

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four K - Part 2: Shadows of the Past

by [The Space Witches](#)



"Remember, you are responsible for what happens next. If you had not come to this planet, none of this would have happened."

Chapter 4 - Forbidden Planet

Sitting in the bullet car on his way to Medbay, Gideon held his head in his hands. This was the first moment he'd had alone in hours. He was exhausted from the battle, but he could see no prospect of sleep in the near future. It was after ship's midnight and just before dawn in the capital city below, and he'd been on his feet for nearly fifteen hours with barely a break. He rubbed his face and ran through the things he had left to do that night. All repairs were under way, although it would be some time before the structural integrity of the ship was brought back to the level necessary for them to jump. He needed to see a full casualty list from Raven, then he could start juggling shifts and duty rosters to cover the essential work that was needed. That at least he could delegate to Jackson. She'd been on the go nearly as long as he had, but she was a lot younger and showed few signs of fatigue. Gideon smiled bitterly, remembering a time when he could work for days and nights without rest and not feel the effects. Well, not any more.

The task that lay ahead was the one he dreaded most. Going to Medbay and seeing the people injured in the fight. He always felt that this was his fault, that somehow he should have been able to prevent the fight ever starting, or manage it better so that fewer people got hurt and killed. Gideon had never come to terms with losing his people. He shook his head free of the guilt and pain as the bullet car slowed to a halt. Standing, he thought about the final job he had to do. To see Angel. He just hoped

that she would still be alive, as he really didn't think he could live with himself if she died.

Gideon slipped into the side room where Deborah sat, quietly holding Angel's hand. Marcus lay curled up, asleep, at the foot of the bed on which Angel lay, while Deborah sat beside her. As he entered, Deborah stood and flung herself into his arms, burying her head in his shoulder and hugging him tightly.

He held her to him and kissed the top of her head, enjoying the warmth of her body pressed against his, and the love and longing she was pouring out at him. Stroking her hair as he held her, Gideon wondered, as he often did, what he'd done to make her love him so much. But for that moment, he allowed himself to bask in her love, to wallow in it and let it heal the emotional wounds inflicted by the last few hours.

Walking through Medbay had been a nightmare. Raven and his team were still working flat out on the casualties. Raven had broken away briefly to give him a report on the latest position. They had thirty-seven dead, nineteen of whom were fighter pilots, the rest mostly engineering crew caught in explosions while trying to carry out repairs. Six more were critical and not expected to live through the night. Another eight were seriously injured but stable; they would recover but almost certainly be invalidated out of Earthforce. Then a total of sixty-four people had been treated and discharged, either to return to their quarters or to go back on duty. Some of these were medical staff, who he'd seen working with bandages over their injuries. Gideon had clamped down on the pain that hearing this toll had caused. This was his fault. It was his job to protect his people, to prevent this from happening. He'd failed them. He still didn't know why the Stryvsteptixi had attacked, but was determined to find out even if it meant going down to the planet, finding the leader and beating it out of him.

He'd quietly thanked Raven for the report, and the work he and his team had done, then moved among the injured, talking to those who were conscious, commending them on a job well done, stopping briefly with those who were unconscious, wishing that there were some way to tell them how sorry he was.

Gideon had looked into the room where John and Lily had been put and smiled at what he saw there. Two beds had been squeezed in, but they needn't have bothered. At some point, Lily had obviously climbed out of her own bed and in with John. He lay on his back, deeply asleep, with his arm around Lily, as she lay with her head on his shoulder and her arm across his chest. They were both smiling in their sleep. Raven had told Gideon that they'd both be fine, and he'd be releasing them back to their quarters in a few hours. One less thing for the Captain to feel guilty about, at least.

Approaching Angel's room had brought all his guilt rushing back to him. Gideon's history with his wife's sister was long and complex, but for the last couple of years, they'd become friends. He just wished that friendship was the only thing he felt for her, but there had always been more than that. Gideon suppressed those feelings whenever they arose, but he was still deeply attracted to Angel, and the thought of losing her... He'd pushed that thought away as he'd approached the door, not wanting Deborah to pick up on the turmoil thinking about Angel produced in him.

