

True Seeker, by Fiona Avery

"But I thought I was 200 people down the list." Jerrica, a young female Narn, sat across the table from Alisa Beldon at the Red River café.

"Well, you were," Alisa Beldon lingered on the last word, flipping over the papers in her hand.

"What happened?" Jerrica tried to get a reading off of the Human's impassive face.

The True Seeker looked over at the young Narn, who was 16 Earth years old, and studied her for a moment before continuing. "You have a very unique case. There are not many adopted Narns in Earth territory."

"My parents wanted to do something when the Centauri bombed Narn. I mean my ... Earth parents. They took me in."

"Yes, that is exactly what the documents here describe. Tell me, Jerrica," Alisa leaned in and their gaze locked, "Do you remember anything before you arrived at San Francisco?"

A pause, hesitation, discomfort. Jerrica fidgeted a bit. Then said, "No, nothing."

Alisa sat back. Her light, mental touch against Jerrica's thoughts had detected surface memories so scant that they were considered dreams and fragments of illusion by the Narn. Memories of a warm place, a cold steel ship, explosions, and that was all. That was the handy part of being a telepath in this business. Sometimes you could help your clients without them even knowing it, as long as you used your abilities to their benefit and never against them. She had taken the Minbari Oath on this matter. As a True Seeker among the Minbari elite, to do other than aid the helpless was dishonorable.

"So then, you think you can find my real parents soon? Is that why you're helping me first?"

"Yes." Alisa saw so much of herself in Jerrica. The Narn girl was young and nervous, the way Alisa had been as a young thief living in Down Below on the Babylon 5 Space Station. That's when Alisa's latent telepathic ability had manifested itself, leading to a confrontation with the Psi Corps which was only resolved when she was chosen to study with the Minbari, thanks to Entil'Zha Delenn, who was now a close friend. In the years since then, she had learned more than just to control her talent and harness the power of telepathy. Delenn had wanted her to bridge the gap between Earthers and Minbari, which was in part what had prompted their close friendship. The great Entil'Zha had many questions, as did Alisa, and they shared knowledge often.

Because of Delenn's friendship, Alisa propelled herself to do more than just bridge a gap between two worlds. She had dedicated her life to bridging the gap between other worlds.

"I do a lot of investigative work," she told Jerrica, who stared at her with those stark, crimson eyes. Narn eyes were so alien, so cold and seeking. Jerrica's were nervous and wide today, showing just the rims of white beyond the large red irises. It was unnerving.

Alisa continued. "I learn identities, find biological parents, and sometimes uncover missing children."

"Sounds very difficult," Jerrica replied.

"It's exhausting and yet so very rewarding. Sometimes it's even -"

{/Dangerous/}.

Alisa sat up as a Narn waiter approached and set a strange concoction down on the table. Alisa heard his thought before she could utter the very same word.

{/She's dangerous/}.

As he turned to leave, she asked Jerrica, "Does anyone else know you're here looking for your parents?"

"Yes," Jerrica replied. "I told the Totem Master-"

Before she was even finished, Alisa grabbed the waiter and pointed to the strange brew in front of Jerrica. Green mist was curling from the square, ridged cup. "Take that back," she said.

The waiter froze for a moment, glanced between the cup and Alisa, and tried to speak. "Madam, I-"

"Now!" Alisa cut him off.

Being Narn, he foolishly continued his protest. "I assure you there's nothing wrong and that she has ordered it. It {/comes/} steaming!"

Alisa flicked her robes back from her wrist to uncover a slim crystal bracelet. The mechanism on her arm popped up a deadly little laser sight that displayed a pale green cross-hair on the Narn's pouch. She let the sound of the bracelet's plasma generator build as she kept the cross-hairs over his vitals.

The Narn flinched. "Yes, Ma'am!" he said, rushing to the cup and picking it up. Alisa heard several Narn obscenities work their way past his mental barriers. He was scared and edgy, but with reason, because his guilt was just under the surface of his slippery, reptilian thoughts.

Alisa rose from the table. "We need to get out of here now."

Jerrica pushed back her chair and followed Alisa across the black stone deck of the patio. Beneath them, red rivers of molten magma were passing in blazing streams. The restaurant had recently been built to admire the volcanic scenery.

"What was that all about?" Jerrica demanded once they were streetside.

Alisa came to an immediate decision. She would not tell Jerrica about the true nature of the danger she was in. Some clients could handle the facts, this young girl probably could not.

She replied, "This is your first trip to Narn, isn't it?"

"Yeah, so?" Jerrica trotted behind.

"That's what I thought. Narn isn't like a lot of other places. It's dangerous to trust the locals around here."

"But... these are my {/people/}."

