

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four A - Part 1: Reunion

by [The Space Witches](#)



A visit to the past.

Chapter 1

November 2269

Gideon suppressed a smile at the report in front of him. He was sure that John had only let it land on his desk for the amusement factor it provided. The tone of his Head of Catering's weekly report was close to hysterical, and for once, Gideon had some sympathy with Chief Petty Officer Gooding's histrionics. The prospect of the Excalibur running out of Swedish meatballs was terrifying.

The Captain had been in the mess hall on deck 14 five days before, when the group of Narn Marines had entered. They had been a late addition to the new multi-species crew the Excalibur carried, representing all the main races of the Interstellar Alliance. Gideon sighed as he remembered the difficulty they had experienced finding slots for every species.

The Pak'ma'ra had proved particularly difficult to place, as they refused to learn any language other than their own, and every job on the ship required some form of communication with others. That problem had been solved when they had discovered that Pak'ma'ra worshipped fish. Fish were about the only thing in the galaxy that a Pak'ma'ra wouldn't eat, and only because of religious principles, not digestive problems.

Gideon pushed aside the thought that the Pak'ma'ra would make a damned good walking refuse disposal system. That was not an appropriate way to think about members of the ISA. Using the tanks holding the Excalibur's large water reserves to supplement the food supply by breeding fish had

solved the Pak'ma'ra problem. It kept them well away from everyone else and let them play with their favorite pets. Now they just had to figure out a way of getting the fish away from the Pak'ma'ra when they were big enough to eat. Gideon allowed his thoughts to wander for a moment, and recalled that the only other constructive thing he had ever seen the Pak'ma'ra do was to appear in a porn video. [And even then they needed some help from technology...]

The Captain shook his head and turned his thoughts back to Swedish meatballs, [Porn and Swedish meatballs? Not much of a leap,] and his Narn Marines. He'd been delighted when told that G'Tan and ten other Narns would be joining his crew. Narns made the best Marines and the toughest fighters in the ISA. He couldn't think of a team he'd rather have on his side in a fight.

Gideon had always rated Narns even higher than Minbari, when it came to a scrap. Minbari warriors were tough enough, but their behavior brought to mind words like 'arrogant', 'snotty' and 'jerks' in Gideon's view. Minbari religious caste members were easier to work with, but their need for three-hour meal breaks, while they meditated over their food and put aside portions for people who weren't there, rather diminished their effectiveness as fighters. Gideon briefly pondered what the outcome of the Earth/Minbari war would have been if the religious caste had been fighting alone. Earth would probably have wiped the floor with them, while the Minbari were out for lunch.

The Captain dragged his thoughts back to his immediate problem. He'd been sitting quietly in the mess with Deborah and Marcus, when the Narns had entered en masse. They were still a little wary of the other species on board, and tended to stick together. Gideon made a point of eating in the mess two or three times a week, as it helped him keep in touch with his crew. He learned more about the ship's grapevine from a couple of hours there than he ever did sitting in his chair on the bridge. He'd found that since his wife and son had joined him on board, their presence in the mess hall with him had made the crew more likely to talk to him. Somehow, the sight of the Captain bouncing his baby son on his knee made him more approachable, although Gideon had learned that potential poker partners were scared off by his ability to shuffle a pack of cards one handed, while he held Marcus in his other arm.

Gideon had been doing just that, when the Narns had entered. Eleven large reptilians entering a room tended to attract attention, so he'd already been looking in their direction when he saw their heads go up, and they all started sniffing the air. A terrifying sound emerged from all eleven throats at once, and the crew scattered as the Narns threw themselves across the mess hall, screaming, "BREEEEEEENNNNN!" The ululating quality of the howl made it seem like a battle cry.

The Captain could only admire the courage of his catering team, who had stood fast in the face of the onslaught. He knew damned well that in their position he'd have run for his life. But then maybe the caterers had known something he hadn't. Maybe they'd known what Breen was. Gideon now knew all too well that Breen was a favorite food of the Narn people, prized as a great delicacy, and it was identical to Swedish meatballs, which had happened to be on the menu that night. There had been enough meatballs left for about forty human portions when the Narns arrived, but Gideon had watched in awe as they'd charged the food counter and cleared every meatball in sight.

Every day since then, the Head of Catering had been besieged by demands for more Breen. Gooding had been a temperamental soul before the Narns had set up camp outside his office. After days of tripping over reptilians twice his size every time he needed to use the bathroom, he was becoming hysterical. His hysteria wasn't helped by the fact that when the Brakiri, Drazi, Minbari, Gaim and even Pak'ma'ra members of the crew had heard about the incident, they had all advised Gooding that they also required a large supply of meatballs. By some peculiar coincidence, Swedish meatballs, or their local equivalent, were favored foods of every known race in the galaxy. Gooding's weekly report was blunt. He needed more meatballs, and he needed them NOW!

Gideon pondered briefly on exactly how Gooding expected him to find Swedish meatballs, when they were in deep space on their way to a planet that had only ever been visited once before by any race in the ISA. Well, only once visited by a ship that had left again afterwards. There had been plenty of evidence that ISA members had visited the planet and stayed. Gideon didn't even know the name the inhabitants called themselves, but he couldn't help wondering if they had any significant supplies of Swedish meatballs on hand. It would solve a lot of problems, if they had.

The only alternative he could think of was to put a call out for Galen and ask him if he could 'magic' them a supply. Gideon could almost hear Galen's reply. "I'm a Technomage, not a grocer! Next you'll be telling me that you've run out of the body lotion the Drazi need to buff up their scales, and asking me if I could just brew up a batch!"

Which, come to think of it, wasn't such a bad idea.

The Captain shook his head and smiled, before dictating a memo to Gooding telling him that they'd pick up more meatballs at their next supply stop, and another to G'Tan telling him to get his Marines back to their quarters as the Narns were making his corridors look untidy.

Gideon sighed and picked up the next report. Another exciting day in the life of a Starship Captain. [Earthforce is certainly getting a return on the investment it made in my training today!]

"Nothing, Captain. I'm getting no response of any kind." The Communications officer turned in her chair and looked anxiously at her Captain as he frowned.

[Why would they refuse to answer us now? I told the Keeper that we'd come back. He'll be dead by now of course, but surely he'd have passed that information on to the next generation?] Gideon took a deep breath and said, "Keep trying to make contact. I'm taking a team down to the surface. Maybe we can find out why they're so reluctant to talk to us this time."

The Captain turned and smiled wryly at his XO, speaking as Matheson opened his mouth. "And before you say anything, Lieutenant, I know I promised you could lead the next two landing parties, but not this one, OK?" He lowered his voice so that only John could hear and said softly, "Two reasons. First, you blackmailed me into that promise," he grinned to take the sting from his words, then allowed his face to fall into more serious lines as he went on, "and second, this one is personal. I made a promise. It's up to me to keep it."

Matheson nodded his understanding. "I'll let you off this time, but the next planet we come to..." He gave Gideon a warning grin, before turning more serious himself. "One concern, Captain. The beacon we placed in orbit, to warn travelers away from this place, has disappeared. I doubt if we destroyed all of their ships last time, and even if we did, they could have rebuilt since. They must have sent something up and taken out the beacon."

Gideon nodded. "I expected them to do that. That's why I ordered the additional beacons placed around the system, and just inside hyperspace, and the warning we sent to the President's office should have kept all members of the ISA away. With luck, no-one should have been down to the planet since we were last here, but we'll check for new DNA traces when we get down."

"Who do you want in your landing party, Captain?" Matheson prepared to put the team together.

Gideon considered, then said, "Get G'Tan and his full squad down to the landing bay. Tell him I want them fully armed and ready for anything. Tell Ankaren to bring whatever he needs to carry out a full sensor sweep from the surface. I don't want to do anything more than a very low level scan for movement from up here. I don't want to provoke the same reaction we got last time we did a deep scan on this planet."

Gideon mentally added together the numbers of his team. Eleven Narns, himself, two pilots and his Brakiri sensor operator, Ankaren, made fifteen. If he limited himself to two shuttles, carrying ten people in each, that left space for five more people on his team. For a moment, he regretted not having Sarah, Max and Dureena on board any more. They had all been with him when they had visited this planet before and would all have been useful additions to the landing party. [Can't be helped. Just select some alternatives.] The Captain smiled. He couldn't think of anyone on his crew who could duplicate Dureena's unique skill set, but at least he could replace the others.

"Ask Dr. Raven to meet us in the landing bay in fifteen minutes and get him to bring one of his xenobiologists with him. I'll take Dunall too, just in case we need a translator, although after last time, it shouldn't be necessary." Gideon knew that the Minbari linguist couldn't match Max Eilerson's skills, but she was good, and with luck, they wouldn't need her anyway. He decided to leave the two final seats empty. There was no need to risk more people than he had to.

"That's it, Lieutenant. You have command, until I get back." Gideon turned and left the bridge. It would take him no more than five minutes to get to the landing bay. That gave him ten minutes to get to his own quarters and say goodbye to his wife and son. He smiled to himself as he walked briskly down the narrow corridor, thinking that he should have told the landing party to convene in an hour. That would have given him time for a proper goodbye. [Although knowing Deborah, if we had time, that goodbye would become a very *improper* one.]

The two shuttles landed in the same area as on their previous visit. Gideon had co-piloted the shuttle he'd come down in, running continuous low power scans of the area, alert for any movement. Nothing. Just before they landed, he'd called back to the Excalibur, and Matheson had confirmed their findings. Exactly like the first time they had landed on this planet, it gave every appearance of being a dead world.

This time Gideon knew better. This planet wasn't dead at all, just sleeping. Its people had entered cryogenic freeze units when, after three years of trying, they had failed to find a cure to the plague that the Shadows had released on their planet a thousand years before.

Since that time, only one of their number had remained awake at any one time. That 'Keeper', as they had called him, had been responsible for tending to the machines that kept the population alive and for conducting the 'experiments' that this people hoped would bring them the cure. Those experiments had involved the capture, murder and dissection of any visitors to the planet.

