was unsettling; the ship should have been busy, a blur of activity and noise. But there was just the sound of her heels, G'Kar's padded footsteps, and their breathing.

A check of the systems display confirmed that the ship was operational, rotating to provide gravity and air, but the engines had shut down after failing to receive any new command within the fail-safe period designed to keep a ship from moving too far off the beacon system that made it possible to navigate the HyperSpace byways without getting lost.

The bridge was silent except for the occasional ping of the automatic instruments. A black-uniformed Psi Cop lay on the floor, barely breathing, his face gaunt and drawn.

Lyta crouched down beside him and psi'd into his thoughts. His eyes fluttered open, trying to focus on her. If he recognized her, his thoughts gave no trace of it.

He tried to speak, but couldn't, his throat dry, his lips cracked and bleeding, as though he had spent long days without food or water.

Don't try to talk, she psi'd to him. What happened?

...planet, he psi'd back, not on the charts, captain investigated ... terrible, terrible...

What about the rest of the crew?

Dead. One hundred thirty of us, dead ...

At last he found her eyes. Avenge our people, he psi'd. Avenge our -

Then he was gone. Lyta pulled back quickly, not wanting to go with his thoughts as he died. She caught only a piece of them, the image of an endlessly expanding event horizon...

She blinked hard, pushing it away, and found G'Kar staring at her.

"What did he say?"

She cleared her throat and told him, adding, "We have to find the ship's logs, figure out where they went."

"And are we going where they went?"

"Yes. They're still my people. I want to know what killed them."

"Well, I can tell you what killed this one," G'Kar said. He starved to death. But the ship's stores are full of food. How can someone die on a ship filled with food?"

"I don't know," Lyta said, and she had that look in her eyes. "But I intend to find out."

The planet was a green and brown world without any obvious signs of technology, no visible cities or lights they could see from low orbit. They had left the Psi Corps mothership adrift in space, setting the controls to take it off the guiding beacon and into the depths of HyperSpace as a monument to those who had died.

"Any signals?" Lyta asked.

G'Kar scanned up and down the frequency range. "Total silence," he said. "I'm taking her down.

The Na'Toth fired her landing thrusters and decelerated into the planet's atmosphere. G'Kar piloted the ship through turbulence that eased as they came out of a thick cloud bank. A wide, flat plain revealed itself - a perfect landing spot. He set the small craft down on the open field with a minimum of bumps.

After checking the atmosphere and ensuring it was breathable, they stepped out onto the field. It was bordered on all sides by thick forests, the tall trees a shade of green so dark they were almost black. Wind was the only sound that drifted across the field to them.

Lyta let her thoughts extend to the line of trees, sensing for any minds that might be watching them. She found nothing.

"It's safe," she said. "For now, at least."

"Actually, it's not for now," G'Kar said. "Perhaps safe for here, for this place, would be better, since there seems to be no one about. If we go where there are others, whether now or later, then it will not be safe. Yes ... for now works on the surface, but for here would be a much more accurate -"

But Lyta was already walking across the open field, gun in hand, glancing left and right as she went. G'Kar smiled. Some habits died hard. What does someone like Lyta need a weapon for, when she is a weapon?

He moved quickly to follow, hoping for another opportunity to split semantic hairs with Lyta; getting that look was half the fun of the journey.

They entered the forest, and the trees seemed to close in all around them. No paths were visible, so they had to pick through the thick roots and vines that grew so close together that at times they could only walk in single file.

The records found in the Psi Corps mothership indicated that the pilot had come across this world accidentally, that it was off all the known charts. The first shuttles down had summoned the rest, until soon they were all down here, leaving the ship to run on autopilot until one dying telepath struggled back alone.

But so far G'Kar had seen nothing that could be of any possible interest ... no cities, no people, and no sign of the hundred-plus Human telepaths who came here and, presumably, died here.

"G'Kar?"

He stirred from his reverie and realized that he had lost sight of Lyta. He looked around for the source of her voice. "Lyta?"

"G'Kar?" The voice came again, but smaller this time, more distant. He ran toward the sound of it, calling her name. But she was nowhere to be found.

Shrock! G'Kar thought. He cursed himself for getting so lost in thought that he could lose sight of her. He believed she could take care of herself under almost any circumstance, probably better than he could himself, but -

He stopped at the sound of a voice. It called to him not in any alien tongue, but in his own language.

