

Viyann shouldered the battered leather satchel crammed with all her worldly belongings and joined the queue to disembark from the interstellar transport. Vonarel Station was light years behind her, and that chapter of her life was over. Administrator Shatreenn was dead and commanded her obedience no longer. His replacement had brought her own aide. As for her father... She was of age, an adult under the law, so he could go shove his ambitious heart in a place where the sun no longer shone.

The docking bays of Tarellen IV's orbital transfer station were rammed with refugees; at least a dozen different races that Viyann could identify, and several others that she could not. And until the moment that she managed to persuade herself otherwise, she wrestled with a ghastly and overwhelming sense of déjà vu. But unlike the panic and chaos that had gripped the Valusha system, a thin veneer of order prevailed here, maintained, in part, by a small cohort of worker caste militia provided by the colony from the planet below.

In spite of the war being over, misery and privation were still in evidence wherever she looked, reminding Viyann of why she was here. Alyt Neroon's willingness to serve had been the catalyst to make good her escape. Strange then, that a member of the warrior caste could have woken the calling of her heart from that dark place where it had languished, abandoned and quiescent for far too long.

At first she had assumed that Neroon was typical of his ilk – arrogant, self-centred, disdainful of those less privileged than he. She had treated him with the contempt expected by those within her own religious caste, even down to that shameful prank with the tea. Yet Neroon had showed himself to be a true Minbari, willing to uphold the third principle of sentient life no matter what. Viyann did not know if Vonarel Station would have survived if Neroon had not been there to hold everything together. And should their paths ever cross again, she would find it in her heart to thank him for setting her free.

Outside the docking bays, and on the other side of the security checks, the station serving Tarellen IV was very much like every other orbital station she had seen since her father had apprenticed her to the offworld civil service. But where to start on her quest? Where could she make a difference?

Without a destination in mind, Viyann followed the general flow of people, stopping to assist a frail Drazi elder negotiate a flight of stairs. When she found a half-naked Brakiri child cowering in terror beside a planter holding a bonsai-d Wysa Nut tree, she instinctively swung into action.

Wrapping the girl in her spare Raalon wool undertunic, Viyann held her close. The poor mite shivered in her arms – from cold or fright, Viyann could not say. What worried her was the silence and eyes that were old beyond years.

If the child were simply lost, someone would surely have come for her; plenty of Brakiri seemed to have found their way to the Tarellen system. Even if the girl was an orphan, someone would have been appointed her guardian. Somehow though, Viyann did not think so. Valen wept, the other possibilities were far less savoury; child traffickers, pimps, men with money willing to pay for certain things...

"I have you," she murmured into the girl's ear, though she doubted the child understood a word of Adronato. "You will be safe with me, I swear. Valen bless you and keep you, may the Universe shine its light upon you and Valeria hold shining wings in protection over you."

Around them, the crowds swirled. Weighed down with their own problems, their own hurts and grief, people paid them little heed. The girl, Viyann guessed, was perhaps seven or eight years old, but she was so thin and dirty that it was hard to tell. Reminded of her experience with the Tokati pickpocket, Viyann cursed the holes in her knowledge of exobiology. This time though, there was no friendly Human Anla'shok to rescue her. In fact, now that she actually thought of it, she had not seen a single Anla'shok since leaving Vonarel Station.

"What are you doing with my property, Minbari?"

The angry male voice was threatening, sibilant, the words in Interlac edged with violence and something else that Viyann could not name. Fingers that seemed forged from steel clamped down hard around her arm. Startled, she squawked with pain, but kept the girl clutched firmly to her chest.

“I want my whore, Minbari. She cost me good gold and I mean to make it back and then some. After I teach the little bitch not to run away from clients who have paid for her.”

Viyann looked up, straight into the blue-and-orange painted face of a Kor-lyani slaver. “No,” she said in a small but determined voice, surprising herself. But she had to be brave for the girl’s sake and not just hers – it was *both* their lives at stake here.

“No, is it? I’ll teach you to say no.”

A brawny arm snaked around Viyann’s throat and squeezed. Bare flesh brushed against her lips. Without thinking, she bit down hard, drawing blood. Valen’s bones, the taste was vile.

“Minbari bitch,” the Kor-lyani hissed. A crowd was beginning to gather.