The Excalibur had barely escaped the trap set by the inhabitants, and Gideon had been forced to use the full power of the main gun to destroy the source of the gravimetric field that had tried to pull them down into the planet's atmosphere. When the Keeper had finally made contact with them, he had offered Gideon a deal. The Keeper had suggested that the Excalibur send different species to the planet to enable more experiments to be carried out.

[More murders, more dissections of innocent victims.] Gideon shook his head, sickened by the memory of what these people had done. He had rejected their deal, but had made a promise. He'd promised that when the Excalibur found the cure to the Drakh plague, they would bring it back to this place and use it to cure the people of this planet. Gideon had promised them something else, too. He'd promised that they would have to face the consequences of their actions over the centuries and answer for their crimes to the species whose people they had murdered.

It was time for the Captain of the Excalibur to deliver on his promises.

"Fan out and stay alert. Stay in pairs at all times. I don't want anyone taken by surprise. Follow the grid pattern we agreed earlier and rendezvous back here in thirty minutes. Go."

Gideon watched the ten Narn Marines depart from where they stood at the foot of the ramp to one of the shuttles. All the Narns wore full body armor, which Gideon hoped would provide some protection against the laser cutting tools previously used to dissect one of his crew. He and the remaining members of his team were similarly protected.

The Captain was glad he'd taken this precaution. They had over-flown the area before coming in to land, and what they'd seen had made Gideon uneasy. There was no sign of the damage done by the main gun on their previous visit two and a half years before. The direct hit they had scored on the source of the gravimetric field should have left a glassy crater several hundred meters in diameter, but there was no sign of it. There was no sign of *any* damage to the buildings in the area, although Gideon knew that his fighters had leveled a number of them in their attempts to take out that field. [Someone's been busy.]

He looked around at the buildings surrounding the landing space and thought, [But not the gardeners.] Vines and other greenery covered the area, obscuring the shapes of the structures beneath them. Somehow, in an irrational way, all that verdant growth only made the city look more lifeless than it had before.

The Captain turned to the others and gave his instructions. "Dr. Raven, would you and Dr. Bennett please inspect the area for DNA traces? Match them back to Dr. Chambers' records from our previous visit and let me know if any new species have visited the city since last time. I hope the warning beacons we placed in orbit and around the system will have kept people away, but as the orbital beacon is missing, I'd like to be sure. Report back with your findings in twenty minutes. G'Tan, accompany the doctors, please."

Gideon watched as his Narn Marine Sergeant led the doctors away, then turned to his Minbari linguist and Brakiri sensor operator.

"OK, you're with me. Ankaren, I need a full power scan of this area. There should be some very large power sources nearby, and you should find traces of life signs about five kilometers below the surface. Let's see what we can find." He led the Minbari and the Brakiri back into the shuttle, where the pilot remained at the controls. Both pilots had been instructed to remain at their posts, ready for immediate departure. Back on the Excalibur, Gideon had placed all his fighter pilots on stand-by. This time, he wasn't going to get caught out. He grinned as he thought that this time he hadn't brought a fly-bike with him to act as decoy.

Using the shuttle's more powerful instruments, Ankaren ran a full sweep of the area. After a few

moments, he turned back to look at Gideon, a puzzled frown on his pale face. "I don't understand this, Captain. I'm scanning at the same coordinates where the power matrices were previously detected, but there's nothing there. No significant power output at all. There may be small local power lines emanating from the plant at too low a level for me to detect from here, but there's nothing similar to what was found before. The lines sunk into the planetary core to draw power are all inert. The whole power plant appears dead."

Gideon pondered this puzzle for a while, then instructed his sensor operator to scan for life forms below the surface. Silence descended in the shuttle while Ankaren carried out his assigned task. By the time he looked up, Gideon could hear the doctors' and G'Tan's voices as they returned to the shuttles.

The Brakiri looked up at Gideon, his face even paler than usual. The Captain wondered briefly if Brakiri also went white when they were shocked, as humans did.

Ankaren's voice was flat and emotionless as he delivered his findings. "There is no power being input to the cryogenic units, and as a result, they have all closed down. I can pick up indications of the inhabitants of the cryogenic tubes, but no life signs. They're dead. All dead."

Gideon slowly became aware of the shocked silence that pervaded the shuttle. He looked around to see Raven and Bennett frozen in the open doorway, with G'Tan standing behind them. They had all heard Ankaren's announcement and looked as stunned by it as their Captain was.

Swallowing hard, Gideon heard his own voice croak out, "Dead? All of them? But there were billions of people in those units. Surely they can't *all* be dead?" He shook his head to clear it and swallowed again. This time, his voice sounded more normal as he instructed Ankaren, "Run the scans again."

The Captain lifted his commlink and keyed the call sign for his XO on the Excalibur, holding stationary orbit above. "Lieutenant. We can't find any life signs down here, so I want you to run a deep scan of the planet. Focus on all those locations where we found the cryogenic storage facilities. Report back as soon as you have results."

Raven and Bennett had moved into the shuttle and stood over the unit where Ankaren was repeating his scan. G'Tan remained at the door of the shuttle, looking out for his returning Marines. No one other than Gideon had spoken since hearing what Ankaren had said. Gideon guessed that they were too shocked to speak. As he waited for the results of the second scan, and for the Excalibur to get back to them, the Captain tried to assimilate everything they had found so far.

[OK, so the damage we did when we were here two and a half years ago has been fixed. That means the previous Keeper, or his replacement, must have remained in charge long enough to do that. But where the hell is the current Keeper? If they're replaced every two years, and the one we met had six months left to live, his replacement should still be around, just. Even if the replacement's gone, someone else should have been woken up to take his place by now.] Gideon was confused. None of this made sense.

[And why have the buildings been allowed to become overgrown? Why is the power plant inoperative? Why have all those people died?] The sheer scale of the disaster was slowly sinking in. This was a catastrophe on a par with what Earth would have experienced, if the Excalibur hadn't found the cure for the Drakh plague. [If someone is responsible for all this, it's genocide.]

Gideon's biggest fear, one he could hardly allow himself to contemplate, was that he might be the one responsible. Could all this have come from their previous visit? If so, how had it happened? He didn't know the answers to those questions, but he was determined to find out.

Luke Raven's voice broke the silence. "Captain? Ankaren's run the scans again, and the result is the same. We can't find any life signs in the cryogenic storage areas. Just bodies." Luke's voice showed his own distress. He hadn't been with them when the Excalibur had been here before, but finding a whole planetary population dead obviously shocked him to the core.

Gideon's commlink beeped, and Matheson's voice confirmed their findings. Deep scans, right through to the center of the planet, showed that everyone in the cryogenic units was dead.

The sound of the Narn Marines returning broke the silence that followed Gideon's quiet acknowledgment of the confirmation. He turned to the others and gave his orders, quietly, doing his best to keep his own voice from showing the maelstrom of feelings sweeping through him.

"OK, we need to find out what's happened here. Doctor, did you find any additional DNA traces?" Raven shook his head and Gideon turned to G'Tan. "Did your men find anything during their sweep?" The Narn also shook his head. Gideon took a deep breath and continued, "Right. We move the shuttles to the site of the power plant Dureena found. I want a full inspection done there. We're looking for any indications of what caused this catastrophe and any signs of survivors."

The Captain turned to the shuttle pilot and asked him to relay the instructions to the other pilot. "G'Tan, get your Marines back on board. We're moving. And stay alert for any movement in the area. Even if the people are gone, their machines may still be active. There was a significant delay before they attacked us last time. The same could happen again. Whatever happened on this planet only confirms that this is *not* a safe place to be."

"Captain!" Gideon spun round to the source of the voice calling him. Ankaren's head stuck up above the control panel he had been inspecting, and for the first time since arriving on the planet, the Brakiri was smiling. "I've found a live power line!"

The Captain jogged over from where he had been quietly discussing plans for continuing the search of the power plant with G'Tan. They had left six of the Narn Marines with the shuttles, two to stay on guard with each pilot and one each to accompany the doctors in their search of the landing area, checking for further traces of DNA.

The initial survey of their landing area had shown that this part of the city was significantly damaged. Buildings listed heavily, showing twisted girders and evidence of burning. They had used the records Dureena had made after their previous visit to trace the entrance to the power plant, finding a gaping hole where the entrance had once stood.

Gideon, G'Tan, Dunall, Ankaren and the remaining four Marines had descended into the depths of the plant, Dunall leading as she translated various signs along the way, until they arrived at the main control room. The damage below ground level was less severe, and their passage through the building had been slow, but not impossible. Once in the control room, the Minbari linguist and Brakiri sensor operator had worked together to understand and use the panels they found there, guarded by two of the Marines. Gideon, G'Tan and the other two Narns had spread out, looking for any signs of life or activity within the plant. They had just returned from their second foray, when Ankaren called the

Captain over.

"What do you have?" Gideon peered over the Brakiri's shoulder, trying to make sense of the panel before him.

Ankaren pointed to a blue line that crossed the panel horizontally. "This tells us that there's a single land line still operating. It's drawing on stored energy, and it appears to have almost drained the storage facilities. Another few days at the rate power is being used, and it will close down. It's very low level, but now that I know what I'm looking for, I should be able to track the line out to whatever is drawing the power. All I can tell you from this panel is that the line leaves the city. To trace it, we'll need to get back to the shuttles."

The Captain nodded his approval and congratulated Ankaren and Dunall on their teamwork and success. He then instructed G'Tan to round up his Marines and get back to the shuttle.

As they made their way back up to ground level, Gideon once again noted the damage within the power plant. Walls and stairways showed signs of having been burned. Some walls had collapsed, leaving ceilings sagging dangerously, and the whole plant had an air of dereliction to it. Gideon knew that his fighters had not been responsible for this damage. The area they had bombed during their previous visit was on the far side of the city. They had never come near this power plant.

But something had. Something had battered this plant, set light to it, and destroyed most of its power generating capacity. As a result of that loss of power, the cryogenic storage units had failed, killing the billions inside them. The question was, who or what was responsible? Gideon was determined that he wasn't going to leave this planet without an answer to his questions.

Emerging back into daylight, Gideon called the doctors and their Marine escorts, telling them to report back to the shuttles. The sun was still high, and he wanted to complete as much of their investigations as he could during daylight. When Raven and Bennett joined him at the foot of the shuttle's ramp, he asked for their report.