"Who are you?" the voice asked.

"Citizen G'Kar of Narn," he answered. "Who are you?"

A form stepped out of the trees, a Narn like himself. "Ka'Dath," he said. "We are honored to have you among us, Citizen G'Kar."

Lyta called again for G'Kar, but there was no answer from the forest that pressed in around her. She pscanned the area, but couldn't pick up even the whisper of his thoughts.

Damn, she thought. How could he have gotten so far away that she couldn't feel him, even without a clear line of sight?

She moved thought a thick strand of trees and stopped at the sight of several Humans - two young men and a woman - working a small plot of ground that might eventually become a garden. They looked up as she approached.

One of them touched her thoughts. Have you come to take us back? He asked.

No, she psi'd back.

He stood, joined by the others. Then you're welcome to stay.

What is this place?

Home, the woman psi'd back. Freedom. A world of our own at last.

Home.

G'Kar entered the small series of huts that had been constructed deep in the forest, and quickly understood why he had not seen them from orbit. They were built of native material and carefully camouflaged to conceal them from prying eyes. As they entered the village, they passed other Narns who emerged from huts and the line of surrounding trees to study the newcomer.

"What are all of you doing here?" G'Kar asked his companion.

"We are the only survivors of a Centauri slave ship that crashed here three years ago," Ka'Dath said. "We built this place out of the wilderness and hoped that one day we might be found and returned home, so that we could rejoin the fight to free Narn."

"Narn is free," G'Kar said. "Two years ago we drove the Centauri from our home. We are now at peace."

"Peace," Ka'Dath said, as though unwilling to believe it. "Is it possible? After so long...?"

"Possible, and real," G'Kar said. "I was ..." he stopped, did not choose to say, I was responsible. I helped in the plan to kill the Centauri emperor Cartagia and overthrow Centauri rule, even though it was true. He had come far to avoid that kind of attention. "I was there when it happened," he said.

"Bless G'Quan," Ka'Dath said. "The elder will be pleased."

"The elder?"

"Yes. That is who I'm taking you to see," he said, and indicated a hut in the center of the village, larger than the rest. "Afterward, there will be a feast in your honor. For bringing us this news, for offering us the chance to return home, you shall be hailed a hero."

G'Kar shrugged. Was this his lot, to be forever elevated above what he felt was his position? Were people so quick to find heroes these days that they would choose someone who just happened to stumble onto their existence?

Every time he thought he had the universe figured out, it did something like this to him.

And perhaps that is the point, he considered.

"Aside from our people, are there any others here?" he asked as they approached the elder's hut.

Ka'Dath seemed to hesitate before answering "I would not be surprised," he said.

Lyta came out into another clearing where makeshift quonset huts had been erected, bright white corrugated plastisteel reflecting the sunlight. She recognized Drazi, and Centauri, and

other races as well as Humans. "Are they all telepaths?" she asked.

Her companion nodded. On their way here he had said his name was Samuel.

"How do you all get along?"

"By respecting one another's privacy. There are no unauthorized scans here, not because we are forbidden by rules or regulations, but because we respect one another. This is a place where telepaths from every world can gather and be safe."

"What about the crew of the Psi Corps mothership that came here?"

He stopped. "You know about that?"

"We found it floating dead in space."

He nodded again. "They heard this was a sanctuary from the kind of persecution the Corps represents, and they came to take us back to Earth with them."

"What happened?"

"We resisted. And when the others aboard saw what we had there, the kind of life we had created for ourselves, most of them joined us."

"The survivor we found said this was a terrible place. He said his crew were all dead."

"Freedom is always terrible to those who would impose their will on others. As I said, most of them joined us. The rest struck off on their own, thinking that if we were here, then others must be as well. They hoped to find another group they could enlist in their cause. Last I heard, they were running out of supplies and lost."

"The survivor you found probably said what he said in hopes of convincing others to come here in force. I can imagine how easy it would be to believe a story like that."

He looked over at her, saw the expression on her face, saw that she had indeed believed him. He smiled. "Some of those who joined us are away hunting, but you'll find most of the rest here. They'll confirm what I told you if you have any doubts."

She smiled back. "It's not that I doubt you, Samuel," she said. "It's just that I've never heard of a whole ship of Corps telepaths changing sides like that before."