The streets were beginning to fill with caravan shoppers hauling heavy bags or large trunks on their backs. Beyond these pedestrians, large and squat adobe-style structures loomed against the orange eye of the Narn sun. The sun separated the dust-filled sky and streaked it in bands of purple, rose and

peach.

Minbari technology had helped Narn clear most of the particulate matter from its atmosphere since the Centauri Mass Driver bombing of 2259. But enough of the dust particles still survived in the sky overhead to serve as a beautiful sunset reminder of recent atrocities.

Alisa could feel the wonder and naive pleasure from the Narn behind her as she stared at the simple beauty of her own people.

{/How could she know their vicious side when this was her first exposure? Poor kid grew up on Earth. All outwardly Narn, but so intrinsically Human in learned behaviors./}

Alisa touched Jerrica's arm, nudging her onto a side street, while simultaneously projecting a sensation of {/calm/} into Jerrica's mind. As minds went, it was Narn; slippery and cold. Not even Jerrica's time on Earth had cured her of the cold-blooded constriction of the Narn mental patterns. "Tell me about your time on Earth."

"Well, I was fortunate enough to go to the Narn Academy of San Francisco."

"A prestigious prep school," Alisa replied while calculating their next move. She was flipping through her mental database of allies who were living on Narn or in this sector of space. It was a very short list.

"Yes, I am fluent in Narn and familiar with the entire history and cultural heritage of my race," Jerrica said.

Alisa scratched her head for a moment before she realized that there actually {/was/} someone here who would serve Jerrica's interests quite well.

{/And/}, she thought, {/this one could be trusted somewhat/}. If Jerrica and Alisa could just make it to the central section of town.

"I never realized Moxtoke would be so open like this." Jerrica was looking around as the two made their way through crowded merchant streets of Moxtoke, the new capital of Narn.

"Yes, lots of construction." Alisa indicated different buildings all forming under unique scaffolding. There seemed to be an overpopulation of contractors from every sector of the galaxy here. Drazi, Pak'ma'ra, Narn, Human, Brakiri ... all working on different buildings in different sections of town.

"They're probably getting in their work before the afternoon rain hits," Jerrica replied.

"Ah yes, of course." Alisa remembered that not only had the Minbari used wind-cleansing technology but they had also laced the sky with silver nitrate; forming clouds that were starting to dump rain on the barren Narn Homeworld in seasonal patterns. "I'm not sure the Narn really appreciate rainy seasons much."

"Not with all these open air shops." They walked past open air booths where Narn were selling meat and butchering it on the spot. Jerrica curled her brown lip at the smell.

The Narn at the booth spotted her and shouted, "All manner of livestock here! Dead! Alive! Almost sentient!"

Alisa felt Jerrica's stomach flop as she paused, then hurried to catch up. Alisa was heedless of the sights around them, purposefully heading to another, quieter section of Moxtoke.

They passed an Exfoliation Stand, where a Narn was seated in a barber's chair and getting his head scuffed by something that looked like a huge nail file.

"What is that?!!" Jerrica was horrified.

Alisa looked over in that direction, shrugged, and said, "Buffing. Narn buff their spots off and they grow back larger during the next molting period."

"Ewwwww," Jerrica said. "Why?"

"I don't know. Same reason Earth women shave their legs. They think it makes them look more attractive."

They continued on and Jerrica stepped out of the way of another Narn walking her pet down the street. The leash was made out of alligator skin. The pet looked like some hybrid between a pig and a daschhund. There were definitely sights to be had on Narn.

"Over here," Alisa called as she ducked down another side street. Jerrica, lost on the sight of a Narn woman walking with a parasol that was shaped more like leather batwings than delicate Victorian lace, realized she was standing in the middle of the main road and ran to catch up.

"Sorry about that. You'd think after all my studies I'd be ready for this." The sky was beginning to darken and Jerrica's eyes adjusted to the level of cloud cover making the world a bit greyer.

"Well, there's books and then there's the real thing. Not much further now." Alisa was at a tiny crossroads with huge, adobe buildings on either side. A Narn woman was lowering a beautiful clay pot down with a rope and calling out to a young Narn standing in the street with a cart full of bottled water. "This way," Alisa decided.

Jerrica followed behind until they came to a clearing and saw a large P'lazzo in front of them. The private dwelling was impressive, with carved features and scenes all over the walls in bas relief. Every ten feet or so, the wall was interrupted by a strew-tree, a Narn succulent that grew in aerated, gravel soil. The strew-trees grew up in little impressions in the wall and twisted prettily with glowing purple flowers at the end of their branches.

A large iron gate, speckled with orange splotches, guarded the entrance. Alisa pressed the intercom switch and a little light ran over her finger.

"Unknown," the computer said.

"Alisa Beldon," she replied. "I'm here to see Na'Toth."

"One moment please," the computer replied. "I will locate her for you."