Raven shook his head. "Nothing new, Captain. The only DNA traces we've found relate to the planet's inhabitants. No other species made it to this part of the city, as far as we can tell."

Gideon considered this information. If an alien enemy had attacked this world and destroyed the power plant, then either they had never emerged from their vehicles, or they had remained sealed within some form of EVA suits. The alternative was that the inhabitants had somehow done this to themselves. But why?

[Too many questions. Time to find some answers.] Gideon instructed his team to reboard the shuttles, then turned to Ankaren.

"Move up front into the center seat and guide us. I want to follow that power line out of the city and see where it goes." The Captain followed his team up the ramp, then turned at the top to look back at the buildings around them. Even the rampant vines, that had started to cover the rubble, couldn't totally hide the devastation. Gideon shook his head and moved into the shuttle, as the ramp lifted and the door closed behind him.

The pale line projected onto the windscreen of the shuttle showed the pilot the path to follow. Ankaren

leaned forward in his seat, totally focused on maintaining the tenuous contact his sensors had made with the power line, and feeding the path through to the shuttle's computers. Gideon glanced quickly at the instruments in front of him where he sat in the co-pilot's seat, noting that the second shuttle was trailing them closely. Looking up again, he could see that they were following a track leading out of the city, crossing what had once probably been farmland, but the ground had long since been overgrown, turning it into a tangled wilderness.

The track they were following had probably once been a major highway, but a thousand years of neglect had changed it into a barely discernible footpath. The terrain gradually became more rugged, and the track wound through a valley between steep hills and cliffs. A canopy of trees concealed the valley's bottom, leaving only a tiny central strip to show where the road had once been.

For a moment, Gideon allowed his thoughts to wander. If the planetary population hadn't died, how would they have supported themselves once they awoke? There must be silos of supplies somewhere on the planet, containing sufficient food and other necessities to support the entire population for the years necessary, before they could get their fields and factories producing again. The logistical effort necessary to create such a planetary reserve was mind blowing. They must have started planning for the possibility of long term sleep almost immediately after the Shadows infected the planet.

A blink of light on the panel in front of him brought Gideon's attention back inside the shuttle.

"Incoming!" He barked the word into his commlink, simultaneously notifying both shuttle pilots of the situation. The first blink of light was joined by another and another, then a handful more. Within seconds, the panel indicated that there were nearly fifty aircraft approaching fast, all on an intercept course. The shuttles scanners detected no life-signs on the ships. [Damned things are on automatic defense again.]

"Evasive maneuvers." Gideon gave the order as the shuttle banked hard to the left, throwing him against the harness holding him in his seat. The Captain raised his commlink to his mouth again and keyed the call signal for the Excalibur. "Launch fighters, Lieutenant, we need some help down here."

Matheson's acknowledgment was terse, and Gideon again opened his link to the other shuttle, making sure that everyone could hear his next comments. "It looks like we're under attack, but the Calvary is on the way." He tried to keep his voice steady, as the violent evasions of the shuttle threw him around in his seat.

The bouncing around didn't help Gideon in his attempt to see Ankaren's instruments, which were to his left, but almost behind his head. He turned to the Brakiri and asked, "Can you find us somewhere to land? We need an open space, but preferably with a hill or a cliff of some kind behind us. Something we can get our backs to, or dig into, until the fighters get here."

The Brakiri nodded and leaned forward to instruct the shuttle pilot. Another sharp turn, this time to the right and down, sent Gideon lurching forward into his harness again. The shoulder straps bit into him, and the buckle on the waistband dug into his belly. He knew that he was likely to have bruises there later, and could only hope that he'd make it back to the Excalibur, so that his wife could kiss them better.

The enemy aircraft were closing in on the two shuttles, following their every twist and turn, and the first shots rocked them violently. The pilot had managed to get them out of the direct line of fire, but only just. Gideon knew that they were running out of time. The shuttles had limited firepower, and they didn't stand a chance against the number of opponents pursuing them.

"Get us down, then evacuate the ships. Run for whatever cover you can find and dig in, until the fighters get down and clear the sky of these bastards." Gideon shouted the orders into his commlink, making sure that everyone in his own shuttle could hear, as well as the occupants of the other ship.

The shuttle shuddered as another shot grazed the back end, and Gideon watched as the pilot put the nose down and dived for the ground. At least, the Captain hoped that the pilot was doing that. If he wasn't, then they were headed straight into the ground at full power, and there wouldn't be enough left of Gideon for Deborah to kiss better.

At the very last moment, the nose lifted, the tail dropped, and the shuttle bounced into the ground. The pilot muttered, "Sorry for the rough landing, Captain!" as he unbuckled and leaped out of his seat, following the other occupants out of the shuttle as fast as he could.

Gideon brought up the rear, yelling, "No need for apologies. We're down in one piece, and that makes it a good landing. Now run!" He hurtled down the ramp and threw himself over a large rock and into its shelter, as an enemy shot made a direct hit on the shuttle behind him. The resulting explosion sent shards of metal and fiery debris hundreds of meters into the air, before it all cascaded down on the Captain and his crew. Gideon hunched over, tucking his head into his chest and curling up to present as small a target as he could. [If I don't come back from this mission alive, Deborah will kill me,] was his last thought, before the remains of one of the shuttle seats landed on him, knocking him out cold.

"Oh shit!" Luke Raven watched as the shuttle seat landed on Gideon. He ran from behind the tree where he'd been sheltering, and pulled the flaming wreckage off the Captain, hardly noticing that his own hands were burning as he did so. Another pair of hands, large and spotted, joined his and heaved the remaining debris away.

Luke grinned his thanks at G'Tan, barely aware that the enemy aircraft were still circling above them, firing down at the remains of the first burning shuttle and at the other, still intact vessel. It didn't stay that way for long. Luke threw himself forward, shielding Gideon's body with his own, as the second shuttle exploded. The air was driven from his lungs as another body dropped on top of his. Luke could only hope that G'Tan had intended to cover him, and was still conscious, as he didn't think he was going to get out from under the gigantic Narn's body without help.

A few seconds later a rumble of words in his ear reassured him. "Are you all right, Doctor? I am sorry if I crushed you." Luke was sure he heard some amusement in the Narn's voice.

"It's OK, I'm fine." Luke coughed out a response, wishing that G'Tan would get off his back.

"I'm glad *you* are, because I'm sure as hell not. Will you guys get off me? Please? I'd like to breathe again sometime this year." Luke could barely hear Gideon's croaking whisper above the noise of the gunfire going on over their heads. G'Tan's Marines were shooting back at the circling aircraft, keeping them at a distance.

Luke felt a great weight lifted from his back as G'Tan moved, then the doctor rolled off the Captain. Luke found himself being dragged behind a large rock, and watched as the Narn pulled the Captain into shelter with them. Gideon started to try and sit up, but Luke pushed him back, until he was lying flat on the ground.

"Don't even think about moving, until I've done a full body scan on you." Gideon lay still, coughing quietly, as Luke ran a scanner over him. The doctor grinned down at the Captain as he said, "You're either bloody lucky, or indestructible, and I wouldn't bet on the latter if I were you." He had to shout the last part of his sentence to make himself heard over the roar of gunfire still going on around them.

Gideon tried to grin back, but it turned into a grimace as he pulled himself into a sitting position. "I'm willing to gamble on a lot of things, Doc, but that's not one of them."

Luke watched as Gideon raised his arm, wincing, and keyed his commlink. John's voice sounded over the link, saying, "The fighters are less than a minute away, Captain. That *was* what you were going to ask, wasn't it?"

Gideon managed a grin this time. "Yeah. And I didn't know you could read my mind from orbit. Tell them to haul ass, will you? The vultures are circling."

Luke looked up to see one of the enemy vessels explode violently overhead. A beam of light shot out from behind them and took another of the aircraft down. The color of the light was totally unlike that emitted by the Marines' weapons, and Luke swung round to look for the source.

The black figure that emerged from the undergrowth held his staff high over his head, sending tight beams of destruction into the air, knocking down every aircraft in the immediate vicinity and sending the rest scattering into the paths of the now descending fighters. Within moments, every enemy aircraft was destroyed.

Luke looked back at the Captain, as he spoke softly from where he was sitting on the ground, leaning his head on his hands and his elbows on his knees.

"Your timing's impeccable, Galen."

Gideon rubbed his sore head as the Technomage approached. It wasn't the only part of him that was sore, but it hurt the most. He grimaced as Galen's voice bounced around inside his skull.

"Having things dropped on your head is usually to be avoided, Matthew. Ask the Wicked Witch of the East."

Gideon snorted a laugh. "Very funny. That probably makes you the great Oz, but someone stole my ruby slippers. Give me a hand here, will you?" He held out his arm and Galen grasped it, pulling the Captain to his feet. "I'm glad you dropped by, Galen. Did you just happen to be passing in your hot air balloon?"

Galen smiled and indicated the remains of the highway, which wound through the trees nearby. "Just following the yellow brick road."

Gideon laughed again. He hadn't noticed that they'd come down on the highway. He realized that this must have been the only place Ankaren could find that had met his specifications for a landing site. The Captain looked around to see his crew emerging from the various places they had taken shelter. He breathed a sigh of relief when a quick head count revealed that they had taken no casualties.

Gideon stood with Galen, watching as Raven and Bennett checked everyone over, treating minor burns,

cuts and bruises. The Captain asked, "So what are you doing in this neck of the galaxy? I'm sure it's not a coincidence that you're here."

Galen shook his head. "No. President Sheridan advised me of your plan to come back to this planet. I decided that it was likely you would need my help *again*," the Technomage emphasized the last word heavily, "so decided to join the party. The fireworks were quite entertaining, so when do we get cake?"

The Captain laughed softly. "I think Deborah saved a piece of wedding cake for you, but you'll have to come back to the ship to collect it. She'll want to thank you for saving my life, anyway."

He turned to the Technomage and smiled as they both said, simultaneously, "Again."

Gideon looked up as the fighters roared overhead, then lifted his commlink to his mouth as it beeped. Matheson's voice emerged, a little anxiety making itself evident as he asked, "Is everyone OK down there, Captain?"