"Meaning it could have happened, and you've simply never heard about it ... or the world we've carved out for ourselves is more attractive than even we realized."

"Maybe so," she said, looking around. This was the kind of environment she had dreamed of creating for her people, a place of safety and mutual respect. No one here wore Psi badges, or gloves, or was forced into a kind of slave labor by normals.

"One other thing," she said. "I had a companion with me when I landed, a Narn. His name is G'Kar. We got separated in the forest. We've been though a lot together, and I'd hate to lose him now. If you could send out a scouting party to look for him -"

"Of course," he said. "I'm sure he'll turn up. Meanwhile, would you like something to eat? You must be starved after all that walking."

A tray of food was spread out before the pallet where the elder half lay, half sat, considering his guest. "You do not eat, Citizen G'Kar," he said.

"In due time," G'Kar said.

"You have questions."

G'Kar smiled. "It seems questions are all I am fated ever to have, it seems," he said.

"Nothing would please me more than to stumble across an answer from time to time, but that does not appear to be a real possibility."

"Then perhaps you are intended to be an answer for others, rather than to have answers given to you by others."

"I don't understand."

"As the eldest among us, I have led our people here since we were freed from captivity by the crash of the Centauri vessel. But I am not well; I do not believe I will survive the coming winter."

"I'm sorry."

"Do not be. My only regret was that I had not yet found someone who could lead my people, guide them in creating a new world for themselves here."

"Don't you want to return to Narn?"

"At first, that was all we dreamed of. But in truth, we will always be a target for our enemies, who dream only of our eventual extinction. It would be our ultimate revenge to create a colony totally unknown to everyone, so that if one day our people are attacked again - if our Homeworld should fall - our race could rise from the ashes here in this secret place and fight to reclaim our home and avenge our people."

G'Kar smiled and paused. He picked up one of the fruits on the table and considered it for what seemed a long time before he finally spoke. "I have only one other question," he said.

The elder smiled back. "Just one?"

"Yes," G'Kar said, and fixed the elder with a faze that he hoped would penetrate whatever was between him and who he was actually looking at. "Who are you?" he asked. "Who are you ... really?"

"...and that was the last we saw of our ship." The man speaking had identified himself as Nathan Delcompte, first officer of the Psi Corps mothership they had found dead in HyperSpace. He had the uniform (now kept in a box beneath the crude wooden bed) and the documents to prove it.

Others had been assembled in the modified life pod that they used as a meeting room, each confirming the other's story, just as Samuel had promised. SO far the place seemed to be everything it was advertised to be.

And yet ... and yet there was something that troubled her. Perhaps it was the way in which their stories so closely corroborated one another. For all their ability, teeps were no more perfect or consistent than mundanes; they saw things in different ways, at different times, and interpreted those things in uniquely personal ways.

Yet all the stories she had been told since arriving had a curious sameness about them ... as if they had been coached, or ...

She frowned and took a bite from another of the exotic-looking fruits in the bowl in front of her. It was delicious, but she felt scarcely less hungry than when she had eaten the first one. However, that was a minor matter; something here wasn't adding up, and she couldn't put her finger on it.

You know what to do about it, she thought to herself. What only you can do. She shook her head. That she could do it wasn't the issue; she didn't want to do it. But under the circumstances, she couldn't see any other solution.

With her Vorlon-augmented abilities, Lyta could touch another telepath's mind, even a P-12, and leave no trace of ever having been there. The thought did not cheer her; this place, if it was what it appeared, embodied all the things she said she believed in, all the things she believed she was fighting for ... a place where the privacy of all telepaths would be respected. To get the information she needed, she would have to violate that privacy. That they wouldn't know it was happening was not the point; she would know she was doing it.

She didn't like it. But it was necessary.

Funny how quickly Paradise passes away in the face of personal convenience, she thought. Hating herself for doing it, she reached out and touched the thoughts of the man who had just finished speaking. Just a gentle surface scan...

She reeled back from the contact. There was nothing there! But that was impossible, it was

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He turned, met her gaze, and suddenly the mental pattern appeared in her thoughts, like a light switch being turned on again. But not even a highly trained telepath could simply turn his neural patterns on and off like that. They had been not there, then they had been there.

And as she caught the impression of his mind, she realized something else: It was familiar.

