

# The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four A - Part 2: Christmas Present

by The Space Witches



A picture Matthew took of Deborah's--and his--Christmas present.

## Chapter 1

December 2269

Demon limped quietly into her rooms, not wanting to disturb her husband, just in case he was working in his quarters as he'd said he might. She was returning earlier than she'd anticipated, her workout in the gym having been cut short by a turned ankle while using the treadmill. Nothing serious, but enough to discourage her from continuing that evening. As she'd sat in the bullet car heading back to her rooms, she'd smiled as she thought that Matthew would probably be pleased to see her home early, as it meant he might get away without having to change Marcus' diaper. Demon never ceased to be impressed by the new excuses Matthew could find to avoid that chore.

She heard his voice as she quietly entered the room, and realized that he was speaking to someone in

his old quarters. For a moment, she thought he might have a visitor, then as she heard the response, she recognized the voice. General Thompson. Not a visitor after all, but a superior officer, who Matthew must be speaking to on the viewscreen.

Demon disliked Thompson intensely. She'd never met him in person, but had been present on a couple of occasions when he'd spoken to Matthew, and she resented his abrupt, even rude, attitude. He seemed to be a man who delighted in giving unpleasant orders. From the tone of the conversation Demon could overhear, it sounded like the General was throwing his weight around again, and had been doing so for some time.

Demon tried not to eavesdrop, but Matthew's words grabbed her attention and she couldn't help herself.

"Do you want me to beg? Is that it? Well, if that's what it takes, then OK, I'm begging. I need those credits, General." Demon could hear the passion in Matthew's voice and feel his anger from where she stood. She moved quietly to the door connecting her rooms to his old quarters and stood, listening.

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Gideon stood behind his desk, leaning his weight on his arms, looking up at the viewscreen. He was pressing his hands down onto the desk to stop himself picking up the nearest object and flinging it at the opposite wall. He'd waited until Deborah had gone out for a couple of hours, and Marcus was asleep, to make this call. Gideon knew that his wife wouldn't want him to do this, that she'd insist it wasn't necessary, but he'd had enough. He'd been patient and waited as long as he could, but damn it, it was nearly three years now. He wanted his back pay.

When he'd heard that Thompson had been appointed Paymaster General, Gideon had been sickened. He knew that Thompson was corrupt, and he despised the man. The General's actions in arranging for Robert Black and his people to be infected with the Drakh plague, in an attempt to cover up the appalling experiments that Earthforce had carried out on them, were beneath contempt, in Gideon's view. Now he had to deal with this low-life, showing the bastard respect that he didn't deserve, or his chances of getting his back pay wouldn't be worth a damn. Gideon gave silent thanks that at least he'd got all the crew paid up to date before Thompson's appointment. It was just he and John who were still owed. He'd been arguing their case for nearly half an hour, knocking down Thompson's excuses and evasions one by one, drilling through to the real core of why the General was being obstructive.

The Captain watched as a slow, malicious smile spread across the General's face. "Much as I enjoy listening to you beg, Captain, it makes no difference to me. Since President Sheridan has seen fit to put you in command of his ship, your name and that of your XO have been removed from the Earthforce payroll. If you want to get paid, you had better speak to him."

Gideon's temper started to unravel. "Damn it, that's not the deal and you know it! Earthforce is supposed to keep paying Lieutenant Matheson and me the rate for our rank, and while I'm on the subject of rank, where the hell has Matheson's promotion got to? It should have come through weeks ago. I was promised..."

Thompson cut him off in mid-sentence. "I don't care what you were promised, Captain. Let me put this into words of one syllable for you. Earth Force will not pay you." The General enunciated each word separately and clearly. He went on, "It will not pay you now, nor will it pay you the arrears you seem to think you are owed. You may not have been paid for the last three years, but that is not my

concern. I was appointed Paymaster a month ago, and when I found that your name was still on the Earthforce payroll, I had it removed, along with that of your XO."

The General took a deep breath and seemed to reach a decision. "If I had my way, both of your names would be removed from Earthforce records completely. If I had my way, you'd both be dishonorably discharged. Well, I can't have my way in everything, but I can have my way in this. You will not receive a single credit from Earthforce for as long as I am Paymaster General."

Gideon straightened, almost breathless at the hatred being flung at him from the viewscreen. He and Thompson had never really gotten along, but this... What the hell had he done to the General to cause this? Had his contempt for the man been visible in their previous dealings? Gideon spoke quietly, keeping his own rage under tight control.

"General, I have no idea what I or Lieutenant Matheson have done to offend you, but it's apparent that we must have done something. If there's an issue about who pays us now, then fine, I'll sort that out with Sheridan, but there can be no argument about the back pay that both Lieutenant Matheson and I are owed. If it were just me, right now I'd tell you to... never mind. This isn't just about my XO and me. This is about our families. I have a wife and a son, General. Right now, I can't even afford to keep my son in diapers, never mind buy him a present for Christmas, which in case you hadn't noticed, is less than a week away. I need those credits."

Thompson stood up abruptly, leaning forward on his own desk, his face a snarling mask of rage. "Christmas? Yes, I'd noticed that it's less than a week away. I would have liked to spend it with my family, as you will no doubt spend it with yours, but I won't get that chance, because my family is dead, Captain. They died in the spring, before you brought back the cure. If you'd been quicker, if you'd worked harder, if you'd been more efficient, maybe I could have spent the holidays with my family too, but you failed them, Captain, and you failed me. I lost my family because you were too slow, Gideon, and I'll never forgive you for that. I will do everything in my power to make your life a living hell, and I won't be satisfied until I have run you out of Earthforce, and done whatever I can to ruin you." The General punched a control on his desk, and the screen went blank.

Gideon slowly let out the breath that he'd held during the vitriolic tirade and carefully lowered himself into his chair. He felt physically sick, nauseous from the hatred that had just been flung at him. He tried to tell himself that the General was wrong, that he had done everything he could to find the cure and bring it home as fast as he could, but Thompson's words had bitten deep. All his self-doubts rose to the surface. If he'd just been smarter, faster, wiser... Gideon dropped his head into his hands and forced himself not to weep for the millions whose lives had been lost because of his failings.