Gideon smiled to himself, and answered the question that his XO hadn't been able to bring himself to ask. "Luke is fine. So are the rest of us. A few bumps, bruises and burns, but nothing worse, thanks to Galen's arrival, and the fighters doing clean up behind him. Send us another couple of shuttles down, will you, John? With a full fighter escort. We'll need them to keep following this power line. I just hope they don't dock my paycheck with the cost of the two shuttles I just lost."

[That is if I ever get paid.] It was now nearly three years since the Captain had last been paid, and it was beginning to annoy him. Signing off from his call, Gideon turned to Galen, asking, "Where did you park your ship? Need a lift?"

Galen waved imperiously, and Gideon watched as the black delta winged vessel appeared over the top of the steep hill behind them, and settled a short way down the highway. The Captain nodded seriously. "Impressive. Does it walk to heel and fetch your slippers, too?"

Galen narrowed his eyes and glared back at Gideon. "Only ruby ones, and its bite is worse than its bark, so be polite." The Technomage gestured at his ship. "There's no need for you to wait for the shuttles. I can take you where you need to go. My ship can follow that power line much more easily, anyway."

It didn't surprise Gideon that Galen knew what they had been doing. The Technomage often seemed omniscient. He shook his head. "I'm not leaving my team until those shuttles and fighters arrive, but then I'll take you up on your offer, if I can bring Luke, Dunall and G'Tan with me."

Galen nodded, and they settled down to wait. Gideon ran through their findings to date. "Any ideas on what might have happened here, Galen?" He was curious to find out just how much the Technomage knew.

Galen shook his head. "When we return to the city, I'll see if I can find any decipherable records. In the meantime, I believe we should continue with the course of action you have started."

The shuttles and fighters arrived, and Gideon watched, as they took off with most of his team, leaving him, Dunall, Raven and G'Tan with Galen.

The Technomage called out cheerily, "All aboard who's coming aboard!" and led the way into the dark interior of his ship.

As the ramp of Galen's ship descended, Gideon looked out into the deserted streets. They had traced the power line to a single building, situated amongst others of its kind, in a grouping that Gideon thought of as a village. He wasn't quite sure why he thought of the buildings in that way, but something about them struck him as more residential than industrial. The only problem was that they seemed to be a little short on residents.

They had limited their examination of the area to a low-level sweep using Galen's scanners, not wishing to provoke another attack from the planetary Automatic Defense System. The results of the scans had been ambiguous. There were indications that nearby buildings held what *could* be life signs, but Galen had advised that they could equally be remaining traces of organic materials, rotted over the centuries that had passed, since the place was last inhabited. The only way to be sure was to go and take a look.

Gideon led his team down the ramp, having instructed G'Tan to stay at Dunall's side at all times. The Narn Marine had looked rebellious for a moment, until Gideon had indicated that Galen would act as his own and Luke's bodyguard. Even G'Tan had to admit that the Technomage could be quite effective in that role. Gideon had caught a quirk of a smile on Galen's lips, as the Narn had made that grudging admission. Walking down the ramp, Gideon heard Galen's murmured, "I think I've been promoted. I started the day as chauffeur, so bodyguard is a distinct improvement."

The Captain thought about telling him to shut up, but decided against it. He sighed sadly to himself. [There are times when I really miss Max. I haven't told anyone to shut up in weeks.]

They followed Galen, as he wove a path through the buildings, following some trail evident only to him. Finally, arriving at the door to one of the buildings, indistinguishable from any of the others as far as Gideon could tell, Galen looked carefully into the golden sphere he held in front of him and nodded. "They're here."

The Technomage turned to the Captain and spoke softly. "There are definite life signs inside this building, and they match the recordings the Excalibur made on our last visit to this planet. It would seem that some of the population at least have survived."

Gideon exhaled in relief. If there were some survivors, the burden of guilt he carried would weigh a little less heavily. "How many? Can you tell?"

Galen shook his head. "A few in this building, more in others, but the structures are screened in some way, and at this low level of scan, I can tell you little more than that there are people alive here. Shall we take a look?"

The Captain had started to move forward, when he felt himself grabbed from both sides. Galen had caught one of his arms, while G'Tan held the other. Looking at each of them, Gideon would never have guessed that a large Narn and a Technomage could look equally disapproving, but somehow they managed it.

Galen spoke first. "I think it would be safer, if you allowed the Sergeant and me to go first. We are big enough and ugly enough to look after ourselves. I will leave you to decide which is which."

G'Tan narrowed his eyes, apparently trying to decide if he'd just been insulted, then waved to the

Technomage to precede him. Gideon wondered if G'Tan planned to get even by outliving Galen. [Always the best form of revenge.]

The doors to the building slid open, as the Technomage made a flamboyant gesture at them, and Galen and G'Tan led the way through and into the gloomy interior. Gideon and Luke followed, staying close to Dunall, who they sheltered between them. The Captain held his PPG at the ready, and quickly checked to see that Luke was also armed. He half smiled at his own conditioned response. He was sure that Dunall was quite capable of taking care of herself, but as a military man the habit of protecting civilians was ingrained.

"Galen? How about lighting up one of those fireballs of yours?" Gideon whispered his request, unable to see much in front of him.

"How kind, another promotion. I must add lamplighter to my list of accomplishments." Galen's tone dripped sarcasm, but he obliged with a ball of light, just as G'Tan and Dunall both switched on the torches they carried.

The resulting flare illuminated the interior of the building, allowing Gideon to see the group of people huddled against the far wall. Reading the facial expressions and body language of an unknown alien race was always difficult, but the Captain was certain that for once, he didn't need his wife by his side to read their emotions. In this case, he knew exactly what these people were feeling. They were terrified.

Gideon pocketed his PPG and turned quickly to Dunall. "Can you tell them that we won't hurt them? That we've come to help them?"

The Minbari linguist nodded and spoke a few short phrases. Gideon knew that she had spent days going through all their records from the previous visit to this planet and had put together a basic vocabulary. He just hoped it would be enough to communicate with these people.

In the silence after the Minbari's speech, one of the aliens straightened and stepped forward. Gideon had no idea whether it was male or female, but it was taller than him, heavier in build, and had the same gray complexion as the Keeper who had spoken to him two and a half years before. When the alien spoke, the voice was lighter, but still deep. Gideon decided, arbitrarily, that he would think of this person as a male. He half smiled to himself, as he realized that he was pandering to his own innate prejudices. [I obviously have a problem dealing with large women. You'd have thought after marrying an Amazon, I'd have gotten over that.] The biggest surprise was when he realized that, although the alien spoke with a strong accent, he was speaking English.

"I can speak your language. You are the people who came before, the ones who spoke to our Keeper. You are the ones who destroyed our world. Have you come back to kill the few of us left alive?"

Gideon tried not to hog the fire, but as night had fallen, the temperature had dropped, and he was feeling the chill. He'd zipped his leather jacket over the body armor he wore, but the cold still penetrated, making him shiver and think longingly of the warm bed, [and hot woman!] waiting for him on the Excalibur. The Captain held his hands out to the fire and listened as the alien spokesperson told his story.

They had left the building and moved into the center of the village, to an open area where others slowly joined them, until a hundred or more aliens surrounded the team from the Excalibur. The aliens were

wary, keeping their distance, pushing their spokesperson forward. Gideon had been half surprised that he and his companions hadn't been assaulted. If these people thought that the Excalibur was responsible for the deaths of everyone in the cryogenic units, why hadn't they attacked? Why didn't they seem angry?

The spokesperson had explained as others had built the fire, which they were now huddled around.

"We heard the attack earlier and can only hope that none of your people were hurt. We are sorry, but we no longer control the vessels that attacked you. They are the only part of the planetary defense system that remains functional, but even that part will soon fail. Soon, there will be no power left to run anything. Soon, the few of us who remain will die. There was no need for you to come to kill us. Our misery will end soon enough."

Gideon had assured them that he had no intention of killing them, and knew nothing of the damage done to the power plant or the deaths of the people in the cryogenic units.

The spokesperson had shaken his head sadly, saying, "I know what you say is true, but nevertheless, it was your visit to our world that precipitated the crisis leading to our destruction."

"How? What did we do?" Gideon followed the alien to the fire, sitting close, the members of his crew huddling around him, as the spokesperson told his story. As he listened, Gideon was aware that Galen hadn't joined them, but stood guard in the darkness that surrounded them.

"I have viewed the records of your visit to our world, and learned your language in case you should return, as you promised you would. After you left, the Keeper sent our ships to destroy the beacon you had left in our skies. He hoped that without its warning, others would still come to our planet, allowing him to continue the experiments on which the lives of everyone on our world depended. I know that you disapproved of those experiments, but they were our only hope."

"When the Keeper died, half a year after your visit, he left complete records for his successor. The new Keeper watched and waited, but no visitors came to our world. Slowly, he realized that the beacon his predecessor had destroyed was not the only warning you had left. He reasoned that you must have left other beacons, beyond our reach, and that those beacons were warning away everyone who came near to our system."

The alien looked at Gideon, his face unreadable, as he went on, "After nearly two years, when his death was almost upon him, the knowledge that you had blockaded our world, putting an end to all our hopes of finding a cure, drove the Keeper mad."

Gideon closed his eyes, telling himself that he'd had no choice. What these people had done was murder, he'd *had* to put a stop to it. He listened as the spokesperson continued.

"The Keeper decided that it would be better if our race died quickly, rather than linger for thousands more years, waiting for a cure that would never be found, while the power plants that kept the sleeper units alive died one by one. Sixty days ago, he reprogrammed the ADS to identify the power plants as an enemy. Our own ships attacked the means by which our population was kept alive and destroyed them. As each power plant was smashed, millions died. The recordings the Keeper left of that time are

terrible, as his madness drove him deeper into despair, and the knowledge of his responsibility for the death of our world drove him deeper into madness. A spiral of despair and madness that killed our race."

The alien fell silent, his head bowed in what Gideon assumed to be grief, at the loss of billions of lives. The Captain asked quietly, "How did you survive? Why didn't you and these people die in the cryogenic units like the rest?"