"Yeah, I'm here," came the reply from over the intercom. "Who are you?"

"Alisa Beldon. I am here on behalf of Jerrica Thomas."

"Who?"

"I'm working with a finder's program and we need to talk. We met once before, on Babylon 5."

"All right." Annoyance was a first-rate Narn trait and it sang over the intercom. "Com on in, but I'm very busy so make it fast."

The gate rolled up without a sound. It hung over the doorway with pointed

spikes as if the person walking underneath might displease the hostess and the gate would come crashing down upon them, pinning their lifeless body to the ground.

"Ah, Narn hospitality," Alisa cracked. She winked at Jerrica.

"Is this {/the/} Na'Toth?" Jerrica whispered.

"Yes, {/the/} Na'Toth." They went inside.

After wandering around the square building, admiring tapestries made from leather, teeth, bones, more leather, and rawhide, the two found themselves at the entrance to the central courtyard. From the adobe walls, there were awnings made from leather and stretching out over little alcoves. The awnings reminded Jerrica of the woman with the leather parasol in the streets. They were painted with beautiful geometric shapes in bold colors like black, orange, and yellow. Beneath the awnings were varieties of plant-life that Jerrica had never seen before.

Under one awning at the far corner of the courtyard, was Na'Toth, squatting down by the wall with a little chisel in her hand. The famous Narn was bent over and squatting with her face just inches from the wall.

Alisa walked over and waited patiently for Na'Toth to rise. Several minutes passed and when Na'Toth finally turned, she looked up at the two women. She saw the dark-haired Human in Minbari robes and behind her a Narn, if something that small and measly could be called "Narn", peeking over her shoulder.

"I remember you," Na'Toth said to Alisa and stood, brushing off her leathery hands. She hit her chest once with her fists and bowed briefly.

Alisa did the same in reply. "Yes, we met on Babylon 5 several years ago, when I was looking to live outside the options of the Psi Corps."

"Yes." Na'Toth seemed unaffected and she tossed her hand-chisel down on the dusty ground.

"Do you do all of the Da'Quana yourself?" Jerrica could not contain her amazement and was pointing to the long layers of bas relief sculpture lining all the walls of the estate.

Na'Toth was clearly impressed with the girl's eye for artwork. "Yes, I do. It's a hobby of mine." The sky rumbled above them. Na'Toth looked up and crossed her arms over her chest. "It's going to rain. {/Again/}."

The other two looked up and Alisa felt a mist droplet hit her in the eye.

"Let's get inside." It was more of a grouse than a command. Na'Toth led them to an open door that resembled a French door on Earth but the panes were not square, they were octagonal, like a beehive.

Once inside, Na'Toth shut the doors on the rainy courtyard.

"It's good to see that Narn is habitable again." Alisa began.

"Not hardly. Rain! I hate rain. It messes up my day, my plans, my schedule. Rain. This was a great Minbari idea. Let's put large air filters, half a mile high on Narn and then prick their clouds with silver nitrate in order to make rain." Na'Toth shook her head, sighed with exasperation and sat down forcibly on the couch in the small room.

Alisa didn't wait for an invitation to sit as well. She chose a strange looking chair (if you could call it that - it did have a seat for one) and

sat down in it. Jerrica remained standing.

"I remember you came with Delenn on her visit to Narn about what, 10 years ago?" Na'Toth said. "You were skulking in the back while she presented us with air purifiers in order to reduce particulate matter in our atmosphere."

"Yes, Delenn and I are good friends now," Alisa replied. "She was delighted to be able to help Narn after the terrible atrocity."

"Yes, I'm sure she was. It would have been better perhaps if Delenn had warned us about the driver attack before it happened."

Alisa didn't take the bait. She just shrugged. She was Human and wasn't nearly as prone to getting upset as a Minbari over matters of honor. "We did what we had to do, and the same can be said for Entil'Zha Delenn. Its no use crying over spilled milk."

Na'Toth seemed to ruffle at this, but Alisa kept right on going. "Today, however, I seek your help in averting another catastrophe for your people."

"Are you bringing trouble into my P'lazzo?" Na'Toth asked.

"Yes," Alisa replied flatly.

"All right, then." The Narn grinned and her red eyes flashed a hungry stare over her wide smile. She looked like a predator licking its lips. "Let's get down to business."

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An hour later, Alisa was walking down the slick streets of Moxtoke. She'd left a terribly reluctant Jerrica to mingle with her own kind. Not just anyone, either. Na'Toth would give Jerrica a thing or two to learn about Narn history and culture. She'd keep the young Narn occupied over the course of the night, and that left Alisa free to do what she did best.

Intelligence gathering.

As Alisa slipped down the shadows toward the central government building of Moxtoke, she considered Na'Toth. Na'Toth's mind was the first Narn mind that Alisa had ever touched, back when she was still a teen on Babylon 5.