The wave of love that swept over him was accompanied by a gentle hand stroking his hair, and Gideon spun around in his chair to see his wife standing behind him. He looked up at her as she reached out to caress his face, her expression full of sadness. "How much of that did you hear?" he asked, as he took her hand and kissed it, then held it tightly, feeling as if it were the only thing keeping him from drowning in guilt.

Deborah stepped closer and bent to kiss his forehead as he looked up at her. "More than enough. Please don't believe those awful things he said, Matthew. It's not your fault his family died. You did everything you could. You saved billions of lives, you couldn't save them all."

Gideon sighed deeply and leaned his head against his wife's breasts, feeling her move her free hand to continue stroking his hair. He lifted the hand he still clutched to his mouth and kissed it again before speaking softly. "I know, but I wish I could have saved more." Leaning back, he looked up into her

warm brown eyes and smiled sadly. "It looks like Thompson is going to stop me getting paid for as long as he can. I'll have to go through Sheridan to get this mess resolved and that's going to take time, so I'm afraid that diamonds are off the Christmas list this year."

The Captain was a little taken aback when his wife's face froze into the impassive mask she wore when she was clamping down on her feelings. Something he'd said had hit a nerve, but what? When she spoke, her voice was flat and toneless. "Matthew, I dislike Christmas intensely. Let's just forget the whole thing, shall we?"

Gideon watched as Deborah forced a smile back on her face. "And as for diapers, I had about five million of them delivered when we were on Mars, so I think there's very little chance of you needing to buy any for Marcus in the foreseeable future." She took a deep breath, and this time her smile was real. "Now, if we're really broke, perhaps we'd better do what poor people have always done, and make our own entertainment. Would you have any ideas on how we might entertain each other in a way that we'll both enjoy, but which won't cost us anything?"

Gideon stood and pulled her close into his arms, smiling impishly. "Oh, I have a lot of ideas, and they do say that the best things in life are free."

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Lily sat on the floor of her rooms, surrounded by a pile of gifts, wrapping paper, ribbons, tinsel, sticky tape, glue, scissors... She had to laugh at the mess she had managed to create. [It's a good job the twins are asleep, or it would be total chaos in here!] She looked across at her sister, as Angel put the final touches to a box she had wrapped in foil and ribbons.

"There. Finished. I do hope Luke likes it." Angel grinned over at Lily.

The little redhead smiled back. "Oh, he will, Angel, I know, and it's a good job you finished it, as he and John are due any minute now." As if in response to her words, the door to the quarters opened, and Luke Raven entered the room. Lily scrambled to her feet, scattering paper and ribbons around as she ran to throw herself into his arms. Lifting her mouth to be kissed as his arms slid around her, she murmured, "Sad Eyes," just as Luke lowered his lips to hers and took her mouth in a long, slow, passionate kiss.

Finally releasing her, Luke led Lily to the sofa and sat, pulling her onto his knee. She curled up happily in his arms as he looked around the room and laughed. "You two *have* been busy. This place looks like Santa's Workshop after a hurricane hit." He gestured at the piles of brightly wrapped gifts and the leftover wrappings. Luke smiled at Angel as she sat on the floor, starting to pull all the paper and tinsel together into a somewhat neater pile.

Kissing Lily gently on the forehead, he looked over at her sister and asked, "Angel? You are joining us for the day tomorrow? I don't mind whether we call it Christmas lunch, or in deference to our little pagan," he squeezed Lily and grinned, "we can call it a winter solstice feast, but whatever it's called, we'd very much like you to join us."

Angel smiled up at the couple on the sofa. "I'd love to. I just wish..."

Her words were cut off by John's arrival. Lily struggled out of Luke's lap and flung herself at her other lover. After greeting him with a suitable degree of passion and affection, and some good-natured tussling between the two men as to whose lap she was going to occupy, Lily sat back in John's

embrace. "Angel, you were saying that you wished for something?"

Lily watched as Angel frowned and drew her knees up against her chest. Her dark hair fell forward over her face, for a moment hiding her expression from the others. When she eventually looked up, her face was wistful. "I wish that Demon could learn to enjoy Christmas. She's always hated it and refused to have anything to do with it. Even when we lived together on Earth, she arranged for me to stay with friends and hid in her room all day. She always refused to accept gifts or to see friends, or do *anything*, and she was just the same on Eriadne. I have no idea why she hates it so much."

Lily looked up into John's face, asking, "John? Do you know what Matthew has planned for tomorrow? He does know how she feels, doesn't he?"

John looked troubled as he stroked Lily's hair. "I don't know. Matthew is off duty tomorrow, as are most of the humans on board. I'm sure he and Demon will have talked this through and agreed what to do. Wouldn't they?" His voice sounded a lot less sure than his words.

Lily looked across at Angel and bit her lip. "If they didn't, there could be fireworks..."

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Gideon lay back in bed, his arm around his wife, smiling to himself. Deborah had been incredibly affectionate in the days since his confrontation with General Thompson, seeming determined to show her husband how much she cared for him, and wanting to drive all bad thoughts from his mind. Gideon almost laughed aloud at how successful she had been. He'd hardly thought about Thompson, diapers or Christmas once since that evening. Between running the ship and keeping Deborah satisfied, he'd hardly had time to think.

Gideon looked at the clock by the side of the bed and grinned. It was mid-night. He knew he should wait until morning, but he couldn't. Shaking his head and silently calling himself a big kid, Gideon slid carefully out of the bed, trying hard not to disturb Deborah, who had fallen asleep a few moments before. He walked quietly to the wardrobe and pulled a gift-wrapped parcel out from under a pile of his sweaters. Moving as silently as he could, he slid back into the bed and leaned over to kiss his wife.

He watched as her eyes opened and she smiled up at him, sleepily. "Again?" Deborah murmured softly as she moved to snuggle against him.