"We were the lucky ones, or perhaps unlucky. As the power failed, the systems running the sleeper machines recognized what was happening. The safety programs tried to awaken the sleepers, but for most it was too late. In each of our underground storage facilities, only a few hundred were awakened in time. We emerged into darkness and death, making our way through the shadows to the surface, to find that our world was at an end. A thousand years had passed while we slept, but no cure had been found. The Keeper had killed himself, but had seen that a few had survived, so left records for us of what he had done."

"There was enough power left for the surviving groups to contact each other and agree on what we should do. Each group moved to the nearest place where the reserves of food and supplies were kept. We knew that we only needed sufficient power and food to last two years, as without a cure, none of us would live longer than that. The group I lead came to this place. We have enough food to feed millions, supplies to last us a thousand years, but we have no power for our machines, and no engineers to repair the damage done to the power plants. So we huddle in the cold and darkness, burning our supplies for light and heat, waiting for the end. For sixty days, we have waited, wondering which would strike sooner, the disease inflicted upon us a thousand years ago, or the aliens who destroyed all our hopes of finding a cure for that disease." The spokesperson looked into Gideon's eyes, condemning him for what he had done.

The Captain spoke softly. "We came to keep the promise I made. We have the cure for the plague you suffer. We came to bring it to you."

Luke had listened in silence as the alien had told his story, watching his Captain's reaction as the tale unfolded. [Sixty days. If we'd come two months earlier, perhaps we could have prevented this.] Luke knew that the same thoughts would be running through Gideon's mind, and he knew his Captain well enough to know that Gideon would blame himself for every death.

Luke cast his mind back two months. He had still been on Eriadne, with Lily, waiting for John and Matt to bring the Excalibur back to collect them. It had been a scary, exciting time, full of expectation and apprehension about the future. And while he and Lily had been preparing themselves for their happy and permanent reunion with John, this world had been dying.

The doctor wondered if Gideon could have ordered the Excalibur to come to this place first. Could he have insisted that the refit then taking place be postponed, while he fulfilled his promise? For Gideon's sake, Luke hoped that would have been impossible. The Captain's conscience would torture him enough. If he could have prevented this by making a different decision, Gideon would never forgive himself.

The Captain's words drew Luke's attention back to the group huddled around the fire. "If you'll agree to give the doctor here some samples, we can analyze your DNA and adapt the viral screen that we've developed. Then we can give you the instruments you need to eradicate the plague from your bodies. How many of your people are left now? We'll need to know."

The alien sighed deeply. "There are less than ten thousand survivors, scattered in groups around the planet. I can give you the locations of the other groups, but we no longer have the power to contact them or go to them."

Luke looked across at Gideon as he responded, staring into the fire in front of him, his voice concealing all the emotion that the doctor knew he must have been feeling, his face expressionless. At that moment, Luke could see why his Captain was supposed to be such a hot poker player. He had the ability to hide every thought and emotion.

"With so few left alive, the treatment won't take long, and it should only take a couple of weeks to adapt the viral screen. At a guess, within fourteen days, we should be able to eradicate the plague from your world." Gideon looked up at the alien opposite and continued, "I'm keeping the promise I made to your Keeper, but there's a price to pay. Are you willing to pay that price?"

Gideon watched the alien spokesperson, trying to read his face and body language, wishing that he had been able to bring Deborah with him, to tell him what the alien was feeling. The Captain pulled his leather jacket tighter around him, shivering against the cold, telling himself that even if these people refused to accept the terms on which the cure could be made available to them, the Excalibur could at least help make their last months of life more comfortable. They could repair the machines, or leave them power cells, whatever it took to get the lights and heat working again.

Gideon wasn't entirely comfortable with the stance he was taking, but he had his orders. The ISA, and Sheridan in particular, had been very specific about the terms under which he was allowed to help these people.

The alien stared back at him and asked softly, "Price? We have little we can offer you. I doubt if our supplies of food and blankets would be useful to you, and we have nothing else to give."

Gideon shook his head. "We're not interested in your food or supplies." [Although right now, a blanket would be damned welcome.] The Captain shook the thought away. "What we want is justice. For a thousand years, you've been luring people to this world, only to murder them for the sake of your experiments. Before we provide the cure for the plague, you have to agree to accept the consequences of your actions over the centuries."

"And what would those consequences be? Who will decide what is just?" The alien's voice was full of outrage as he leaned over the fire and made his demands.

Gideon spoke softly. "While my people work on adapting the viral screen, we'll also start accessing the records on your experiments. We'll carry out a full inventory of the ships' 'graveyard' that we found in your city, and we'll catalogue every species we can identify, whose people you killed. When we have a complete list, the Inter Stellar Alliance will convene a tribunal, with representatives of every species whose people have been murdered. That tribunal will decide on what action they think is appropriate."

The alien surged to his feet, protesting. "You call this justice? We did nothing! The people here are innocent, none of us took part in these experiments, yet you would punish us for the sins of others!"

Before Gideon could respond, Galen materialized out of the darkness and stood between the Captain and the alien, his staff held in both hands. The Technomage was several centimeters shorter than the

alien, but the sense of power emanating from his person was sufficient to make the spokesperson take a step backwards.

When Galen spoke, his voice was low and threatening. "None of you can claim innocence of these atrocities. You are all of the generation that decided to retreat into your cryogenic sleep, leaving one of you to commit multiple murders, capturing and dissecting sentient beings. You agreed to that course of action, you are accessories in the crimes. You cannot avoid the responsibility. You hoped to benefit from the murders carried out on your behalf, now you will have to face the families of your victims, and explain to them why you should not be punished."

Gideon could hear the sound of murmuring from the darkness surrounding them. His hand drifted closer to the pocket that held his PPG, while he wondered if they would be attacked. From the corner of his eye, he could see that G'Tan had subtly shifted his stance and that the Marine Sergeant had adopted a defensive crouch, swinging his PPG rifle to the ready position.

The last thing the Captain wanted at this point was a fight, but if it came to it, he was prepared to defend himself and his crew. A quick glance at Luke and Dunall confirmed that they were also alert to the possibility that they would be attacked. Luke had his hand in the pocket where he'd put his own gun, while Dunall had both hands tucked beneath her robe. Gideon wasn't sure what weapon might be concealed there, but he'd never come across a defenseless Minbari yet. Dunall was unlikely to be the first.

Gideon rose slowly and stepped toward the alien and the Technomage, now almost nose to nose, confronting each other. "Let's cool things down a little, shall we?" He shivered as his movement took him away from the fire, thinking, [The last thing I need right now is to cool down. Any cooler, and I'll freeze solid.]

He watched as both men relaxed and moved back from their confrontational stance, then he turned to the alien. "We're not saying that your people will be punished, or if they are, what that punishment should be. Personally, I can't think of anything you could do which would repay the people who have lost friends and loved ones to your experiments over the centuries. Fortunately, I don't have to decide. Those decisions will be made by people better qualified than me." Gideon hoped he was telling the truth. He prayed that the tribunal would be made up of individuals with the wisdom and mercy to resolve this mess. He was just glad that no one would ask him to be a part of it.

Galen's voice rang out from beside the Captain. "And to help that tribunal reach a just conclusion, I will assist the crew of the Excalibur in their attempts to recover data from your records."

That statement surprised Gideon, and he turned to stare at the Technomage. Galen had never offered that kind of help before, what motivated him to give it now? Gideon could only assume that the Technomage was as outraged by what these people had done as he was.

The alien spokesperson said quietly, "All of our records have been destroyed. You will find no evidence to use against us there."

Gideon interrupted before Galen could speak. "We're not looking for evidence to use against you. We're looking for the truth. We know and understand the desperation that drove your people to do what they did. If we hadn't found the cure when we did, it's possible that we might have done something similar. I hope not, but I don't know. If I were faced with the choice of killing a stranger or allowing my wife and son to die, I don't know what choice I would make." The problem was that Gideon was fairly sure of what his own choice would be in that situation, and he didn't much like the answer.

He looked at the alien, hoping that some of his sadness and understanding of their plight could cross the barrier that made it so difficult for different species, with different morals and ethics, to communicate effectively.

Before the alien could respond, Galen intervened. "Your records may not be as irrecoverable as you think. I have techniques at my disposal that might surprise you."

Gideon looked questioningly at the Technomage, wondering again where this sudden surge of helpfulness came from. What was it in those records that Galen was so keen to find? He put that puzzle aside and spoke quietly. "You have to decide. The choice is yours. If you agree to our terms, then we'll start work immediately, and within a few days, we should be able to start curing your people. If you won't accept those terms, we'll leave. But before we go, we'll do whatever we can to repair the damage done to your power supplies, so that you don't suffer unnecessarily during the time you have left."

The alien snorted in contempt at this final offer, then sighed deeply, saying, "Very well, do what you have to. The choice is between an uncertain life and certain death. We choose life. Produce your catalogue of victims, convene your tribunal, but do not judge in haste. If you can indeed recover our records, then study them carefully. They will show the efforts we made, before we retreated into sleep. They will show how many of our people refused to take that option, how many preferred to die rather than live at the price of others' lives. Whatever you may think, we are not an evil race. Rather, we were desperate. Remember that we, too, were victims of this plague that was so unjustly spread across both our worlds."

Gideon couldn't help but admire the quiet dignity with which the speech was delivered. He nodded and said, "I'll go back to my ship and start making arrangements. Be prepared for a team to arrive in the morning. We'll need details of the other survivors' locations. Fighters will accompany our shuttles, so if there are any more of your defense ships left functional, we'll take them out." He started to turn away, then paused to look back at the fire and the alien standing proudly next to it. "For what it's worth, I think you've made the right choice. We'll do our best to temper justice with mercy."

The Captain turned from the fire, collecting his people around him and leading them back to Galen's ship. The cold intensified with every step into the darkness and Gideon wondered if he would ever feel warm again.

During the trip back to the Excalibur, Gideon called ahead on his commlink and organized the teams needed to go down to the planet the next day. Lt. Jackson took note of all his instructions and made suggestions for the composition of the landing parties, telling the Captain that she'd persuaded Matheson to go off duty an hour before.

Gideon was almost able to hear the smile in her voice as she told him, "Lieutenant Matheson seemed unwilling to go off duty before you returned to the ship, Sir. I asked him if he didn't trust me, and whether he'd changed his mind about recommending me for the position of second officer. He left the bridge about two minutes later."