Narn minds were no big deal to Alisa now, but the first time that the Narn psyche is truly experienced, Humans can have nightmares for weeks. They're cold, slippery, carnal. But, despite that, there was always something about Na'Toth that Alisa really enjoyed. A sense of "the hunt" that Alisa herself knew well. Above all, Na'Toth was an honest player. She'd take good care of Jerrica and keep her safe.

Alisa approached the center of Moxtoke and looked up at the shiny new capital building. This was a high security zone, but that didn't intimidate her. Alisa had been to many worlds already, with many security tasks, and she was capable. It was something she kept learning on the side, even on Minbar. Thieving might be bad, but intelligence gathering, now ... that was different.

Alisa put on her camouflage net and snuck over the side of the wall, pausing as a security laser started to scan the flat surface of the wall a few feet away. Right before it went over her camouflaged body, she held her breath, and the laser passed right over her. It kept going down the wall and Alisa didn't wait for it to double back. She slid over to the side-access door and hooked up her pirated datacrystal pack.

Two seconds of decode and she was inside. {/I have Minbari technology/}, she

thought.

The Minbari were highly advanced compared to any other race still around. They were the leaders, wise and true, who rarely abused their power. While Alisa had trained with them, she was still not "of" them, and she saw other possibilities for Minbari technology. In the right hands, the tech could easily avoid calamities like this one.

{/A Minbari would never do something like this/}, she thought, {/but I would - and do - all the time/}. It made her smile as she worked on another inner lock. She had her own world with its own rules. And because she played fairly, even if she did dance on the line, she had been commended for it by the Minbari. A year ago, they had presented her with the medal of honor called the "True Seeker." Her job was to help people - and she used whatever means possible to that end.

After two more security breaches, she was inside the main vault of the Records Office. Here, to the left, she found crystals lined up on shelves. They contained genetic information on just about every Narn still alive. She scanned the most recent recoveries. Within a few minutes, she had located Jerrica's datacrystal.

Rolling it between her fingers while her left hand ran over the smooth stainless-steel surface of an encryption desk, she sat down on an oddly formed Narn chair and inspected the data plug.

{/Ha!} She grinned. {/This uses pirated Minbari technology! Woo hoo hoo, wouldn't Entil'Zha Delenn be peeved?!} Some things were better left untold to her friend and mentor Delenn. This would be one of them.

{/Good thing it'd be a problem for anyone else but me./} Alisa slipped in the datacrystal and ran her hands over the faceted jewel control buttons on the silver surface. With a few slips and guesses she had bypassed the Minbari encryption software and went right into Jerrica's Genetic Files.

{/Who do you belong to...?} she asked. She scrolled down past genetic strings, blood samples, blood type, virtual recreations, until she got to the report matching.

{/I know you're first circle, I know it. So whose child are you ...?} Alisa hit the bottom of the report and it would scroll down no further. Her eyes widened and she sat straight up in the chair.

"Holy SH--!"

{/"She must not survive the night! I can't believe the Kha'Ri already knew about this!"/}

The voice was not here, it was a mindcast ... about ... two floors down, Alisa guessed, close enough for her to pick up the angry thought patterns and actually "hear" the conversation. If not with her ears, with her mind.

Alisa bolted out of the chair, with the datacrystal in hand. It shut down the encryption desk once it was removed. She hurried toward the door and stepped out into the hall just seconds before the Narn whose mind and voice she recognized came thundering up the hall with a smaller Narn beside him.

"That's why I came to you, because I know where she is {/right now!}"

Alisa stood very still against the wall, hoping that they would pass by and she would not have to breathe. The camouflage net was still activated but a breathing wall would look very suspicious. Narn had heightened sense of movement too, much like cat vision, so she remained perfectly still.

{/Thank the Maker for meditation classes/}, she thought as the two Narn walked to the door, just feet away from her, and started to unlock it.

"I want to see the file for myself."

"Tra'Kar, you are going to miss this golden opportunity."

"What opportunity?" He shouted and glared at the little Narn beside him.

"Na'Toth is my neighbor. I saw this Narn female go into her house with a Human woman, and I knew immediately to contact you." Alisa could feel him trying to soothe the savage beast before him. {/Little worm/}, she thought. "We go back, right? I am your friend, no?"

"Perhaps. Go on." Tra'Kar opened the door and walked into the room. The little Narn followed.

"She's at Na'Toth's for most of the afternoon, and then, once it gets dark, she follows Na'Toth out."

{/They left the house?!!/}

Alisa wanted to stomp her foot and shout "Damn!" but she held it in. {/How could Na'Toth do this? Damn it!/}

The Narn continued, "After they left, I followed them to -"

"{/Where is the datacrystal?!!/}" The voice was so loud that it made Alisa wince. It came across like a sharp knife over her mental passageways, cutting them like a razor.