Gideon laughed quietly and kissed her again, saying, "You're insatiable. No, not that. It's just after mid-night, so Happy Christmas." He brought the gift out from behind his back and placed it carefully on his wife's belly, as she lay on her back next to him.

Deborah went rigid. Her face froze, and her body became utterly still. Gideon watched with concern as she stared down at the parcel lying on her belly. After a few moments, she whispered, "Take it away." Her face was locked into the impassive mask she wore when she had clamped down on her feelings.

[What the hell...?] Gideon had no idea what had caused Deborah's response. He leaned over and lifted the gift off her, holding it up where they could both see it. It was a flat box, about fifty centimeters long by twenty-five wide and five deep. He had carefully wrapped it in gold tissue paper and tied a gold ribbon around it. For the life of him, he couldn't see what there was about it that should cause such a strong reaction.

Looking back from the parcel to his wife, he asked, "Why? What's the problem? It's a gift, Deborah.

A present for Christmas. I got it..."

Her sudden movement interrupted Gideon. Deborah shuddered violently and pushed him away, knocking the gift out of his hand and throwing back the bed covers, as she tried to get past him and off the bed. Gideon blocked her quickly, grabbing her wrists and throwing her back down on the bed. His temper was fraying. He had spent the few credits he still had on a gift and the ungrateful... He took a deep breath and told himself to wait until he got an explanation before getting mad.

"Let me go." Deborah's voice was cold, totally lacking in emotion, as she stared up at Gideon. "I told you I hated Christmas. Why don't you listen to me? Just leave me alone and let me go." She didn't struggle, but her ice-cold stare roused Gideon's temper further.

"A lot of people say they hate Christmas, but they mean they just don't like all the commercial business around it. How am I supposed to know that you're different? How the hell am I supposed to know anything about you when you won't *talk* to me!" Gideon shifted his hands to Deborah's shoulders and shook her gently.

She twisted away from him, squirming down the bed, and off the end as she said. "I don't want to talk about it. Leave me alone, I'll go..."

Gideon jumped up from the bed, grabbed Deborah's arm and span her back to face him. By now he was really angry. He pulled her close against him and yelled, "Don't walk out on me! You can't run away from everything you don't like, Deborah. You can't run away from Christmas. In case you've forgotten, we have a baby in there." He pointed to his old quarters where Marcus slept. "Today, he doesn't give a damn what day it is. Next year, he'll be noticing that this day is different. The year after that, he's going to know that today is special, and he's not going to understand if his mother tries to hide away and refuses to get involved. So let's get this out in the open now. Talk to me!"

Deborah was staring at him, not moving, as he gripped her upper arms tightly, her face a completely frozen mask. Gideon watched as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Matthew, I can't..." He shook her again, gently.

"I'm not taking 'no' for an answer this time. Tell me about it. Tell me why getting you a gift for Christmas was such a terrible thing to do."

When Deborah's eyes opened again, Gideon could see they were filled with tears, which overflowed and rolled down her otherwise expressionless face. She whispered, "Because no one has done that since I was six years old. I decided then that I never wanted to have anything to do with Christmas again."

Gideon pulled his wife tightly into his arms, then pushed her gently until she had no choice but to sit on their bed. He climbed onto the bed next to her and took her in his arms, kissing the top of her head as she laid it against his shoulder. He whispered, "Tell me about it."

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Deborah Montgomery woke on Christmas Day, and her first thought was that she was hungry. There was nothing new about that; she had been hungry for months. Since her father had disappeared over a year before, her mother had become ever more distant and distracted, forgetting to shop for groceries, forgetting about her daughter's needs. Deborah had learned to eat as much as she could at school, showing an enthusiasm for school dinners unusual in a six year old. She would not only clean her own plate but, given half a chance, would clear anything left by her classmates.

That helped in term time, but school had closed four days before and Deborah had eaten little since. Her stomach made growling noises as she got out of bed, went to the bathroom to wash, then returned to her bedroom to dress. In honor of the day, she chose a black velvet party dress that her mother had bought her just before her father had left. Being over a year old, it was too short but still fitted otherwise. In that year, Deborah had grown upwards but not outwards. She knew that people commented on how thin she was, but they assumed it was natural. Her mother was tall and slender and her father had been the same. Deborah had inherited her blonde hair and hazel brown eyes from her mother, too, but people had used to comment that the shape of her face made her look more like her father.

When she was dressed, Deborah retrieved the gift she had made for her mother, carefully wrapped at school with assistance from her teacher, and took it downstairs. She found her mother asleep on the sofa in the living room, an empty bottle on the floor beside her, as usual. Deborah carefully placed the present on the coffee table that occupied the center of the room and sat next to it, waiting for her mother to wake. She had learned months before that it was better to wait than to attempt to wake the sleeping woman.

The six year old gazed around the living room and sighed. There was little sign in the house that it was Christmas. A few cards on the mantle over the empty fireplace and that was it. Deborah remembered the year before, when her mother had made an effort to put her sadness to one side for the day. Then, there had been presents and food, the fire lit and a tree in the corner. In the year since, her mother had given up the struggle and surrendered to her grief and loss.

Deborah had watched her mother become sadder as every day passed and knew that she was responsible. The day before her father had left, Deborah had broken a vase while playing, and her father had been angry with her. She knew that if she hadn't broken the vase, he wouldn't have left them, he'd still be there and they'd still be happy. It was all her fault.

After a couple of hours waiting, her mother woke up and groaned. Looking bleary-eyed across at Deborah, she asked, "What time is it?"

Deborah had learned to tell the time a few weeks before, so proudly looked at the clock on the mantle and said, "It's nearly eleven o'clock. Happy Christmas, Mummy." She lifted the carefully wrapped gift and offered it to her mother.

"Christmas? Is that today?" Her mother looked stricken. "Oh Deborah, I'm sorry. I lost track. I meant to get you something, but I thought..."

Deborah shook her head, her long golden curls falling around her face. "It doesn't matter," she said, trying to believe her own words, as she watched her mother drag herself to her feet, ignoring the proffered gift. Deborah put the present back on the table and followed her mother into the kitchen.