The Captain chuckled quietly, "Nice move, Jackson, but don't try it on me. Lt. Matheson is a pushover for emotional blackmail. I don't fold so easily."

After assuring him that she would never dream of using such tactics on her Captain, a denial that Gideon didn't believe for an instant, Jackson signed off.

Gideon turned to Galen who had stood listening, his coat hood pulled up over his head. "So Galen, you're going to help us recover those records are you? That's very...considerate of you." Gideon paused before choosing his words, allowing the Technomage to feel the full weight of his skepticism.

Galen chose to ignore his tone. "I'm a considerate person, Matthew. Especially when it comes to rescuing stray cats." The Technomage turned on his heel and disappeared into the gloom of his ship.

Seconds later, Gideon felt the wheels of the ship touch down. He closed his eyes and shivered again. The cold of the planet seemed to have penetrated his bones, and he'd been unable to get warm on the journey home. He sighed with relief that he was finished for the night and could now go directly to his quarters. [Maybe Deborah can warm me up.] The smile that this thought produced lingered on his face as he turned to G'Tan, Dunall and Luke, telling them they were off duty.

Ignoring Luke's suggestion that he detour via Medbay to get his injuries treated, Gideon almost ran down the ramp of Galen's ship as it dropped, eager to get back to his quarters and his wife.

The Captain stood over his son's cot, watching over the sleeping child. He'd crept into Marcus' room, careful not to wake the seven month old baby, but somehow needing to see his son, to check that the child was well, before being able to sleep. Gideon looked down at the tiny scrap of humanity and wondered why so many books were written about mother love, but so few about how a father loved his child. He felt a fierce protectiveness for this baby, partly arising from the knowledge that this was his son, partly from how Marcus looked more like his mother with every day that passed.

Gideon bent low over the cot and brushed his lips against the baby's forehead. Straightening, he wondered again what he would decide if faced with the choice of killing a stranger to save his son. Looking at the sleeping baby, the Captain knew that he would do anything to protect his wife and child. He sighed deeply and turned to leave Marcus' room, making his way into the bedroom he shared with Deborah.

He'd left his body armor in the landing bay, and now quickly stripped off his leather jacket and uniform, shivering again as he did so. Even in the warmth of his quarters, Gideon couldn't shake off the chill of the planet below. Cold as he was, he took a moment to look at his wife, deeply asleep in their bed. The light from the living area behind him gave him more than enough illumination to watch her as she slept.

Deborah was sprawled across her half of the bed, the covers down around her hips as usual. Gideon looked at her face and wondered what dream had provoked the gentle smile that played across her lips. He thought his wife was beautiful at any time, although he knew that many were intimidated by her strong jaw and often-cold expression. Only with her family and friends did Deborah relax enough to smile and laugh. Gideon loved her deep, raucous laugh, but to him she was most beautiful when she slept, when her face relaxed into that gentle smile, and the cares of the day were washed from her expression.

He shivered again, so carefully lifted the covers, and tried to slide into the bed without disturbing Deborah's sleep. As he pulled the covers up to his shoulders, his wife rolled toward him. She moved across the bed in her sleep, until her naked body was pressed close against him.

Gideon kept his arms outside the covers, not wanting to wake her by placing his cold hands on her. Deborah put her arms around him, then twined her legs through his, until he could feel the soft warmth of her skin pressing along the length of him. The Captain closed his eyes and sighed deeply, reveling in the warmth of Deborah's body, the softness of her skin, wondering why she would want to snuggle up to the ice block in bed with her.

He felt his wife's head move, and her lips pressed gently against his shoulder. Deborah was awake. Her voice was the merest whisper in his ear as she said, "You're cold. Seems like you need a bed-warmer tonight."

Gideon kissed her cheek and whispered back, "You warm my bed, my body, my heart and my soul."

There was a pause while Deborah considered his words, then she laughed softly. "You are such a slick bastard at times. How long did it take you to think up that one?"

Gideon pretended to be hurt. "That was entirely spontaneous. I'm deeply wounded that you don't take my protestations of love seriously."

Deborah pressed her lips against his shoulder and blew a raspberry. "Nice try, Captain, but I know you just want to get your hands on my body."

The Captain laughed, "My hands are like two lumps of ice. If I get them on your body, you'll scream."

Deborah chuckled, "I often scream when you touch me. Warm your hands up on my butt, and we'll see who screams first."

Gideon slid his hands under the covers and placed them on her ass, pulling her even closer against him. Deborah let out a little squeal as he touched her, and wriggled her groin against his. She whispered, "You're right, your hands *are* cold. I think I'd better check your extremities for frost bite."

The Captain smiled as his wife moved one of her hands to his cock. He groaned with pleasure as her warm fingers enclosed him, stroking him gently. He moved his hands in circles over Deborah's butt, warming them, as he whispered, "Nothing bitten yet, but I live in hope."

Deborah laughed softly and started to kiss her way down Gideon's chest, ducking her head under the covers. She pushed him gently onto his back, her hands and mouth warming him more with every minute that passed. When her mouth found his cock, Gideon groaned again. The combination of her lips and tongue moving around his cock and her warm hands massaging his balls lit a fire in his groin that spread through the rest of his body, until only his hands and feet felt chilled. Lifting the covers, he peeked under them, to where his wife continued to suck, lick and play with his now erect cock.

"Can you breathe OK down there?"

Deborah released his cock to grin up at him, her smile just discernible in the darkness beneath the covers. "I can breathe, but my teachers always told me not to speak with my mouth full, so don't distract me."

Gideon grinned. "Whoever taught you to do *that* deserves a medal, as far as I'm concerned. Now come back up here where I can see you."

Deborah pulled herself up his body and soon lay on top of him, kissing him passionately. Gideon returned her kisses, running his hands over her back, butt and thighs, feeling his temperature rise with every minute that passed. Then Deborah dropped her head and kissed his shoulder, just where it was tender from the bruises inflicted by the shuttle safety harness.

Gideon couldn't suppress a brief hiss of pain. Deborah lifted her head and frowned at him, then waved on the bedside light, pulling back the covers so she could see him properly. She inhaled sharply, when she saw the bruises spread across his shoulders, chest and belly, the darkened areas clearly outlining where he'd been thrown against the seatbelt.

"Matthew, why didn't you say? Let me get the regenerator." Deborah started to move off him, but Gideon grabbed her and held her close.

"Later. For now, finish what you started, please?" The thought of waiting to make love to his wife was unbearable. Gideon needed her next to him, needed to be inside her, feeling her warmth and love enclosing him, pushing away the cold and darkness of the night.

Deborah looked at him in silence, then kissed him gently and started to rotate her hips against him. Gideon gave silent thanks that he'd fallen in love with an empath. He didn't need to explain how he felt, didn't have to try and put his need into words. Deborah felt his need, knew what he wanted, and she was delighted and determined to give him everything he desired.

She lifted herself until she straddled his hips, then lowered herself slowly onto him, guiding his stiff cock into her, gently thrusting down onto him, taking him deeper and deeper into her core, enclosing him. Gideon felt his cock stretching the warm wetness of Deborah's walls. He sighed with pleasure as she began to move, gently rising and falling, tightening her internal muscles to increase his pleasure. He lifted his hands to her breasts and caressed them, then sat upright to take one of her nipples into his mouth.

As he shifted, Deborah moved her legs, until she sat astride him, her legs wrapped around his waist, his cock as deep inside her as it could get. Lifting his head from her breast, Gideon moved a hand to pull her head down to his, taking her mouth in a passionate kiss, all the while moving his hips to thrust up into her.

Deborah's hands roved his back and moved down to his butt, pulling him harder into her, increasing the pace of her thrusts as their passion built. After a few moments, they broke their kiss, both panting for breath as their climax approached. Gideon moved his hands back to Deborah's butt and pulled her hard against him, kissing her neck and shoulders as he felt the build up of his orgasm, holding back, waiting for the signs he knew so well, the signs that would tell him that Deborah was about to join him in the crescendo to their love making.

Deborah's orgasm exploded out of her, cascading over Gideon as he continued to thrust into her, driving him to uncontrolled release, as wave after wave of her pleasure poured over him. Only with Deborah could he experience this, only she was able to share with him in this way. Only she could take him to a level of gratification and love that he'd never known before.

As the surges of pleasure slowly receded, Gideon fell back on the pillows, dragging Deborah with him. She lay panting on his chest, moving her legs until she straddled him again, never losing her grip on his cock, which remained buried inside her.

Gideon lay contentedly stroking his wife's back and butt, all thoughts of cold and darkness left behind, as he basked in the warm glow of her love.

Demon shifted herself until she lay next to Matthew, carefully resting her head on an unbruised part of his chest. They lay quietly for a while, resting, enjoying the warmth and comfort of each other's bodies. Demon eventually shifted her head and kissed one of the bruises on Matthew's shoulder gently, saying, "I'll get the regenerator."

She slid out of bed and walked to the dresser, aware that Matthew was watching her every move. Glancing over her shoulder, she grinned back at him and wiggled her butt. Matthew laughed and said, "I appreciate the thought, but you'll have to give me a while to respond to that signal."

Demon took the regenerator from the drawer and went back to the bed, kneeling beside Matthew as he lay back into the pillows. She leaned down and gently kissed the bruises on his right shoulder, then ran the regenerator over them until they had faded. She repeated her actions on his left shoulder and then on his belly, where the imprint of the harness buckle was clearly visible. Demon smiled up at her husband and asked, "So who used to do this for you before I moved in?"

Matthew smiled. "I used to get my bumps and bruises fixed in Medbay, but no one ever offered to kiss them better, no matter how much I turned on the charm. No, wait, there was one time, but the nurse concerned was two meters tall, weighed 150 kilos and was called Nigel. I had to tell him that it was kind of him to offer, but he wasn't my type."

Demon chuckled and gestured for him to roll onto his stomach. She sucked in her breath, when she saw the bruises and welts on Matthew's back and shoulders. Kissing them gently, she then applied the regenerator, asking, "How did you do this?"

His response was muffled, as his head was buried in the pillow. "A seat landed on top on me."