After a while, Deborah's outpouring of love faded as she regained control over herself. For want of anywhere else to sit, Gideon pulled her down to the floor with him, sitting with his legs spread wide, with her sitting across him, her butt on the floor between his legs, her head resting on his shoulder, his arms wrapped tightly around her.

He kissed the top of her head again and when she looked up at him, gestured with his chin at the bed

and its occupant. "How is she? Is she going to be OK?"

Deborah nodded. "We think so. She's still very weak, but she's sleeping now. She gave too much of herself to the merge. I shouldn't have let her do it without Ilas, but it was the only way..." she trailed off, biting her lip, before looking up at him again. "I thought I was going to lose you. I thought if we didn't help that you were going to die. Was I wrong?" Her eyes had filled with tears.

Gideon shook his head and kissed her again. "No, you weren't wrong. We were losing the battle and they were going to blow us out of the sky. If you and your sisters hadn't come to our aid when you did, the Excalibur would have been destroyed."

He heard her sigh of relief and knew that she was glad that her sister's sacrifice had been necessary. He went on to ask, "But what exactly was it that you did? I've seen you link before, but what you did today... What was it that you did? And how?"

Deborah sighed. "You know that we were adapted by the Vorlons, to be used as a weapon in their war against the Shadows." He nodded. "What you saw today was a demonstration of what we were designed to do. A small one. If Ilas had been with us, we could have wiped out that entire fleet without it causing any of us any damage at all. No physical damage, anyway."

She went on to explain how their powers fitted together in the merge. How her empathy was used as a sensor and director of the attack, how Lily's foresight enabled them to anticipate the moves of the enemy and her telepathic block shielded them from that form of attack. "The Shadows had started to use Telepaths and the Vorlons knew it, so they gave us that defense." Angel's telekinesis provided them with the force for their attack. "But Ilas' shape-shifting skills enable us to shape the force we use. With her in the merge, we can use Angel's force like a rapier, penetrating ships only where we need to do the most damage. Without Ilas, all we could do was use brute force, swinging hammer blow punches at the enemy. Working like that completely drained Angel. She nearly killed herself to save us all." She buried her head back into Gideon's shoulder as he tried to take in what she'd told him.

"But why did John and Lily collapse? I can see why Angel would have been affected, but why them?"

Deborah lifted her head to smile sadly at him. "Unfortunately, that was John's fault. When we hit the destroyer and broke it apart, we felt the death of every person on her. That's the price we pay for using those powers. Every person we kill, we feel their death as if it were our own."

Gideon looked at her in horror. To feel every death, every pain, every scream of agony... no wonder they'd resisted becoming the tool that the Vorlon wanted. She continued, "It's the worst feeling that you can ever imagine, and John had never felt it before. To some degree, my sisters and I are used to it, although that's the main reason we resisted the Vorlons and refused to use this power. But John couldn't cope with it. He started to lose himself in all the deaths. His mind was trapped in the pain and loss, and he started to die with them."

Deborah must have felt Gideon's dismay, as she looked up at him suddenly and brought her hand to his face, caressing it gently. "It's all right. Lily felt what was happening to him and that part of the merge broke away to save him. In going after him, and bringing him back, she shattered the merge rather more abruptly than we normally do. The backlash knocked her out and made me a bit weak for a while, but they'll both be all right. I can feel Lily through our link and she's fine, just sleeping. She wouldn't be that way if John were seriously hurt, so don't worry."

Gideon tried to accept what his wife said and sat quietly holding her for a while, trying not to think of

all the other things that he ought to be doing. After a while, she looked up at him and asked what had happened after she'd left the Bridge. "We were attacked again, weren't we? Who was it and what happened?"