The woman opened cupboards and pulled out a mug, making herself coffee in silence. When she had drunk half of it, she turned back to her daughter, who was perched on a kitchen chair, watching her. "Have you had breakfast?"

Deborah shook her head. "There's nothing to eat."

Her mother opened the refrigerator and peered inside, then started rooting through the kitchen cupboards, before turning back to the child and half-laughing, "I really have screwed things up this

year, haven't I? Never mind, I can drive into London, there are always shops open there. I'll soon be back with some food."

Deborah waited while her mother washed and changed, then started to leave the house. As the woman walked to the door, the little girl asked, "Can I come with you? Please?"

Her mother paused at the door and turned to her daughter. "Uh, no. Best not. I may have to go to places where children aren't allowed. Stay here, I won't be long." With that, she left the house and Deborah walked through to the living room, watching out of the window as her mother's car pulled out of the drive and disappeared down the road.

Deborah sighed and climbed onto the sofa, picking up the remote control for the TV. She was used to spending long periods alone, and had learned to keep herself occupied. The house she lived in with her mother was large and old, but Deborah had grown used to the odd noises it made; it didn't frighten her to be left alone. Not any more. At least the house was heated, so she was warm.

After a couple of hours watching TV, Deborah got bored and turned it off. She walked back to the window, feeling slightly strange. Her stomach had stopped growling, but now she felt dizzy and light-headed. Deborah collected a book from the coffee table and climbed up onto the window seat, settling herself to read where she could see immediately when her mother returned. She read quietly until she fell asleep.

When she woke, it was dark. For a moment, the child was frightened by the shadows and the silence, but she told herself not to be silly. Slipping down from the window seat, she started to make her way carefully across the darkened room, feeling her way around the furniture, toward where she knew the light switch was. After a few paces, a wave of dizziness swept over her and she stumbled. Deborah felt herself falling, but couldn't seem to stop herself. She put her hands out to stop her fall, and as her left hand hit the floor, she felt a horrible pain in her wrist. At the same moment, her head hit the side of the coffee table and she blacked out.

When Deborah came to, it was still dark, but now her head hurt and her wrist throbbed unbearably. She sat on the floor for a while, crying quietly, but no one came and nothing happened. The child realized that if she wanted help, then she was going to have to go looking for it. She crawled across the room and used the doorframe to pull herself to her feet. Stretching up, she could just reach the light switch with her uninjured right hand.

Flicking the light on, she could see the clock on the mantle. It wasn't as late as she had thought. Only six o'clock, but that was late enough for it to be dark and cold outside on a winter's day. Deborah stumbled into the hallway and collected her black winter coat from the peg where it hung, carefully pulling it on over her now very sore wrist. She could just reach the latch on the door, and she stepped out into the night, pulling the door closed behind her.

It wasn't far from her house into the village, and Deborah knew the route well. She walked it every day on her way to school, but she'd never walked it alone in the dark before, and she still felt very dizzy. There was something wet trickling down the side of her face, which she suddenly realized had been there since she woke up after her fall. She rubbed at it and winced at the pain this caused, wondering why her hand felt sticky afterwards.

Coming to the village green, Deborah found that she had no idea where to go. The village shop was closed, as was her school. Lights showed in the windows of the cottages around the green, but they all had their curtains drawn tightly shut, closing out the cold, dark night, and with it a child in need of



help.

The sound of singing attracted her attention and she made her way, knees trembling beneath her, to the village church where the sound came from. Deborah entered the porch, but when she tried to turn the heavy handle on the large oak door, she found that she didn't have the strength. Something inside her gave up at that moment. The child was cold and hungry, her head and wrist hurt, and she was lonely and afraid. She curled up in the corner of the church porch and cried.

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The Reverend James Fairclough sighed with relief as the last of his parishioners left the churchyard. He'd stood in the porch after Evensong to wish each of them a Merry Christmas, but he was eager to get back to the vicarage and settle in front of the fire for the evening. His wife had bought him a nice bottle of claret, and he was very much looking forward to sampling it.

He turned to lock the church door, when his foot caught in something soft and he heard a strange noise. For a moment, he thought he'd kicked a stray cat that was sheltering in the porch, but when he looked more closely into the dark corner, he was horrified to see a small child curled up there. She had a mass of golden blonde hair that cascaded over her shoulders, and her pinched, white face looked up at him. Rev. Fairclough couldn't see anything else, as her dark clothes blended into the gloom, but what he could see was enough. He recognized Deborah Montgomery from his visits to the village school. He knew that her teachers were becoming anxious about the child, as they had spoken to him about whether they should call in Social Services. Her mother's depression and drinking, following her husband's disappearance, were well known in the village, and people were beginning to suspect that Deborah was suffering from neglect.

Fairclough stooped and put his hand out to touch the little girl's face. "Deborah? What's the matter? You shouldn't be out on your own in the dark. Where's your mother?"

The whispered, "I don't know," was enough to raise the vicar's temper.

He straightened and held out his hand. "Come along, you can come back to the vicarage with me, and we'll find your mother." The vicar watched as the child tried to get to her feet, but after her second attempt had failed, he bent and lifted her into his arms. He was appalled at how little she weighed, as he carried her into the large, warm kitchen where his wife was preparing supper.

Lowering Deborah into a chair, he saw her face properly for the first time. "Heavens, child, what have you done?" Fairclough reached out to touch the congealed blood on Deborah's forehead.

"I fell. I hurt my hand." She held up her left arm and the vicar could see the wrist was bent at a sickening angle, clearly broken. His wife joined him, and knelt by the chair, pushing back Deborah's hair to look more closely at the injury to her head.

When she saw the wrist, the vicar's wife gasped. "James, we need to get her to hospital. That wrist is broken, and she could have a concussion."