Demon planted one last kiss on the area she had finished treating, saying, "Bad seat. Tell me where to find it, and I'll punish it severely. Doesn't it know that you're supposed to sit on it, not the other way round?"

Matthew laughed and rolled onto his back, pulling her down into his arms. Demon snuggled against him, and they again lay quietly for a while. Demon could feel the turmoil of emotions surging through her husband, but waited for a few moments before asking, "Do you want to talk about what happened down there?"

Gideon smiled at the phrasing of Deborah's question. She'd left him the option of saying, 'No, I don't want to talk about it,' but he found that he wanted to talk.

In the years since the loss of the Cerberus, Gideon had slowly withdrawn from others, encouraging acquaintance rather than friendship, never willing to risk the pain that losing friends caused. He had allowed John to get closer to him than anyone else in all those years, but before the first visit to Eriadne, he'd kept even John at arms' length. That time was over. The woman lying beside him was closer to him than anyone had ever been in his life. Gideon knew that she loved him deeply, passionately, and he could confide in her as in no one before.

Deborah smiled up at him and waited for him to speak. Gideon took a deep breath and told her everything that had happened on the planet, the deaths, the attack, finding the survivors and the deal he had made. Deborah listened attentively, only interrupting when she didn't understand something, waiting until he poured everything out before asking, "What's making you feel so bad about all this, Matthew? I can feel your guilt and sorrow. I understand the sadness--what has happened to these people is terrible--but why do you feel guilty?"

Gideon hugged her again, holding onto her as if to a lifebelt that kept him afloat in a sea of guilt and despair. "Because so much of what's happened is my fault." He rolled onto his side, holding Deborah close, while looking deep into her warm, golden eyes. "If I hadn't left those warning beacons, then the Keeper wouldn't have gone mad, and all those people wouldn't have died."

Deborah pursed her lips and shook her head. "You couldn't let them go on murdering visitors. What they were doing was wrong."

Gideon shook his head as he reached out to stroke her soft, blonde hair. "Was it? Yes, I guess it was, but what right do I have to condemn them? When I was here before, I could afford to be self-righteous and ethical, although even then Max tried to warn me. He asked me if I'd be willing to sacrifice a few hundred Narn lives to save humanity. I ignored his question, refused to deal with it or the issues it raised, but I can't avoid that now."

He ran his thumb along Deborah's cheekbone and smiled sadly. "Now I understand why these people did what they did. If I were in their position and faced the choice of allowing strangers to be killed or watching you and Marcus die..." Gideon ran out of words, unable to bring himself to say what he was thinking.

Deborah kissed him softly, whispering, "I love you, Matthew, and I do understand. Feeling like that doesn't make you evil. It makes you human. When the Vorlon adapted and trained my sisters and me, they wanted us to kill for them. We refused, and I couldn't believe then that I would ever feel strongly enough about anything to be willing to kill for it. Now I do. If anyone ever threatened you or Marcus, I would do anything and everything in my power to prevent them. I would kill anyone who tried to harm you, if that were the only way to protect you."

Gideon looked at his wife in amazement. He reached out to touch her face again, whispering, "Do you really feel that way?"

Deborah smiled and said, "I love you," as if that were answer enough.

Gideon decided that maybe it was. He smiled and said, "Then you understand why I feel so ambiguous about what happened on the planet below. What those people did was wrong, but understandable. I promised to deliver the cure to them, no charge. By demanding that they face a tribunal of their victims, I feel as if I'm breaking that promise. Do I have the right to issue them with an ultimatum? 'Agree to answer for your crimes, or we won't give you the cure.' The survivors didn't conduct the experiments themselves. Are they guilty by association? What gives me the right to judge?"

Deborah kissed him again. "You don't judge. You stand as surrogate for the families of the victims. You represent them here. To demand that these people face the consequences of their actions isn't unreasonable. We may understand what they did, we may even believe that we might do the same, but we also know that we would have to pay the price for that decision. So do they. Matthew, I don't know what's the best thing to do with these people, and neither do you. I'm grateful that neither of us

has to make that decision. We don't have to fix every problem in the universe, you know. Let's leave it to someone else to sort this one out. Concentrate on the positive side of your job. Cure these people of the plague."

Gideon smiled, but the smile faded as Deborah continued, "You once told me that you were like a policeman. You only had to investigate and pass the evidence of the crime to a court of law, for someone else to act on. That's the role you play here."

A wave of guilt washed over the Captain, as he remembered when he'd said those words to her. He'd been talking about bringing Angel and Lucas to justice. He reached out and pulled Deborah tightly into his arms, asking, "Will you ever forgive me for what I did then?"

Deborah kissed him gently and told him there was nothing to forgive, that he'd been right and that he was right now. That he should investigate, present the evidence and move on. Gideon decided that she was right, but there was something else that bothered him, something else for which he found it hard to forgive himself. Deborah picked up on his feelings and asked him to explain.

"Sixty days ago. That's when the Keeper went mad and everyone died. The Excalibur was in space dock then, being refitted. If I'd insisted on coming back here first, maybe we could have prevented all that destruction. Billions of lives could have been saved. I should have insisted. I should have come back sooner." Gideon clung to his wife, trying not to drown in guilt, trying to suppress his feelings, so that she wouldn't have to experience them, too.

Deborah pushed him away, frowning at him, her voice almost fierce as she told him to stop crucifying himself. "Hindsight is always perfect, Matthew. You didn't know, you *couldn't* know, what was going on here. The Keeper's madness was *not* your fault!"

She was so stern as she spoke that Gideon couldn't help but smile. "Yes, Ma'am!" He raised his hand in mock salute and got it slapped in retaliation. He grabbed Deborah's hand and tried to kiss it, while she tried to wriggle out of his grip. The resulting tussle soon turned amorous, and their mock fight turned into lovemaking.

When they lay quietly in each other's arms again, Gideon looked at the clock and groaned. It was 03:00, and he'd called a meeting for 08:00 to brief the team leaders, before they descended to the planet. He turned and kissed Deborah, then waved out the light, saying, "You will be the death of me, Deborah Gideon. I never get enough sleep these days."

Deborah laughed quietly as she said, "But you'll die happy."

Gideon pulled her into a tighter embrace, thinking, as he drifted off to sleep, that she was probably right.

Galen sat brooding in the control room of his ship. During the previous week, he had worked with the computer technicians from the Excalibur, examining every potential data source available to them, attempting to retrieve the planetary history of events over the last thousand years. The remaining population of the planet below had done their best to assist, but few of those who had survived were skilled in the areas needed for the data retrieval process. Even the Excalibur crewmembers who assisted the Technomage had barely been able to follow the techniques he had used.

This had given Galen the opportunity to vet and edit all of the data, before it was passed to the Excalibur. Everything ran through his ship's systems, and was cleaned up and translated, before being transferred to the ship in orbit. Galen knew that Gideon was suspicious that the Technomage was being selective about what data he let through. Gideon was correct.

While Galen had passed on everything that related to actual events in the planetary history, and everything that might be known by the survivors below, he had removed most of the data relating to the cause of those events. The Technomage was willing to allow his friend to know the 'what'. He was more reluctant to pass on the 'why' and the 'how'. All of Galen's worst fears about this place had proven correct, all his suspicions, aroused by the story that Gideon had told him on arrival, had proved to be well founded.

Reviewing the events of a thousand years ago, one thing had been obvious to Galen. The Shadows had not selected this planet at random. Scouting parties had been sent out to find planets with populations suitable for domination by the Shadows, planets located at strategic points for the war then being waged with the Minbari. This planet had been identified as an ideal base, located conveniently close to hyperspace shipping lines. The population had been described by the scouts as perfect potential servants for the Shadows, having standards of ethics and morality that would easily be molded to their Masters' needs.

The government of this planet had intercepted the reports made by those scouts. It was the prospect of their enslavement by the Shadows that had given them the strength and motivation to refuse to have a Shadow base placed on their worlds. Fragments of the government's debates remained, sufficient for Galen to be able to tell how vicious the argument had become. It was only by the narrowest of margins that this people had refused to become servants of the Shadows.

Galen had retained copies of the records of those debates on his ship, not passing them on to the Excalibur. A thousand years before, the planetary government had been unable to identify the nature of the scouts and spies who had circulated amongst them, but to Galen their identity was obvious. He feared that what was obvious to him might also be apparent to Gideon and some of his crew. The scouts had been Technomages.

The description of the things the scouts had been able to do, the way they had behaved, even the descriptions of their appearance, made it evident to Galen that the Technomages of that time had been actively supporting the Shadows in their attempt to force this planet into submission.

Worse, from Galen's own records, he could see that the plague released on this planet was a far less sophisticated variety than that released on Earth. Like the plague they had found on another planet--the one that had induced the population there to murder each other--this plague had required a control center to monitor its progress and keep it active.

Galen had worked quietly, secretly, and after days of searching, had found the Technomage control center. It was dormant, having been deactivated when the planetary population had retreated into their cryogenic sleep, but it hadn't been destroyed.

Galen had concealed this from Gideon and his crew, fearing that they would discover what he had, that they would find the thing that had horrified Galen most. The control center had last been activated only two months before. The computers there had been used to adapt the plague virus carried by the Keeper, who had been awake at that time. The virus had been adapted to become very similar to the one Galen had discovered on that other world, the virus that had driven the population to murder and destroy each other. As far as Galen could tell, the Keeper, who had been alive only sixty days

before, had been deliberately driven insane. He had been manipulated into murdering almost the entire population of the planet.

Galen shuddered again at what he had discovered. He was left with no alternative, but to accept that his own people were responsible for every death on this planet. What they had failed to achieve a thousand years before, they had returned to complete two months ago.

Staring into the darkness of his ship, Galen tried to decide what he should do next. He had no doubt that it was his involvement in the original visit to this place, his report back to the Technomage Council on the events that had occurred here, that had led to the destruction of this world. Galen wondered if his people had forgotten this place in the thousand years that had passed since they had last come here. Had his report reminded them of things they had done, of which they were now ashamed? Had they feared that with the rediscovery of the planet, their crimes here would also be discovered? He didn't know the answers to those questions and could only speculate as to why it had taken the council so long to take action. Why had they taken two years since receiving his report, before they acted? Galen feared that it was the success of the Excalibur in finding a cure for the human plague that had triggered events.