"I ... I don't know." The little Narn was cowering. {/The little weasel./} "Tra'kar, it's not important."

"What do you mean it's not important?!!"

"Listen to me, you can still take care of the little Narn - she's at Red Dust Cavern with Na'Toth!"

{/Damn it, Na'Toth!!/} Alisa was furious. She'd told Na'Toth to stay at home with Jerrica and make sure nothing happened to her. By virtue of the fact that Jerrica had been evacuated from Narn when few others had that opportunity, Na'Toth almost certainly knew that Jerrica was a potential child of one of the inner circle of the Kha'Ri! Of course, none of them knew that she was the child of -

Tra'Kar suddenly got very, very quiet. "Did you hear something?" Terror, in a Narn, is a robust and strange thing.

"No," the other Narn whispered, if Narn could whisper.

Alisa thought nothing, did nothing, held her breath and became as empty as the wall she leaned against. Moments passed and silence engulfed the area.

"I swear I heard something," Tra'Kar insisted.

"Let's get out of here. This is giving me the bristles!"

The two shuffled out of the room, right past Alisa, who was so empty with thought she was beginning to {/feel/} like a stone slab and she tried not to let her teeth chatter from the chill.

A few levels down, when the Narn thought they were out of danger, she could hear them continuing their conversation.

"I want to go there and take care of her myself," Tra'Kar said. "I'll do the job tight and there'll be an end to this."

"A tragic accident?"

"Something like that."

Alisa growled under her breath. She didn't have time to chide herself for her error, but as she ran down the hall to follow the two, she did so anyway.

{/Never think really loud obscenities when you're in a person's mind. Bad Alisa! Bad!/}

Outside the headquarters, she let the two Narn gain a little distance on her, because she was still steaming about Na'Toth taking Jerrica out - to a {/bar/}, no less - when her very life was at stake. If Alisa got too close to them, they'd feel her anger, because she was livid and could not contain it.

She watched the two Narn part company. Tra'Kar went on to Red Dust Cavern while the little guy went to the left, presumably back home. The little guy had been given a nice-sized credit chit for his pains.

{/Little weasel/}, she glowered. {/It's people like you that make this stuff actually happen. So, I'm gonna teach you a lesson in reverse/}, she decided. She stalked after him.

It didn't take long at all. Two blocks down and a few dark alleys later, Alisa had cornered the little guy, whose name she discovered was Ka'Dal, and pushed him up against the wall, shutting down the conscious part of his brain for a moment, long enough to implant a suggestion within his mind.

{/It was a harmless suggestion/}, she figured. Minbari are taught never to harm anyone with their telepathy. And this wasn't really a harmful suggestion. Humans would call it ... a fetish. The Minbari had a nicer phrase for it: "altering his appreciative bias."

She made Ka'Dal interested only in Centauri women. He would be destined to roam the Narn Homeworld perpetually frustrated, unable to confess his fetish for their captors, and if he ventured off Narn for any reason, he'd have to head to Centauri Prime in order to find himself a worthy mate. The Centauri had become so insular it was rare to even see a handful of them at places as populated as Babylon 5. {/Poor little weasel/}, she snickered.

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Alisa had no problem spotting the Red Dust Cavern. It was the only bar where the patrons were flying out the windows, causing glass explosions to cascade onto the street beyond. This wasn't usually the way Narns hung out at their drinking establishments. Sometimes they'd have a brawl, or two, or eight. But not like this.

"Aw, hell," Alisa realized and ran as fast as she could to the entrance.

Avoiding a chair flying straight through the doorway, she ducked down and entered the bar. The entire place was huge mess of swinging arms, biting teeth, kicking boots. It was a Narn slugfest. Where were Na'Toth and Jerrica? More importantly, where was Tra'Kar?

Alisa slunk along the walls, avoiding crazed Narn with fists flailing until she had spotted the threesome. Na'Toth was clinging to Tra'Kar's back, biting his neck. Tra'Kar was whapping her with his arms, trying to get her off him. Jerrica was huddled in a corner with red eyes wide in fright.

Alisa dove over them just as Na'Toth went flying back into a table and Tra'Kar turned around, catching his breath momentarily.

Na'Toth shouted, "You were an idiot for assuming you could take me on, Tra'Kar! You're nothing!"

"I'm not here for you, I'm here for her!" He pointed to Jerrica and was about to go for her when a chair smashed down on his back from behind. It hurt. Bad.

When he turned around, Alisa stood behind him, like a small child before a giant. As Alisa backed away, Na'Toth took the opportunity to rush Tra'Kar and tackled him, pushing against his ribs to throw him back several feet. The fist fight began all over again.