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The next few hours were a blur for Deborah. People came and went, asking her questions that she couldn't answer, tending to her head and her wrist, feeding her, then asking more questions, until totally confused and bewildered, she broke down and cried. Somehow, she found herself in a warm bed

in a strange house with Mrs. Fairclough, the vicar's wife, sitting on the bed next to her.

Deborah felt better than she had done in weeks. She was warm, with food inside her, and even the pain in her wrist and head had subsided, but she was still worried. "Where's Mummy?" she asked the kindly looking woman who was tucking her into bed.

Mrs. Fairclough sighed deeply. "We don't know, Deborah. We're trying to find her to tell her what's happened and where you are, but don't you worry, I'm sure that she's fine, wherever she is." Deborah watched as the woman's lips tightened with these words.

Deborah whispered, "I'm sorry to be a nuisance. I've been very bad."

Mrs. Fairclough frowned down at her. "You haven't been a nuisance, Deborah, and why do you say you've been bad? You're one of the best-behaved girls in the school, you never give any trouble. You're not bad, Deborah, far from it."

Deborah's eyes filled with tears, and her words tumbled out in a rush. "But I must be bad. If I hadn't been bad, Daddy wouldn't have gone away, and Father Christmas brings good children presents, and he didn't bring me any, so I must be very bad."

The vicar's wife reached out and wiped the tears from Deborah's cheeks, but the child could see that the woman was herself nearly crying. "Oh sweetheart, none of that is your fault. You're a good child, and I'll prove it to you. Father Christmas *did* leave a present for you, he just left it at the wrong house. I'll get it for you now." She left the room hurriedly, leaving Deborah lying in her warm bed, wondering how Santa Claus could make such a mistake.

A few moments later, Mrs. Fairclough returned with a flat, square parcel, which showed signs of hasty wrapping. Deborah didn't really care. If she had a Christmas present after all, perhaps she hadn't been totally bad. She sat up in bed, being careful not to knock her wrist, and took the gift from the woman, looking up at her and smiling, "Thank you very much, Mrs. Fairclough." She found it difficult to undo the wrapping one-handed, so the vicar's wife helped her, until she held her gift in her hand. It was a book, which made Deborah very happy, as she loved books. She traced her finger along the title, slowly reading out loud, "The Wizard Of Oz."

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Gideon held Deborah tightly as her voice continued, in the same monotone in which she'd told her story, "When they found my mother, they threatened to prosecute her for neglect and to put me into care. They eventually agreed not to, when she volunteered to send me to boarding school. There was plenty of money in our family, so she could easily afford it. So I stayed with the Faircloughs until the start of the next term, and then I went away to school. I hardly ever went home again, and never at Christmas."

They lay in silence for a while, Deborah's head pressed hard against Gideon's chest, his arms tight around her. After a while, he lifted a hand to stroke her hair, and he kissed the top of her head, then whispered, "I'm sorry."

Deborah shook her head and looked up at him, her face still expressionless, "It's not your fault, and there's nothing you can do about it. It happened. It was a long time ago now, and you're right, I have to put it behind me. For Marcus' sake. For you."

Gideon lifted his hand to stroke her cheek, smiling sadly as he said, "I do love you, you know. Have I told you that today? I just wish I could go back and make it all better for you. I want to beat the shit out of your parents, and I want to turn back the clock and let you have a happy childhood, where every Christmas you were surrounded by gifts and people who loved you, but I can't do that. All I can do is make sure that every day from now on, you know how much you're loved. By your sisters, by our son, but most of all by me." He watched as Deborah's face crumpled, and she finally wept. Gideon held her and rocked her gently until the heart-breaking sobs subsided.

They lay in silence again for a long time, then Deborah lifted her head and smiled sadly at him. "So what did you get me? Do you still want to give me my gift? I know I don't really deserve it."

Gideon hugged her again and kissed her forehead. "You deserve much more than I'll ever be able to give you, but for now..." He trailed off as he let her go and leaned over the side of the bed to pick the gift up from the floor where it had fallen, and passed it to her.

He watched as she pulled herself up the bed and propped herself against the pillows, staring at the parcel in her lap, biting her lip. He reached out and stroked her cheek again. "It's OK, it won't bite." Deborah smiled nervously at him and started to untie the ribbon. Gideon watched her hesitant movements and said quietly, "In some ways, it's more of a present for me than for you, anyway."

Deborah turned and frowned in puzzlement, pausing as she carefully peeled back the wrapping. Gideon smiled to himself. [I might have known that she'd open it carefully. She'd never just tear off the paper.]

"What do you mean, a present for you?"

Gideon nodded at the package. "Open it and see."

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Demon's hands were shaking as she tried to open the box. She looked up as Matthew put his hand over hers, and said quietly, "You don't have to do this now. Not if you don't want to."

She looked up at him, smiling sadly as she felt his love and his sorrow. "Yes I do. It won't get any easier, and I have to get over this." Demon gave a wobbly little laugh. "It's an odd phobia to have, isn't it? A fear of Christmas presents. My dislike of heights seems quite normal by comparison."

Matthew smiled sadly and lifted her hand to his lips, kissing it gently, before he let it go and nodded at the gift. "Go on then, get it over with."

Demon carefully opened the box. Lying on top was a long, thin article, wrapped in tissue paper. When she unwrapped it, three distinct segments fell into her hand. Demon looked at them for a moment, puzzled, then worked out how they would fit together and what they would make up. She looked up at her husband to see him lying on his side, his head propped on his hand, grinning wickedly.

"Matthew, this is a riding whip. Who exactly do you think is going to be doing the whipping, and who is going to get whipped?"

Matthew's grin widened. "We can negotiate on that one. Open the rest."

Demon followed his instructions and pushed the remaining tissue paper in the box aside. The first thing she pulled out was a pair of black silk, very high cut panties. She held them up and looked at

them. "Well, I assume that I get to wear these. There are certain parts of *your* anatomy that would never fit into them."

Matthew chuckled and took the panties off her, running his fingers over the silk. "You put them on, but *I* get to take them off. There are a couple more things in there. Take them out."