The arm tightened around her further still. Spitting out foul green ichor, Viyann struggled to free herself. Convinced that she was about to suffocate, she let go of the Brakiri girl and kicked out with booted feet. A meaty thunk was followed by a high-pitched scream. Released suddenly from that vice-like grip, Viyann toppled forward. Her satchel went flying. It landed on the deck plates with a thump.

Hands reached out to catch her. A woman’s hands, elegant, long-fingered but calloused from manual work, hands that emerged from wide sleeves banded at the cuffs in broad stripes of white, brown and black. Muttering thanks, Viyann regained her feet and found herself being appraised by a middle-aged Minbari woman in the purple robes and lilac chasuble of a Sister of Valeria.

“Thank you, Honoured Sister,” she said after a moment of confusion. Still shaken, Viyann bowed, remembering the courtesies she had been taught. “Blessed be those who Serve.”

That was when she noticed the Kor-lyani male writhing soundlessly on the deck plates, clutching desperately at his knees.

“Not every species has their fruit in the same place,” the Sister commented matter-of-factly. “The Kor-lyani keep their genitals where we Minbari have our knees.”

Reminded by the mention of genitals as to why she had defied the slaver, Viyann looked around desperately for the child prostitute she had tried to protect. Relief washed over her when she saw the girl a few paces away clutching at the purple-hemmed lilac skirts of the Sister’s acolyte, watching wide-eyed as her pimp – *former* pimp – flopped around like an Ulabon out of water.

Alerted by the cluster of onlookers, a worker caste militia patroller came over to investigate. Luck, Viyann decided, could only take one so far. She had to do something about these damn gaps in her knowledge before she made a critical mistake, but where to start? If she couldn’t have her friendly Anla’shok from Vonarel Station, then she definitely needed to find herself a library.

A quiet exchange between the patroller and the Sister saw the Kor-lyani taken into custody with alacrity. Slavery, paedophilia and prostitution were all abhorrent to the Minbari, – and illegal. Every child learnt that with their mother’s milk, no matter what caste they were born to.

The intricate swirling patterns of the slaver’s blue and orange face paint had smudged to a muddy brown, Viyann noticed as she reached to retrieve her bag. She thought that he no longer looked quite so fearsome – handcuffs did tend to do that. But with so many aliens displaced as a result of the war, races with very different concepts of what was acceptable before the Universe, all sorts of things would inevitably slip through the net of what her people considered right and proper. Valen knew there had been enough such incidents on Vonarel Station...

With the pimp gone, the Brakiri girl started to cry. Hiccupping sobs were interspersed by plaintive words in her own language as she flung herself into Viyann’s arms.

“I promised I would keep her safe,” Viyann explained to the Sister over the sound of the girl’s weeping, “and I intend to keep that promise. I have seen far too much horror as a result of this war, witnessed too much ignorance. I might be only one person, but I want to make a difference.”

“You wish to Serve?” The question came accompanied by a piercing gaze.

Put on the spot, Viyann shrugged. “I... I don’t know.” Serving with the Sisters of Valeria had never even crossed her mind. Shatreann had despised the Purple Sisters in spite of their honoured place in society; like the Anla’shok, the order was of all castes and of none.

“A wise answer.”

“I do not understand.”

“You will, in time.” The Sister peered more closely at her. “If I am correct about the cut of your tunic, you are from the offworld civil service, are you not?”

Viyann nodded. She had the sense of being judged and hid her nervousness by stroking the girl’s matted hair. It calmed both of them; keening cries turned to soft hiccups muffled almost to silence by the thick Raalon wool.

“That is of no import – for now. However, many seek out our order, wanting to Serve for the honour it brings. But it is not a life for everyone, and few, whether of high rank or low, have the steadfastness to pass the tests.” One hand waved at the acolyte. “It took Faliri here nearly three cycles to make the decision; fasting, meditation and prayer amongst other things. And a willingness to do whatever might be asked of her. Our vows often take us to places not many of our people wish to go – like here, working with refugees from the war.” Once again, that piecing gaze was levelled at her. “I ask you this. Did you seek us out deliberately?”

“No.”

The stern face broke into a bright smile. “Come then,” the Sister said. “Bring your waif. We have quarters and a Healer here on the station. Our chapterhouse is down on the planet below. I am Sister Tirenn.”

Viyann followed in a daze, carrying her Brakiri charge, wondering all the while whether that question had been the first of the tests Sister Tirenn had spoken of.