Every mindprint is as individual and distinct as every fingerprint; no two are alike. Telepaths are taught to recognize such patterns instantly in order to find each other in large crowds, and to sense potential enemies.

But the pattern she detected in this new mind was identical with the pattern of Samuel's mind.

As she widened her probe, she felt the mental patterns snapping on in all the people in the room. All the same. Identical.

One mind. Not many minds. One mind.

She found Samuel's face in the crowd. "Who are you?" she said. "Who are you?"

"I don't believe I understand what you are asking," the elder said.

"Of course you do," G'Kar said. "For every Narn, there is no greater imperative than the need to return home. It's understandable that an outsider, however well informed - telepathically, perhaps? - would not know that. It's not in our history, it's not something we think about - it's who and what we are. The need to return home is in our blood and our bones and our emotional makeup.

"A true Narn would never say what you just said, never write off the Homeworld, never concede even the possibility of extinction. Therefore, although you look like a Narn, you cannot be a Narn. From this I can only conclude that what I am seeing ... is not what is. And if you are not what you appear, then I must wonder how much else is real. This room, this table, perhaps even the fruit which I believe I am holding in my hand ... but which almost certainly does not exist any more than you do."

The elder - or what appeared to him as the elder - regarded him silently for a moment before speaking. "You do not seem concerned by this conclusion of yours."

"Concerned? No. Troubled? Yes. I wonder how many came before me, how many others have seen what you wanted them to see, eaten what they thought was nutritious food that did not, in fact, exist ... causing them to starve to death without ever realizing what was happening."

The elder rose, limbs that had previously appeared infirm now strong. He approached G'Kar and met his gaze. G'Kar did not look away. "You are a most remarkable Narn," he said.

G'Kar shrugged. "So I am told."

"In the time of my existence, few have ever discovered what you have just discovered, and then only in the last moments of their lives. You are the first -"

He looked off, seemed to be concentrating on something far from here. "-yes, the first, but now there is another also discovering this, not far from here. Your companion." He looked back at G'Kar. "Perhaps this was a good thing. From both of you I can learn what I did wrong that allowed you to discover what was going on so quickly."

"I've been a teacher before. I'm sure I can be of assistance," G'Kar said. "Lyta, however, might not be quite so amenable."

"We will see," the elder said. "It is a strange thing, to meet another mind openly, and ... talk. Even if only for a little while."

"Why just a little while?"

"Because regardless of how our conversation goes - and make no mistake, I am looking forward to it - neither of you will leave here alive."

"Perhaps," G'Kar said. "But until then, if you want to learn from me, first I must learn from you. So I ask you again: Who, or what, are you?"

As soon as she asked the question, the other telepaths - or what appeared to be telepaths -

went silent. She went through the possibilities. It's impossible for two people to have the same mental imprints. Therefore they cannot exist. I am seeing that which does not exist.

She closed her eyes, and for the first time became aware of the slight telepathic pressure on the base of the optic, tactile, and auditory nerve bundles, sending false signals back to her brain. She shut down the misleading impulses and opened her eyes.

The room was empty.

She closed her eyes and chased down the last of the impulses, hidden expertly from detection, and opened her eyes.

The room was gone.

She stood just inside a forest, the high branches forming a vast canopy above her.

In front of her were spread the rusted husks of shuttles and personal starships from hundreds, perhaps thousands, of worlds. They were overgrown with vines and covered in leaves. Some of the vines had left tracks in the dirt where they had been used to pull - or had themselves pulled - the ships in, where they could not be seen from orbit.

The more recent shuttles, still new and untarnished, bore Psi Corps symbols.

Lyta felt sadness for the multitude of passengers - now all gone - that had once occupied these vessels, but quickly pushed the thought away. She started toward the ships ... and heard movement among the distant trees. As she watched, animals, birds, and insects of every shape and description seemed to bleed out of the Shadows. They crawled, hopped, slithered, stalked, and galloped out of the forest, moving together, utterly silent, and looking straight at her with uncommon intelligence.

She pscanned them from a distance.

They all registered the same mental imprint.

No, she corrected herself, not hundreds of creatures with the same imprint, the same imprint overlaying their own neural patterns.

The words came to her from her earliest days of Psi Corps training, a phenomenon often discussed at the Academy but rarely encountered in the real world: hive mind.