Demon looked back into the box and first lifted out a leather collar, and then a red silk... something. It was long and flat, with pearl buttons at one end and eyelets for the buttons at the other. She looked at Matthew and saw that his grin had got wider. Looking back at the soft red silk, she finally worked out what it was.

"This is a corset. A red silk corset. So you want me to dress up in these panties, put on this collar and this corset, then brandish the whip, is that it?"

Matthew nodded eagerly as he said, "But *my* Christmas present is going to be the pictures of you that you're going to let me take."

Demon started to laugh and leaned over to kiss her husband. "Matthew, I have a very strong feeling that everything about this present is for your pleasure, but I love it anyway. Thank you."

He pulled her down into his arms and started to kiss her passionately. Demon surrendered herself to his embrace, feeling herself becoming aroused as his hands wandered over her body, touching, stroking, fondling, giving her pleasure like nothing else she had ever experienced. After a few moments, Matthew pulled back and whispered, "Go and put them on. I want to see you in them."

Demon laughed and slid out of his arms, picking up the clothes and whip as she moved. Standing at the bottom of the bed where he could watch her, she slipped on the panties and pulled them up. The sides were cut nearly waist high, and the front covered her lower belly. The back narrowed to a thong that slid neatly between the cheeks of her ass. Smiling mischievously, Demon turned her back to her husband and wiggled her butt, delighting in the moan of pleasure this drew from him. She lifted the collar to her neck and buckled it in place, then picked up the corset and tried to get it on. She got the bottom button done up, but after that the sides wouldn't meet across her ribcage and breasts. She managed to pull it close enough to cover her nipples, but the center gaped open, displaying her navel and most of the globes of her breasts.

Demon looked up at Matthew and spoke apologetically, "I'm sorry, Matthew, it's a bit too small. I must still be bigger, even now I'm not breastfeeding anymore. I guess I'll get smaller again, eventually."

Matthew grinned from where he lay on the bed, his arms behind his neck and his arousal prominently displayed. "Looks damned good from here. Now pick up the whip and play with it for a minute."

Demon bent forward, quickly holding the corset to her so that her breasts wouldn't fall out, and lifted the whip from the bed. She straightened and stood with legs slightly apart, holding the whip at either end, looking down at the handle, checking to see that she'd put it together properly. When she looked up at Matthew, she could see that he was lying on his back, staring at her hungrily, as he stroked his stiffening cock. [Well, it's nice to know that I can still get him that turned on,] she grinned to herself.

He moved quickly, wincing slightly, as his hard cock swayed in front of him. "Wait there a minute." Matthew started rummaging through a drawer, quickly pulling out his holocamera. Demon posed as he asked her, while he took a dozen or more pictures, then she reached out and took the camera away from him.

"Matthew, I can see what I *really* want for Christmas, and I want it now." Dropping to her knees in front of him, Demon took his cock in her hand and started to run her fingers gently along the length of him, cupping his balls with one hand as she held his shaft with the other. Lowering her mouth she licked the head gently, hearing Matthew's moan of pleasure as she took him deep into her mouth.

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They lay sleepily in each other's arms, passion spent, Gideon playing with the data crystal of the pictures he'd just taken. He leaned across and kissed Deborah's cheek gently, then whispered, "I think I'll have the best picture of this lot put up on the viewscreens in all the mess halls."

Deborah's eyes shot open, and she stared at him. "What? What did you say?"

Gideon grinned. "It would be very good for morale. A picture of the Captain's wife in her S&M gear, looking sexy and sultry. The crew would love it!"

"Matthew..."

Gideon forged on, ignoring the warning note in his wife's voice. "And we could put some of the other pictures in the bullet cars, maybe have some on the walls of the shuttles. We could even offer individual signed copies as prizes for the crewmembers with the best evaluation each month. That would be a great morale booster."

Deborah rolled over onto her side and glared at him. "OK, there's obviously something behind this. Spill the beans, buster. What's going on?"

Gideon grinned wickedly and pulled her tightly against his chest. He leaned across and whispered in her ear, "I want that data crystal back. The one with the picture of me and the sock."

Deborah started to laugh and buried her head in his chest. After a few moments, she lifted her face and looked up at him admiringly. "You evil, blackmailing bastard! You had this planned right from the start, didn't you? Well, I can't give you that data crystal."

Gideon looked surprised, he'd been convinced that this ploy would work. "Going to play hard ball are you? Do you think I won't go through with it?"

He watched as Deborah grinned and shook her head. "Oh no, I think you'd do it! But you're not listening again, Matthew. I didn't say I *won't* give you the crystal, I said I *can't* give it to you."

"Why not? Oh please, God, tell me you didn't give it to Ilas to look after. If Max Eilerson ever saw that..." She stopped his words with her fingers on his lips.

"Promise me you won't get mad?" Deborah was smiling at him, and Gideon wondered just what she was going to hit him with.

"No, but I promise if I feel the need to punish you, we'll both enjoy it. Maybe that little whip will get its first outing tonight. You may not be able to sit down for a few days, if I don't like what you're going to tell me." Gideon was somewhat surprised to see his wife's nipples harden, her pupils dilate, and she licked her suddenly dry lips. [She likes the idea of being spanked! Oh Deborah, we are going to have some fun...] He pushed that thought aside to concentrate on her answer.

Deborah looked up at him through her dark lashes, golden-brown eyes wide and innocent. She bit her lip and spoke very softly, "There wasn't any data crystal in the camera. There never was a picture of you with your cock in a sock."

Gideon stared at her blankly for a moment, and then he started to laugh. It was a long time before he was able to stop.

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The call came through to Gideon, as he sat in the new rooms he shared with his wife. It was a few days into January. Marcus was in bed, Mozart was playing quietly in the background, and Gideon sat with his wife in his arms. He was reading engineering reports from a data pad, while Deborah read a book. The Captain sighed as he heard the comm. unit in his old quarters sounding off. That meant it was work. He'd given instructions to the Communications team that official calls were to go through to his old quarters, where he could take them at his old desk. The comm. unit in the living area of Deborah's quarters was reserved for personal calls.