The Technomage council knew of Gideon's promise to return to this place when he had found the cure. Galen had included that in his report. He suspected that the council had been content to do nothing as long as there was no risk of that promise being kept. As soon as they had received the news that the cure had been found, they had acted. They had sent their agents to this world to reactivate their control center, to adapt the virus, and to drive the Keeper mad. By doing so, they had tried to ensure that everyone and everything knowing of their secret was destroyed.

Galen lowered his head into his hands, trying to come to terms with what he had done. By agreeing to continue to act as an agent for the Technomage council, by agreeing to pretend to Sheridan, Gideon and even Alwyn, that he was an outcast, Galen had made himself responsible for everything that had arisen from that act of deception. That included the deaths of billions of sentient beings on this planet. He struggled to comprehend the scale of what had been done here, the scale of the murders for which he was morally responsible.

The Technomage laughed bitterly to himself. Morality had little to do with what had happened in this place, either a thousand years before or sixty days earlier. By any standards of morality that Galen could think of, he was an accessory to mass murder on a scale only previously committed by the Shadows and the Vorlons themselves.

Galen lifted the golden ball that had rested on his knees and spoke softly. "Ship. Contact Alwyn." Perhaps the older Mage could help him decide what to do. Perhaps Alwyn could help him find a way out of the trap he had backed himself into.

Alwyn looked up from the text he was studying, as his ship spoke. "Incoming call. Incoming call. Incoming..."

"I heard you the first time!" Alwyn snapped, telling himself that he really ought to get round to doing a serious overhaul of her programming. [And just when did I start thinking of her as 'Her'? I have entirely too many strong-minded females in my life these days.]

The chirp from his pocket made Alwyn realize that he'd verbalized his thought. He reminded himself

that he ought to be careful of what he said out loud. He really didn't want a part of his anatomy dear, if not near, to his heart to get rather warmer than he might like.

"Who is it?" The elderly Technomage sighed as his ship told him that Galen wanted him. He speculated for a moment on what kind of trouble the younger man might be bringing to lay at his door, before instructing his ship to accept the call.

Galen's hooded image appeared in mid-air, directly in front of the armchair where Alwyn sat. "Galen, my boy. What kind of mess have you got yourself into this time? Or is it that stray cat of a Captain of yours? He does seem to get himself stuck up trees with monotonous regularity." Alwyn half smiled as he remembered when he had last seen Gideon. At least since then, the maverick Captain had retrieved the wife and son he'd nearly managed to lose within minutes of getting married. The older Mage half-smiled as he remembered that wedding. Standing in as the bride's father was all very well, but he hadn't expected to get left holding the baby. Literally!

The sober expression on Galen's face as he shook his head brought Alwyn back to the present. "Matthew is blissfully unaware of my present dilemma, although his naturally suspicious nature leads him to believe that I am concealing something from him. As usual, he is correct." The younger man grimaced as he continued, "As for getting stuck up trees, Matthew now has a witch to look after him. If he needs help getting down, no doubt she can assist him on her broomstick."

Alwyn sighed again, realizing that any truce called between Galen and Demon was at best tentative and temporary. He could foresee trouble ahead in that relationship. He turned his attention to Galen's previous words and raised an eyebrow. "I assume it is this concealment that you wish to discuss?"

Galen nodded and swore Alwyn to secrecy, using the most binding oaths known to his order. Oaths which, if broken, would bring down catastrophe on them all. He then proceeded to pour out his story. The older Mage sat listening with increasing horror and anger as the tale progressed. The actions taken by the Technomages of a thousand years before were despicable, but in keeping with the ways of that time. Alwyn was all too aware of how closely his order had allied itself to the Shadows over the millennia.

When Galen reached the events of just a few weeks before, Alwyn was unable to stay seated in his armchair. He leaped from his seat and paced the room, interrupting Galen's flow of words with expletives and exclamations of outrage. As the younger man finished speaking, Alwyn turned to glare at his image.

"You are concealing this knowledge from Gideon? And you swore me to secrecy to prevent me telling him."

Galen nodded. "If Matthew discovers this, he will pass the information to Sheridan. Our order would be condemned as criminals throughout this part of the galaxy, and we would never be able to return to our home world. We would be hunted down as mass murderers, even those of us who took no part in these events. Is that right? Is that just? I cannot condemn the entire Technomage order to such a fate, but my silence will condone the actions of the council. Alwyn, I am uncertain of what I should do. I am troubled as to where my obligations lie."

Alwyn stared at the younger man, appalled that he should be procrastinating. "Galen, once before you confused your duty to your master with your wider obligations. Do not repeat that error. Denounce the criminals amongst our order for what they are; mass murderers. You should not--cannot--protect these monsters from justice."

Galen's anguish and doubts showed clearly on his face as he asked, "And what of the innocents? What will happen to the weaker members of our order who had nothing to do with this decision? Who cannot protect themselves against the persecution that will be the inevitable consequence of my denouncing the council? Innocent lives will be lost and innocent blood spilled, Alwyn. How can I justify that?"

"How can you justify remaining silent? As you said, by doing so, you condone the actions of those who committed this loathsome crime. You make yourself one with them." Alwyn frowned in thought as he gazed at the troubled image of the younger Mage. "Galen, why did you call me? You knew what I would say. You knew that I would tell you to denounce these fiends. Do you wish me to convince you to do what your conscience already tells you?"

Galen dropped his head, his hood concealing his face as he almost whispered, "My conscience is divided, Alwyn. If I speak out, more innocent lives will be lost. If I remain silent, evil will remain unpunished. I was hoping that you might see another way, an alternative that I could not see."

Alwyn shook his head sadly, desperately sorry for the younger man. "There is no third way, my boy. Yes, if you speak out, lives may be lost. But if you remain silent, then you condemn yourself. You ally yourself with the council that committed these crimes, and in doing so, you make yourself their equal in evil. You become as guilty as they are, as guilty as those who first released that plague, and you betray your friend. Again."

Galen lifted his head, and Alwyn could see the pain in his eyes. "Yet I think I must carry that burden, Alwyn, to protect the innocent who still live. Your words and counsel have not provided the comfort I sought, but you have my thanks nonetheless."

Alwyn watched as Galen lifted his hand to terminate the connection and spoke quickly before their contact was lost. "Choose wisely, Galen. Remember what I have said to you before. The war is coming and you must decide which side you will take. The road you are now traveling will lead you to side against your friends and everything your parents believed in. I once told you that I thought your father would be proud of you. He would not be proud if you choose silence."

Galen whispered, "I know. It seems that I am damned for whatever choice I make. So be it. I choose to defend my weaker colleagues against persecution." His image faded as he cut the call short.

Alwyn sighed as he spoke softly to the empty air. "Then you are indeed damned."

"Jump." Gideon gave the order with an almost audible sigh of relief. He was glad to get away from this planet, and all the problems and issues it raised. He sat in his chair on the bridge, brooding for a while, watching in silence as the vortex opened in front of them, and they shot through into the red maelstrom of hyperspace.

On the positive side, they had succeeded in adapting the viral screen to the genetic structure of the remaining population. Having released the screen into the atmosphere, it had not taken long to treat the few thousands remaining on the planet, removing the plague virus from each one of them. The plague had been eradicated, and the people were free of infection.

The work to identify the victims of their experiments over the centuries had also gone well. It had

become apparent that at some time almost every member race of the Inter Stellar Alliance had lost people to those experiments. Using that information, President Sheridan had convened a tribunal representing the ISA. The tribunal was now on its way to the planet. What happened next was out of Gideon's hands, and he was relieved of all responsibility for the future of the people there.

When the President had told him this, Gideon had felt as if a burden had been lifted off him. He had spent hours talking through his worries with Deborah, and he knew that she was right, that there were some problems he didn't have to solve himself. Nevertheless, knowing that people were on their way, whose job it was going to be to deal with these issues, helped the Captain come to terms with his own doubts and concerns. Just for once he could say, 'not my problem'. Now he just had to learn to believe it.

Gideon told himself--again--to let it go, to accept that he had done everything he could to help, and to move on. Before leaving, he'd had his crew working on repairing the power plants. They'd got enough of them functioning to provide the remaining population with light and heat, and power was available to restart the manufacturing centers. Gideon wasn't sure if the population would ever recover enough to need those facilities, but at least, he had left them significantly better off than he had found them. They were cured, and they no longer needed to burn their supplies to keep warm. The Captain hoped that if he told himself that often enough, it would help him sleep at night.

With an effort, he turned his thoughts away from the problems he was leaving behind, and focused on one he was taking with him. Galen's ship was still in the landing bay, although the Technomage hadn't emerged from it for some time. Gideon was suspicious about the help Galen had provided in the retrieval of information from the damaged planetary databanks. The Technomage wasn't usually so forthcoming with help, except in an emergency, or when he had an agenda of his own. Gideon was sure that Galen had his own motives for helping them, but the Captain had been unable to discern what those motives might be.

[Call me a cynic, but I don't think he's being entirely open with us.] Gideon brooded over what the Technomage was hiding, and wondered how much of the recovered data Galen had withheld. One thing the Captain was sure of, Galen hadn't told them everything. [We all have something to hide...]

Those doubts and worries nagged at Gideon's mind as he watched the roiling red of hyperspace through the front viewscreen. With a sigh, he picked up the datapad that had been resting on his knee and started reading.

Breen. Gooding was still obsessing about Breen. Gideon half smiled as he thought that maybe he should suggest that his Head of Catering write to Santa Claus, and ask for some Breen for Christmas. There were only three weeks left until the holidays anyway. The Captain's smile turned lascivious as he thought about the gift he had bought for his wife. Then the smile faded as he thought about what he would have liked to have gotten her, if he'd had more money. He decided that he'd wait a couple more weeks, then contact Earthforce and raise hell about his and John's back pay.

Gideon settled down to read Gooding's latest diatribe on the subject of Swedish meatballs. At least, it provided a distraction from his other concerns.

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four A

{[Part 1: Reunion](#)} {[Part 2: Christmas Present](#)}