Alisa followed the two, tried to get in a few good pounds on Tra'Kar, but took a punch, square in the jaw. The force of it sent her spinning to the ground. Na'Toth clobbered Tra'Kar.

Jerrica rushed over to Alisa to try and help her but the telepath immediately grabbed the girl by the arms.

"Get under that table! Now!" Alisa commanded. Jerrica huddled under the table and Alisa stood back up.

Now she was angry. She had tried to fight fair but now being fair didn't matter. She reached out with her mind and started to work into Tra'Kar's own slippery, cold thoughts.

Within moments, he was slowing down and Na'Toth was continuing to pound him. Tra'Kar turned his eyes to Alisa's and realized that she was grabbing onto his mind and affecting him. He tried to vocalize words but couldn't speak. Alisa just stared at him, determined to put him down.

Unfortunately, she didn't get a chance. The Narn Guard appeared, rushing through the doorway of the bar with heavy weaponry. They were shouting, commanding all patrons to put their hands up in the air or be shot and killed on the spot.

The Narn Guard didn't mess around. Alisa let go of Tra'Kar's mind and stepped back. All around she saw patrons growing quiet, some taking longer because of the battle frenzy, but finally realizing that heavy artillery was pointed at them point blank. Na'Toth got up off the floor and dusted herself off. Tra'Kar, realizing he could move his hands and legs again, followed soon after. He was casting leery glances at Alisa.

It didn't take long to assess who'd started the fight in the bar. Everyone was pointing at Na'Toth and Tra'Kar. So, Alisa, Na'Toth, and Tra'Kar were hauled away by a squadron of Narn Guards. Jerrica called after, and Alisa tried to silence her, but the young Narn would not be left behind. She called after the troops and was soon taken to the Narn Cells with the rest of them.

"You should have stayed out of this," Alisa scolded Jerrica. "You wouldn't be here right now."

Jerrica looked up from her notepad where she had scribbled don some words. She shrugged. "I wasn't safe outside. At least here, I'm with you guys and no one can get me."

Na'Toth chuckled through a split lip. "She's got a point."

"You should talk. I told you to take care of her. I expressly told you to keep her at home." Alisa was hot.

"I do as I please, Alisa Beldon," Na'Toth shot back. "The girl needed a decent lesson in Narn life. She hasn't seen any of Narn proper since her arrival. How's she supposed to learn about her world locked away in someone's house?"

"There'll be plenty of time for her to learn about Narn after her life is no longer in danger."

"Na'Toth was taking care of that guy," Jerrica chimed in. Alisa glared at the young Narn. Na'Toth on the other hand was grinning like a savage beast. When Narn grinned, it always made Alisa uneasy.

"We're in it now, worse than we would have been before. They took the datacrystal I'd stolen from the Kha'Ri headquarters." Alisa ran a hand through her dark brown hair. "I am {/so/} busted."

"Possession is only one-tenths of the law here on Narn. Just say someone handed it to you, they'll never know." Na'Toth casually picked at her lip.

Alisa decided it was better not to argue, she already had a splitting headache. The cell stank of stagnant water and perspiration. Or, something like perspiration anyway, she wasn't even sure if Narn could sweat. She looked past the bars of their cell at Tra'Kar, seated in a cell just across the narrow hallway.

He was actually resting in his cell. His eyes were closed lightly and he was breathing calmly. She had forgotten how predisposed the Narn were to being in trouble. To them, this was nothing. A night in jail for a beat-em-up. Even Jerrica seemed distinctly at ease. It must have been genetic hard-wiring. It made Alisa even more depressed. She leaned her head back against the wall and looked at the world through half-closed eyes.

Alisa was not sure how long had passed. She must have dozed a bit. A guard was at the cell door, opening it. Na'Toth and Jerrica both looked up at him in his leather uniform and his shock stick in hand. Alisa jolted awake from a drowsing state where she was half-thinking, half-snoozing. Her hands pressed against the cold, grainy cement floor of the cell. Dirt squirmed under her fingers as she rose to stand.

"The First Circle of the Kha'Ri will see you all in court, now," the Guard said.

Alisa felt herself breathe a sigh. Anything was better than sitting in a cell that smelled like a Narn armpit. Even if it meant getting into worse situations with the Kha'Ri. At least there, she could talk her way out of a situation.

"I demand to be present as well!" Tra'Kar shouted from his cell. His hands were wrapped around the bars like he wanted to strangle them.

"They will be coming for you presently," the Guard said. It was monotonous, as if he'd said it a hundred times before to a hundred other prisoners.

Alisa asked, "May I ask what the court is assembling to discuss?"

The Guard pointed at Jerrica. "The Heir Apparent to G'Kar's seat in the First Circle of the Kha'Ri."