They'd rearranged their quarters so that Deborah's bedroom, with its large double bed, was where they now slept, and they both used the bathroom attached. Her living area now held a sofa, chair and small dining table instead of the old desk. Her kitchen had become their main food preparation area. Gideon's old living quarters, the mirror image of hers and connected through the living areas, now got used as a private office for his use in the evening, which Deborah used during the day when she wanted to work with the ship's computer. They'd had the kitchen in his old quarters ripped out and the space converted into a play area for Marcus. It meant that they could confine his toys to just one part of their quarters. Gideon's old bedroom was now Marcus' room, with his cot still in place until he was old enough to sleep in the bunk. The en suite bathroom was dedicated to Marcus' use.

Gideon nudged his wife to get her to move from where her butt rested between his legs. "Come on, move. I need to get that."

Deborah turned and kissed him quickly, then got up, muttering quietly about there being no peace for the wicked and how Gideon was wicked enough never to get any peace.

The Captain was smiling as he walked through to his desk and activated the viewscreen. A woman he didn't recognize looked out at him, but he could tell from her rank symbols that she was a General. She was small and dark, delicately featured, her jet-black hair cut short, her large dark eyes adding to her attractiveness. She smiled as she saw Gideon, and when she spoke, her voice was low and husky for a woman her size. "We've never met, Captain Gideon, but I've heard a lot about you. I'm General Carole Martin, and I'm calling you in my new role as Paymaster General."

Gideon raised an eyebrow. "What happened to General Thompson? He was only appointed a couple of months back."

Martin nodded, her face somber. "General Thompson is dead. An unfortunate riding accident. It appears he fell from his horse. The fall wouldn't have killed him, but sadly, he landed on the spikes of some piece of farm machinery. He was impaled there for days before he was found. The doctors aren't sure yet whether he died of exposure or exsanguination. Whichever it was, it couldn't have been quick or easy."

Gideon winced. No matter how he felt about the man, he wouldn't have wished such a death on

anyone. "Why are you telling me this, General? What's it got to do with me?"

The General smiled gently. "I've been in this office for four days, and I'm already finding some rather odd decisions made by my predecessor. One that I had to address immediately was his decision to remove you and your First Officer from the Earthforce payroll. That is entirely contrary to the agreement made with President Sheridan at the time of your transfer to his command. With immediate effect, your bank account will be credited each month with the pay due for your rank. The same will apply to Lieutenant Matheson."

Gideon nodded and smiled. "Thank you, General. I'd sent a message to President Sheridan's office protesting General Thompson's decision, but this resolves the issue much more quickly. Thank you again." He paused, then decided to push his luck. The General seemed sympathetic and he had little to lose. "Has any decision been made about the back pay that Lieutenant Matheson and I are owed?"

Martin laughed, a low husky chuckle. "I wondered if you would ask. Yes, Captain, a decision has been made. Your account will be credited with three years back pay at the end of this month. Plus interest. Having listened to this recording," she held up a data crystal, "of your last conversation with General Thompson, I can only apologize. The kindest thing is to assume that he was driven by grief, but his conduct was still inexcusable. You earned that money, Captain, and most of the people on Earth are grateful to you. I am particularly grateful. My son had just turned four when the plague hit him. We didn't think he would live to see his fifth birthday. You brought back the cure just in time to save his life. You have no idea how pleased I am to have this opportunity to thank you personally."

Gideon straightened in his chair, for once at a loss for words. All he could think of was, "I'm glad we made it in time for your son. I wish we could have done the same for General Thompson's family."

Martin nodded, sadly. "I don't think he ever really recovered from losing them. I wouldn't want this to go any further, Captain, but there is some query about the accidental nature of his fall. The position he landed in didn't seem quite right. Still, it's unlikely that he would have killed himself in such an unpleasant way."

Gideon's brain went into overdrive. When they left Theta 49 with the last element of the cure for the Drakh plague, a few of Black's colonists had asked for a ride to the nearby Orion system. Gideon had seen no reason to deny them, they were totally free from infection and fully vaccinated, so he'd dropped them off at their next stop. Was it possible that they had finally caught up with the man responsible for them being infected? Gideon felt a momentary twinge of guilt about having told Black that Thompson was responsible. That indiscretion may have led to Thompson's death. He shook himself and turned his attention back to Martin. There was nothing he could do about it now.

"Thank you for reversing General Thompson's decision, General. I do appreciate it both for Lieutenant Matheson and myself. I'll be sure to pass on the good news." He stood to salute, then decided to push his luck a little further. "General, I know this is outside your remit, but I wonder if you could help expedite Lieutenant Matheson's promotion? It's well overdue." He gave the General his most disarming smile, the one that made his wife melt into a gooey mess in his arms.

Martin laughed. "I bet that smile has gotten you your way with a lot of ladies over the years, Captain. What does your wife think about you using it on other women?"

Gideon grinned back. "She tolerates it in public, then beats me up in private."

This time Martin threw her head back and let rip with a full-throated howl of laughter. "Serves you

right. Very well, Captain, I'll look into it and see what I can do, but no promises. Martin out." The screen went blank and Gideon paused for a moment, shaking his head at his own audacity, then he turned and went to tell Deborah the good news.

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"So, now I can afford to get you a *real* Christmas present, one that's for you, not for me." Gideon grinned down at Demon as she lay in his arms. "But have you got over your phobia enough to let me get you something? Whatever you want, money no object."

Demon considered. "Well, there is something, actually. I saw it advertised and thought it would be great fun, but it is *rather* expensive." Gideon asked her what and how much, then swallowed hard when she told him.

"You're right, it *is* expensive, but it does sound like fun. What the hell, we've got credits to burn. Let's do it."

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### March 2270

Matthew and Demon stood in front of the crate in the landing bay. The words *Edgars' Industries* were stamped in bold letters on the outside. Matthew hefted the crowbar he'd brought with him and broke open the crate. They looked inside and Demon sighed. "There are an awful lot of parts, Matthew. We'll have to haul them all up into the bullet car tube, then assemble it up there. This is going to take a while."