So he told her how the Shadow hybrid had attacked and been destroyed. He looked down at her and smiled. "And I have you to thank for that. Although sometime soon, we're going to have a discussion about what you do when the Captain gives you an order." Gideon tried to look stern but he knew it was hopeless. Deborah would be able to tell that he wasn't really angry. "If you and your sisters hadn't helped us when you did, we wouldn't have survived the first attack, and I would never have been able to keep my promise. But now I have. I killed the bastards who destroyed the Cerberus."

Gideon paused for a moment while Deborah hugged him tightly, then he continued, "It's not over yet. I still want to know who they are and where they come from, and the answers to those questions may be on the planet below. I'm going to find out even if I have to go down there and beat it out of them."

Before he could continue, there was a sound from the bed above them and they both looked up. Marcus sat up, rubbing his eyes, and immediately started to whimper. Gideon realized that the room they were in wasn't shielded. Somehow, Deborah had managed to block or control the emotions that must be crashing down on her from the injured people in the main Medbay, but Marcus was too young to either control the pain he could feel or to understand it. He started to wail his fear at what he was feeling, and Deborah's face began to show the stress from what the child was sending through their link.

Deborah leaped to her feet and rushed to the bed, with Gideon right behind her. Sweeping the little boy into her arms, she started to pour out love and reassurance, trying to drown out the negative emotions he was picking up, but Gideon could see that she was losing. Marcus was still screaming.

She held the child tightly and looked at her husband in anguish. "I have to get him back to our quarters, but I can't leave Angel. I have to be here, when she wakes. Oh god, what am I going to do?"

Gideon grabbed her and pulled her close, holding their son tightly between them, trying to shield him from the pain. "Take him back. I'll stay with Angel. I can work from the computer terminal here just as well as in my office or on the Bridge. Now go, quickly, before he gets worse." He kissed his wife once more and watched as she fled the room.

A small noise from the bed distracted Gideon from the report he was reading. He'd sat at the computer terminal in Angel's room for nearly three hours, going through damage reports, agreeing new duty rosters prepared by Jackson, preparing his report for President Sheridan's office and Earthforce on what had happened. He'd lost track of the time and was surprised to see that it was nearly 04:00 ship's time. He'd just spoken to the comm station and been told that the Stryvstaptixi leader was still not responding to their calls. It looked like Gideon was going to have to go down to the planet to get his answers after all. It was early morning down there, but the scanners reported a very low level of traffic movement for that time of day compared to previous days. Something was happening down there, but what?

Gideon looked up from the terminal to see Angel struggling to sit up in bed. He went over to the bed and pressed the control that lifted the back, then helped her to lift herself higher up on the pillows. She still looked half asleep and only seemed to gradually become aware of who was helping her. He watched her focus on him and raise her eyebrows in surprise.

"Captain?" The word was slurred and he could see she had difficulty speaking through dry lips. He silently lifted a glass of water to her mouth and held it there while she drank.

Speaking softly, he told her, "Luke said you'd probably have a killer headache when you woke up. He left these for you." Gideon held two tablets out to her and watched as she took them, took another sip of water to wash them down, then fell back against the pillows, closing her eyes.

He pulled his chair over to the side of her bed and waited until Angel spoke again. "Where's Demon? Why are you here?" Her eyes were still shut.

Gideon quietly explained that Deborah had taken Marcus back to their quarters and that he'd promised to stay with her. "I wanted to be sure you were OK. I owe you a lot, we all do, and I wanted to thank you."

Angel opened her eyes and fixed their startlingly blue gaze on him. "Me? Why me in particular? We all did it together."

Gideon smiled and took her hand. "I know that, but you risked more than the others. Deborah told me that you stretched yourself too far to take out that destroyer, but if you hadn't, none of us would have lived. You had more to lose and less at stake than your sisters." He kissed her hand, then looked up at her, holding on to it and squeezing gently.