"I am this world," the elder said.

"Not possible," G'Kar said. "Planets are not sentient creatures."

"No? Perhaps not the soil, or the metal, or their component molecules, but what of the lifeforms themselves? Branch and leave, hoof and claw?"

"There is no memory among us, even the oldest, that tells u how it happened. Some who came here long ago and discovered our nature had their own ideas about it. They believed that in a time long past, links began to occur between all the forms of life there.

Telesymbiosis, they called it. Individually, none of those who live in this place are sentient, as you mean it. But collectively, there is a group mind, a flash of consciousness that links all forms of life here into one great entity that, one day, long ago ... woke up.

"Ours is a world of unrivaled peace and cooperation. The flower tells the insect when it is most suited for pollination; the wounded animal calls out to the carrion eaters when it is about to die so that the food is not wasted. We are One.

"But from time to time over the years, others came here, others whose intentions were not peaceful. They would destroy the land, tear down the forests, kill the animals. We responded by becoming even stronger, until we could impose the telesymbiotic pressure on those who came here. They would become lost in illusion, as you almost did, eventually starving to death. Their bodies would be moved into areas requiring fertilization, to serve the greater self.

"It is easier for us to deal with your kind this way," the elder said. "But we do have other means at our disposal.

Lyta looked around. There were now thousands of the creatures moving into position on all sides. Even armed, she knew she could take out only a few of them. If they struck with a coordinated attack, she would be hopelessly overwhelmed. Bitten, beaten, and stampeded to death.

She could feel them preparing to strike, felt the growing agitation in their unified thoughts. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and she was nearly out of time.

But not out of ideas.

She closed her eyes again and concentrated. Hive minds seemed almost supernatural, but there was always a core element somewhere. Thoughts didn't come randomly into existence; they all had to start somewhere. She visualized the thought patterns in the lifeforms around her and focused on tracking them back to the source, the beginning of the thought.

Come on, damn it, focus. The Vorlons had altered her, enhanced her abilities to an extent even she didn't fully understand. I can do this.

"One other thing," G'Kar said, stalling for time. If the entity could sense Lyta in motion, then she must be ready to take action. It might help to distract the entity, and while he was at it ... learn something.

"What is it?" the elder asked.

"A question. Since the dawn of recorded time, my race and every other has turned its attention to understanding the universe, to discovering the ultimate meaning of our lives. You have an advantage - you can bring the unified collective consciousness of an entire planet to the process. So I ask: Have you solved that question? Have you touched the unknowable?"

"I ..." The elder paused, seemed momentarily to lose focus. Then he shook off the distraction. "Yes, we have. When we became conscious, it was our first thought: Who are we? And where did we come from? We needed to define ourselves against the universe. So yes, we did ask that question, and after years spent dwelling on this one question, we finally received an answer. We know the meaning of all of this, the importance of..."

The elder paused again. Looked at G'Kar. His eyes widened. "The other..."

"Lyta?"

He nodded. "She ... is not like the others. Stronger. We had thought she was the same."

"You were wrong."

The image came into her thoughts: Buried deep in the planet's upper crust, a kind of bacteria, a microscopic lifeform that had all the classic traits of individual neurons ... it evolved with the other native lifeforms, infected them over the course of millions of years, created a symbiotic life cycle .. took root in their own neural relays until they reached a kind of critical mass, until they were answerable to and controlled by the greater neural biomass. There were miles and miles of the bacterial matter coiled far beneath the surface, where it was warm, and moist, and safe.

Correction: where it believed itself to be safe.

She struck with a massive telepathic attack. She felt the hive mind reel under the assault, feel it struggle to meet her attempts to disorient it and shred its neural patterns. It was unprepared - it had never thought it could be attacked in this way.

Eyes shut, she heard the creatures stampeding toward her, propelled by fear. Kill her, kill her, do it now.

She knelt, dug her fingers into the dirt, and pierced the hard ground with her thoughts. She

was sweating, shaking, but refused to pass out. Break the neural link, overload the faux-synaptic pathways, neutralize the electrochemical transmissions, break, overload, neutralize, break, overload, neutralize ...

Far below, something massive and moist began to tear.

Blackness surged upward, rising behind her eyes.

In her mind, a planet screamed.