Matthew nodded. "Well, we always knew that this was going to be a big project, but standing here talking about it won't get it done. Here." He handed Demon a rucksack, and they started loading parts. When they were both loaded as heavily as they could easily carry, they set out for the ladders giving access to the bullet car tubes.

Arriving at the foot of the ladder, Demon looked up nervously. It seemed an awfully long way up. Matthew's arms came around her from behind, and he hugged her for a moment, then said, "You go up first. I'll be right behind and beneath you. I won't let you fall." Demon smiled uncertainly, pushed down her fears and started to climb. When they got to the top, she was shaking, but triumphant.

It took several days to move all the contents of the crate up the ladders, during which time Demon gradually overcame her fears. First she managed the trip alone, then with Marcus in a sling on her back. She and Matthew started to work together on assembling the parts. Demon would spend much of each day sitting on the floor of the tube, bullet cars whizzing overhead, with Marcus sitting beside her, playing with the parts that she hadn't yet got to.

After his shifts, Matthew would join her and they would work together, quietly. Every so often, Demon would sit back and watch Matthew as a bullet car zipped past, smiling as she saw him close his eyes, turning his face into the breeze created by the passage of the car.

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When the job was finally complete, they left Marcus with John, Lily and Luke, and headed up for the bullet car tubes together. Matthew had laughed as Demon emerged from the bedroom, reaching for the



black scarf that she'd used to tie back her hair and tugging it gently. "I won't fall for that one again, you know." He'd drawn her into his arms and run his hand over her butt, down to the hem of her black sundress, then up to cup her ass. His other hand had run along the top of her breast where it stretched the fabric tight, then he'd moved both hands to zip up her black leather jacket. This time the zipper had traveled easily over her breasts and Matthew had laughed again. "I told you that they'd shrunk a bit since you stopped breastfeeding."

Demon had kicked his shin, gently, as she was wearing her heavy, laced-up black boots. Matthew had grinned at her and grabbed his own leather jacket from the back of the sofa, then grasped Demon's hand. "Come on." He'd dragged her out of their quarters and along to the access ladder, then pushed her up the ladder ahead of him.

She had turned to look down at him, grinning, "You just want to look up my skirt, don't you?"

Matthew had smiled wickedly up at her. "I want to stay below you, so if anyone comes in and looks up, they won't be able to see that Captain's wife's not wearing panties. There are some parts of you I prefer to keep to myself."

Demon had leaned down to kiss him, then scrambled up the ladder.

They stood side by side looking at Demon's belated Christmas present. It was a replica 1992 Kawasaki Ninja ZX-11 motorbike, made in limited numbers by Edgars' Industries, only delivered in kit form, but with full assembly instructions in English and Japanese. A pollution free Minbari power cell drove the engine, and the gas tank and body cowling were black. Of course.

Matthew turned to Demon and held out his hand. "Shall we?" He helped her onto the pillion seat, then swung onto the front of the bike. Demon pulled herself close to his back, arms tight around his waist, her head resting on his shoulder.

She closed her eyes and inhaled the unique smell of Matthew and his leather jacket, the scent that instantly aroused her passions. She felt him turn his head and look over his shoulder at her, so she opened her eyes and smiled.

"Ready?" he asked, pulling his sunglasses out of an inside pocket and putting them on.

Demon nodded and grinned. "Just don't take off. You know I still don't like heights."

Matthew laughed. "Wrong kind of bike, this one stays on the ground. Hold tight." He started the engine, opened the throttle, and they shot down the bullet tube, accelerating hard to the sound of Demon's screams of delight.

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Gideon screeched to a halt at the far end of the tube, spinning the back end of the bike round, so it faced back up the length of the tube. With over a mile of bullet car tube to play with, he'd been able to get up to over 150kph before he'd had to start braking. He knew he was grinning like an idiot, and when he looked over his shoulder, he saw that Deborah's smile was just as wide.

"Want to drive?" Her enthusiastic nod was enough. Gideon swung off the bike, and Deborah quickly pulled herself forward. He climbed on behind her, pulling himself tight against her ass, feeling the vibrations of the idling engine against his balls, and the firmness of her butt rubbing against his cock.

He knew that by the time they reached the far end of the tube he would be rock hard and raring to go, but then so would Deborah.

Gideon jolted backwards as she let out the throttle, accelerating far harder than he had. He laughed to himself and held onto her tighter, thinking, [She really is a Demon.]

When they reached the far end of the tube, Deborah braked hard and executed the same skid as Gideon had done at the other end. She kicked the stand down and turned off the engine, then wiggled her butt against Gideon's now stiff cock, and looked over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were bright, her lips swollen and her cheeks and neck were flushed. She was breathing hard as she glared at him and whispered, "Fuck me, Matthew. Now. Hard."

Within moments he was deep inside her, thrusting hard from behind, bringing them both to an explosive climax before he fell, panting hard, onto Deborah's back as she lay on the bike, breathing heavily.

When he recovered enough to speak, Gideon sat upright and pulled his wife up so that she leaned back against him. "You realize that the whole ship will have felt that one. I hope to God everyone on board has got their contraceptive shots up to date, or we'll have babies coming at us from every direction in a few months time."

Deborah chuckled huskily. "The humans will deliver just in time for Christmas." She lifted herself off her husband's cock, and swung herself off the bike, then back on again, this time facing him, sitting backwards. "How many different positions do you think we can find to make love on this thing, Matthew?"

Gideon didn't speak as he gently pushed her backwards, until she was laying on her back, legs apart either side of the bike. Then he slowly unzipped her leather jacket and unbuttoned her dress, pushing the clothes aside, until she lay completely exposed and open to him. He smiled lazily as he reached out to play with her erect nipple, and said, "I think we could have a lot of fun finding out. So how do you like your Christmas present?"

Deborah grinned up at him, as he lowered himself on top of her and started to kiss her breasts. "A hell of a lot better than I liked my Christmas past."

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four A

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