Angel flushed slightly at his comment, bringing a welcome color to her cheeks. [God, she's beautiful.] Gideon pushed the thought aside quickly.

"Matt, what was at stake for me was my family and my home." She gestured at the room. "This ship has been my home for over two years now. I've lost so many homes... The one I grew up in with my mother, the one I shared with Demon on Earth, our home on Eriadne, the home I had briefly on Babylon 5, even the home on Mars that I shared for such a short time with Nikarran. Events, and forces I couldn't control, took all of them away from me. I'm never going to let anyone take my home away from me again." Angel's voice cracked and tears started to trickle down her face as she spoke.

Gideon stood abruptly and leaned forward to take her into his arms. He hugged her to him as she cried into his shoulder, stroking her hair, holding her until she quieted. He pushed himself back to look at her and smiled. "Angel, wherever you choose to make your home, here or anywhere, I promise I'll do my best not to let anyone take it away from you. OK?"

He leaned forward to kiss Angel's cheek, but somehow she turned her head and he caught her mouth instead. Before he could stop himself, Gideon's lips opened and he felt Angel responding, opening her mouth under his, deepening the kiss. His arms went around her, pulling her to him, crushing her against his chest as the kiss became more passionate. He could feel himself losing control, wanting her, needing more of her. He pulled back abruptly, breaking away, his breath coming in gasps.

"Angel, we can't..." Gideon looked at her flushed face, her silky raven hair spread about her shoulders and he wanted her desperately. Angel lifted her hand to his lips and stopped him before he could continue.

"No, we can't, and we won't. We both love Demon too much to ever do that to her. So you'd better go, before we lose control and do what we both want to do so much."

Gideon took Angel's hand in his and gently raised it to his lips again. "You're right. I do love Deborah more than I ever imagined I could love anyone or anything. But it's a funny thing, Angel. I've found that loving one person as much as I love her, doesn't mean I can't love anyone else."

He turned and left her room while he still had the strength to do so.

Returning to the Bridge, Gideon pushed all thoughts of his tangled relationship with his wife and her sister out of his mind. He had a ship to run and a mission to complete. There was no time for personal problems. Anyway, he had no idea how to even start untangling that particular Gordian knot, and was damned sure he had no intention of swinging a sword at it. Sliding back into his chair, he focused on the needs of his ship and crew, finishing off the final reports by 06:00 ship's time. He'd sent Jackson off to get a few hours sleep, promising her that he'd go off duty when she returned. He had only one job left to do. To find out why this whole thing had blown up in his face so badly.

He'd just about decided that he had no choice but to go back down to Stryvsteptix and find out for himself, when the comm officer turned and spoke. "There's a call coming in from the Stryvsteptixi leader's office on Channel 1. Shall I put it through?"

Gideon stood and nodded, "Yes, to the conference room and call Dunall. I may need her help if the translation is beyond the computer's capabilities."

By the time he entered the conference room, the Stryvsteptixi leader's face had appeared in the view screen. Gideon sat back on the edge of the table and ordered the computer to bring the translation facility on line.

"That won't be necessary, Captain. I can speak and understand your language."

Gideon looked up in surprise. "So, that's another thing you've been keeping from us, Leader Sivraxtin. Do you have many more surprises in store? Or do you plan just to spring them on us, like that fleet you sent to attack us?" He found it impossible to keep the anger out of his voice.

Sivraxtin nodded. "You have cause to be angry with us, and I cannot tell you how relieved we are that you survived the attack on your ship. We need your help, but I know that before you will be willing to give it, there is much you need to know about us and our planet that we have previously been unable to reveal. I will now tell you everything I can."

Gideon looked to one side as the doors to the conference room opened and Dunall slid through the door. Nodding to the Minbari to take a seat, he turned back to the screen, wondering what the Stryvsteptixi leader was going to say that could possibly explain their betrayal. "Try starting with the reason for your unprovoked attack when we were on the point of signing an agreement for you to become members of the ISA."