Na'Toth took a step back in shock and turned to look at Jerrica, who looked up from her little notebook in utter horrified surprise. Then pen fell from her fingers and rolled down the sheet of paper and onto the floor.

"Well," Na'Toth finally spoke. "Like father, like daughter. At least they both know how to pass the time in a cell."

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The Kha'Ri trial was long, lasting several days. The First, Second, and Third circles of the Kha'Ri made up the primary initial decision makers for all of the Narn Homeworld. Positions of power reserved for only the cultural elite, the First Circle was the most revered and respected symbol of Narn authority. To be First Circle was the highest honor any Narn could ever attain.

Jerrica, Alisa, and Na'Toth were given comfortable quarters during the deliberations. The court hearings lasted from dawn until dinner. Dinner being proclaimed by the loudest complainer of the First Circle shouting he or she was hungry and asking the court to be adjourned for the day.

Alisa was finally able to shower and tend to her sore jaw. It was well-bruised by the punch that Tra'Kar had given her. Pending the outcome of the trial, all other charges had been put on hold and Delenn had a hand in clearing Alisa of any charges when she learned that the Narn were using pirated Minbari software. The Narn retracted their charges of burglary, claiming there were larger issues at stake.

The long, highly-publicized trial was starting to look bleak for Jerrica. The council met once again in the orange-toned room, that was shaped much like an amphitheater, but with softer seats, and it had octagonal depressions in its round formation. Many members were seated in large rings stemming from the very bottom of the amphitheater where the First Circle was seated. The Second Circle was just behind, one step up, one step removed from the rest.

"Isn't it obvious?!!" Counselor Na'Farl was saying to the other members of the First Circle. "She has been Earthanized in everything, including her name. Jerrica." He said it with such disdain. "It's a bastardization of G'Ryka! G' being the pronoun of her father, the Holy G'Kar, and Ryka being a conglomeration of her mother's name and a unique suffix. Yet the {/Humans/} cannot deign to pronounce anything alien in correct fashion, so they bastardized her name with the spelling and pronunciation Jerrica. If they did this to her name, think what they did to her upbringing and all that makes her Narn!"

There was a great bustle at this argument. "I say we use Tra'Kar. Sure, he's a more distant heir, but at least he is truly full-blooded Narn!"

Na'Toth stood up to object. "I object to this! Jerrica - or to use her formal name - G'Ryka {/is Narn!/} Look at her! She's the same as you or I! I'm here to support G'Kar in this and I believe he would want his own Heir and daughter to take his place! I speak for him!"

"Have you spoken {/to/} him about this matter, citizen Na'Toth?" another, older council member asked pointedly.

"No, but I {/know/} G'Kar!-"

"then you cannot speak for him!" This time it was Tra'Kar piping in from across the room.

"Yes, but I can speak for myself."

As Moses parted the Red Sea, so this voice from the top of the amphitheater parted the sea of Narn bodies congregated in this place. The tide of Narn parted to reveal none other than G'Kar standing at the highest level of the amphitheater. He slowly descended the bleacher-like stairs.

"It is G'Kar!" came the various cries, many people bowing in reverence, or backing away with their heads down. The entirety of the Inner Circles of the

Kha'Ri stood aghast or amazed at his very presence.

"G'Kar," the first council member spoke. "How ... good of you to come in person. It has been, what, six years?"

"Your lack of accuracy is touching, Council member Na'Farl." G'Kar extended his hands, looked at everyone around him on the bottom level and continued. "I left Narn in the Fall of 2262, Earth time, and it is now Winter of 2269, that makes for seven years, a month and some change, roughly. Naturally, you've all missed me. I'm touched."

"You've come just in time, for we were discussing your--"

G'Kar cut him off. "Yes, I am aware of this. I have been keeping up with the headlines, no need to fill me in. I'm here only because I am keeping you all from making another fatal mistake in the progress of our civilization."

Na'Farl bowed his head reverently and backed away.

"I've been listening to your arguments and I quite disagree." G'Kar walked over to Jerrica and looked at her kindly. The young Narn looked back at G'Kar with awe and amazement reflected in her eyes. "I find Jerrica to be entirely 100 percent Narn."

G'Kar turned around to address the First Circle again. "If we are to gauge our cultural leaders by the percentage of alien thoughts they have, what percentage would you stop at? Is it fair to deprive {/you/} of your seat in the Kha'Ri because you might have {/one/} alien thought in your head?"

Another Narn stood and interrupted. He was old, his red eyes heavily wrinkled at the corners. He spoke softly and G'Kar listened with respect. "It is not percentage we worry about, G'Kar. We have had specific traditions since the dawn of our civilization. We set ourselves up for failure when we allow someone into our most sacred circle of leadership who does not understand these traditions."