When she opened her eyes again, G'Kar was standing over her. They were back in the Na'Toth, and she was covered with biosensors. She tried to sit up, but the world kicked slantwise beneath her.

"Don't move," he said. "I found you on the ground and carried you back. Your heart stopped for a moment, and I thought you weren't going to come back."

"... the animals ..." her voice was thin, a whisper. Her head was pounding, and there was the coppery taste of blood in her mouth. Must've popped a vein, she thought casually.

"They were wandering around aimlessly when I found you. Whatever joined them together, it is now gone. Can you tell me what happened?"

Between careful sips of water, she did.

G'Kar digested the information for a moment before saying, "You killed an entire planet?"

"It pissed me off," she said, and shrugged. "I killed the main body of the telesymbiotic biomass. But I don't have any illusions that I got all of it. It'll build back up to critical mass eventually, but it'll take centuries before it can exert enough influence to pull together a new planetary hive mind on the scale of what we saw here."

She focused on him. It hurt. "I could feel you talking to the entity toward the end," she said.

"You helped me get in by distracting it. I don't know what you asked, but it must have been one hell of a question, because nearly all of the entity was focused on it. What was it?"

"Oh ... nothing important," he said, fighting what she suspected was an ironic smile.

"Nothing important at all."

With that, he turned, headed back into the cockpit, and fired up the engines.

For the next several minutes, the only sounds in the ship were the roar of the engines, and G'Kar in the forward compartment ... laughing.

Straczynski Speaks Out

Although original episodes of the program no longer air, Babylon 5 creator J. Michael Straczynski continues to explore his celebrated saga through fiction. "Genius Loci" is his second piece in this series, which also included "Shadow of His Thoughts" (issue 597)

To follow the serious tone of his last story, JMS said he was looking forward to writing a lighter, more action-oriented piece. Exploring a new adventure of Lyta and G'Kar was a natural choice for him. "The fans have expressed considerable interest in seeing what happens to Lyta and G'Kar," he said. "Their story alone could be a series, frankly."

While the author declined to name his favorite characters in the series ("They're all favorites."), clearly these two hold a special place in his heart.

"G'Kar is great fun to write, whichever relationship is under consideration - Londo, Lyta, Sheridan, any of them," he said. "Like Londo, it's very easy to make him talk, and much harder to make him shut up. With Lyta, they make for an interesting and unusual pairing, and each one will have to learn from the other during their travels."

Lyta has already learned enough already to prove a formidable foe to the Psi Corps, her former masters. The author plans to continue that storyline in his fiction. "It's clear that she

intends to deal with the Corps, and keeping that thread alive is something I think people want to see," he said.

But is she ready for what her destiny calls her to do? "In order to deal with the Corps, Lyta will have to grow beyond what she thought possible," JMS explained. "Right now, she's overcompensating, going too far in the other direction - more prone to rage due to the death of her lover, Byron. That's why the relationship with G'Kar is a good one, because he will be able to bring her back more toward the center."

While Lyta struggles with her anger, G'Kar has developed in another direction. "Genius Loci" Sees the Narn explore the meaning of life with a powerful alien lifeform. At least on the surface, their discussion is a ruse to distract the alien from Lyta's telepathic attack, but the scene resonates with deeper meaning for G'Kar. At the outcome, is the Narn any closer to finding for himself the answers to his existential questions?

"I don't think G'Kar has ever come close ... at least from his own perspective," JMS observed. "He is wiser about these things than most, but he also discovers that the more he knows, the more questions he has."

The author addresses the concept of life's higher purpose not only through G'Kar's explorations. The search for meaning beyond oneself is a key question throughout Babylon 5, he said. "It's a mythic element, and B5 is about myth. The purpose of myth is to give a society context: This is where the tribe came from, that's where it's going, this is where we are and what we do.

"I think we have to apply our own meaning to life rather than having it applied from some theoretical outside force. But we're never going to arrive at that meaning unless and until we begin asking the right questions. My goal is to try and find some of those questions and pose them in what I write."

While he weaves together the mythic strands of his next Babylon 5 piece for Amazing Stories, JMS is busily juggling several other projects as well, including an adaptation of C. M. Kornbluth's classic SF short story "The Marching Morons" for NPR. His current television endeavors include scripting a Murder, She Wrote TV movie for CBS and continuing development on a new series. His comic, Rising Stars, is out now from Top Cow.