The Stryvsteptixi sighed deeply. "I need to start with a more fundamental issue. One of the first things we lied to you about was our social structure. We told you that we are born into a dominant or submissive class, and that our families arrange partnerships. That much was accurate. We also told you that when we reach a certain rank in society, we are allowed to choose a second partner. That was untrue. We do not choose a partner, we are allocated a Guardian. That Guardian enters our family and watches everything we do, monitoring our performance and our loyalty to our masters. If we do not show sufficient zeal for our duties we are removed. Permanently."

Gideon frowned. "Who are your masters? And why did you lie about it?"

The Stryvsteptixi leader went on to explain how his people had lived in servitude for a thousand years, dominated by an alien race. "We have tried to break free of their influence many times over the centuries, but we have been unable to do so on our own. Each Guardian has their own Keeper that reports everything they do and see back to our masters. Everything we do is monitored and at the first sign of disloyalty, we are removed. When we heard of your Inter Stellar Alliance, we saw an opportunity to break free at last. We pretended to our Guardians that we were playing with you, wanting to steal your knowledge, while really we wanted your help. We were ready to rise up against our masters and had plans to sabotage the fleet the Guardians used to attack you, intending to tell you of our situation after we had freed ourselves, then plead for your help in keeping ourselves free. But our Guardians must have discovered our plans and acted. Before we could stop them, they had launched their attack. During and since your battle we have been hunting down the Guardians, killing them and their Keepers. We are winning, but the fighting continues. My own Guardian is leading the fight against us."

"Keepers? What are they? And you still haven't told me who your masters are."

"The Keepers are an alien life form attached to the Guardian at..."

Sivraxtin paused and looked down in surprise at the middle of his chest, where a patch of dark red Stryvsteptixi blood started to spread across his clothes. Gideon leaped to his feet and rushed to the viewscreen, yelling the Stryvsteptixi's name. He looked up at Gideon, his face showing sorrow and loss, before he fell forward onto his desk, revealing the person who stood behind him in the now open doorway. Gideon immediately recognized Sivraxtin's partner, the starship engineer who had gone missing during the ship's tour, the individual who was almost certainly responsible for the sabotage of their main gun before the battle. She held what looked like some kind of projectile weapon, which had obviously been used to kill Sivraxtin.

"I assume that you're Sivraxtin's Guardian, not his partner. Why did your people attack my ship?"

The Stryvsteptixi bared her tusks. Gideon wasn't sure if it was meant as a smile or a threat. "That was always our intention, Captain Gideon. We were well aware of the rebels' plans to obtain your help in freeing them from our masters. We used them to draw you here, intending to capture or destroy the pride of the ISA fleet. But you were stronger than we could guess and have surprising allies."

She took a step forward and lifted a panel in Sivraxtin's desk, twisting a dial hidden underneath, before looking up at Gideon again. "That makes you dangerous, and you have too many questions. This planet holds too many answers. Our masters will not allow you to know those answers. You may have destroyed much of our fleet, and even one of our master's ships, but we will not allow you to control this planet or to discover the secrets it holds. Goodbye, Captain. Remember, you are responsible for what happens next. If you had not come to this planet, none of this would have happened." The Stryvsteptixi turned and left the room, leaving Gideon looking at Sivraxtin's dead body sprawled across the desk.

"So what happens next? Do they attack us again?" Gideon stared at the dead body for a few seconds, then turned and left the conference room with Dunall on his heels. Arriving back at his chair, he called battle stations then sat and told the Sensor station to start scanning the planet below for signs of activity, and to route the results through to his screen. "Helm, start moving us away from the planet. Maximum burn. Use as much thrust as she can take."

The Captain waited for another fleet of ships to arrive and start to attack, wondering if they could survive another battle. The Excalibur was still undergoing repairs, and he knew they hadn't yet achieved the level of structural integrity they needed to jump. His energy supplies were depleted, and his crew was exhausted. This time he wouldn't have Deborah and her sisters leaping to the rescue. If the Stryvsteptixi sent another fleet against him, this time he'd lose.