"Although I respect you, D'Paur, that is pure poppycock," G'Kar replied. "When I spent time on Babylon 5, it did not make me any less Narn. In fact, the longer I spent time among other races, the more Narn I became. By being exposed to other thoughts, I more firmly appreciated my own Narn thoughts."

"But how worthy can this girl be? She has not seen enough of life or Narn to be a truly good member of the First Circle," came the last member's argument.

"You roll out of bed, buff your spots, put on your pants and come to this place two blocks from your home, in order to embrace your heritage." G'Kar took Jerrica by her hand and led her to the center of the First Circle. He held onto her shoulders and looked at each member.

"Jerrica has come light years to attain her heritage. She has risked life and limb to embrace her birthright. She nearly died to become Narn. I'd say that being Narn means a lot more to her than it does to all of you."

There was silence in the entire amphitheater as G'Kar's words settled in. He stood, completely comfortable, before the thousands gathered. When bodies finally began to stir, after long deliberation, the lead Kha'Ri council member replied.

"We must gather, alone, to discuss this." And the Kha'Ri was dismissed. G'Kar wandered out of the council chambers and Na'Toth kept Alisa and Jerrica from following him.

"He needs time," Na'Toth said solemnly. Jerrica and Alisa nodded and did not move.

The council reassembled a few hours later. Alisa couldn't help but wonder if their decision-making session was akin to `{/Twelve Angry Narns/}` - like the old Earth vid-flick she'd once watched. They filed into the hall and took their respective seats. G'Kar came down the stairs from outside and sat on the edge of a seat on the second tier.

"We have made a decision based on all that you have provided us." There was a great pause. Then, "We have decided that we want you, G'Kar, back in the Kha'Ri. Your place is open for your return to our leadership. We do not ask you to rule. Or to do anything but simply advise, as you once asked eight years ago."

G'Kar seemed to sag a bit and his eyes softened. The council representative continued, "What do you say to this, G'Kar?"

G'Kar stood up. "I say no. I'm going back among the stars." He motioned with his gloved finger to Jerrica, sitting down at the base of the amphitheater. "And I am taking Jerrica with me."

The entire assembly went crazy at this. There was shouting and mayhem. The Second and Third Tiers were crying out at the First Circle. The Council representative was trying to keep order. "`{/Hush! Silence! Now!/}`"

The room had died down a bit by the time Jerrica made her way to G'Kar on the Second Tier.

"Citizen G'Kar. Do not leave us again. Please! We will do whatever you wish, if you will just stay on Narn."

"You wish me to stay as an advisor, yet you heed nothing I say. Why stay?" he asked simply.

"What do you want?" the Council member asked.

"That is a very dangerous question." G'Kar shook a gloved finger at the man at the center of the assembly. "But I will tell you anyway. Jerrica must take my place at the Kha'Ri First Circle. It is law that my closest heir take the seat. It `{/is/}` tradition."

There was some murmuring at this. "Either she takes my place," G'Kar said over the shuffling. "Or we leave Narn."

Jerrica looked up at him, and he looked down at the girl, his ... offspring, and then he winked. She tried not to laugh and turned around quickly.

The First Circle conferred quickly among themselves at the base of the amphitheater in a little huddle. They turned around and the Council representative spoke again. "Agreed."

The whole assembly was buzzing now, with a positive energy. G'Kar broke into a great grin and clasped his hands together in triumph.

Jerrica looked up at him again, quietly. "You see?" he said. "That was not so difficult, was it?"

She smiled at him, motioning to the notepad in her hand. "I'm writing it all down," she said, "to share one day with others."

G'Kar chuckled. "I know the impulse."

She started to climb down to where Na'Toth and Alisa were now standing. Then she remembered something.

"Oh, of course, that's right!" Jerrica said. Your book! I read your book in freshman literature class, Dad. It was pretty good ... for a first draft."

G'Kar gasped. He realized that for the first time in eight years, he was utterly speechless and to nothing less than a remark coming from his ... his ... he couldn't even say it.

Na'Toth approached with a grin and struck her chest with her fists in greeting. "Hello, G'Kar. Welcome home," she said briskly.

"Na'Toth. Thank you for looking after my -" He stopped abruptly and shouted down at Jerrica. "First draft? What do you mean first draft?!!"

Na'Toth continued as if he had said nothing. "My job is to protect all that is yours. Even though you are no longer Ambassador and I am no longer your personal watch dog. I have developed a responsibility to your person."

G'Kar stared, listened, and pondered life. Alisa could feel that he was starting to feel oddly at home suddenly. And he chuckled as he started to ease in. He and Na'Toth started at Jerrica for a few moments, watching the young Narn talk with Alisa Beldon in excitement. Then, Na'Toth clapped G'Kar on the back twice, roughly, and he glanced back up with alarm.

"It's good to have you back ..."

She barked. "Dad."