Gideon watched the screen closely, looking for any signs of a fleet rising from the planet, or coming in from any other vector, but there was nothing. No movements from above or below. [What the hell did she mean?]

The Sensor operator turned in her seat to look at Gideon, her face showing concern. "Captain, the readings on the temperature of the planet's molten core are rising. Something is heating the planet from the inside."

Gideon stood and went to look over her shoulder at the readings on her monitors. He stood frowning for a moment then yelled at Helm. "Full power to the engines, get us away as fast as you can. Whatever trajectory gives us the fastest way out, use it! Push her to the limit!"

He listened as the engines strained to follow his orders, still not fully repaired after the battle, but gradually pulling them back, putting space between the Excalibur and the planet below. Knowing that his Helm officer would do everything she could to get them away, Gideon turned his attention back to the monitors.

The planetary core continued to heat, expanding as it did so. The first signs of that expansion appeared on the continent around the far side of the Stryvsteptix. Tectonically unstable anyway, it was the first place the expanding core found to break through to the surface. Great fissures began to appear, slowly spreading from the land into the ocean. The Excalibur's scanners showed where the ocean floor started to break apart and the seas started to heat.

Soon the fissures spread to the other landmasses, and the crew of the Excalibur watched in horror, as the planet beneath them came apart at the seams. Gideon stared at the readouts then looked up at the screen. Angry red lines ran across the planet's surface, where it showed through the heavy yellow clouds. Looking back to the scanners he watched, appalled, as the force of the surface explosions blew the atmosphere away. The Excalibur had managed to get over 200,000 kilometers from the planet, but as far as Gideon was concerned, it still wasn't far enough. He looked over at Helm and told them to keep going, to keep putting as much distance as they could between the Excalibur and the dying world.

As Gideon watched in dismay, all he could hear were the last words Sivraxtin's partner had spoken. *"Remember, you are responsible for what happens next. If you had not come to this planet, none of this would have happened."*

A planet of over two billion people was dying in front of him, and they blamed him.

John woke slowly, finally opening his eyes to look into the deepest emerald eyes he'd ever seen. *[[Lily.]]* He breathed her name aloud and sent it into her mind at the same moment, putting all his love and longing into that single word.

The dark green eyes sparkled with love and humor as she sent back, *[[Sweet face.]]* Then

simultaneously their thoughts crossed as each thought to the other, *[[Are you all right?]]*

John chuckled softly and pulled Lily down into his arms, kissing her gently then holding her tightly, as he took in his surroundings and the memory of what had brought them to this room in Medbay returned.

He closed his eyes again, mentally thanking whoever had thought to put him and Lily in the same bed, trying to fight off the deep depression that flooded through him at the memory of all the deaths he'd experienced. John had never been through anything like that before, never having volunteered for a death-watch when he'd been in Psi Corps. He'd heard stories of those who had been in another's mind when they died, of how a part of the soul of the watcher went with the dying person. He finally understood what that meant. Before he'd understood it with his mind, but not with his heart and soul. Now the death of every person on the enemy's ship was so deeply engraved within him that he wondered whether the scar would ever truly heal.

Lily lifted her hand to his face and stroked his cheek. *[[John, darling, please don't. You shouldn't have been there for that. You should never have felt that. I tried to make you go, but you wouldn't leave. Why did you stay linked to the merge like that?]]*

John smiled down at the tiny redhead he held so tightly in his arms. *[[I was worried about you. I wanted to be sure that you were safe.]]*

Lily sat up abruptly and her eyes flashed with temper. *[[John, I may be small, but I'm not a child! You and Luke have to accept that. You know how much I hate it when you're over-protective. I was doing something I've done before. My sisters and I can shield ourselves from the worst of the death feelings, but you couldn't. I had to break the merge to come after you and save you, and I hurt my sisters when I did that. Why can't you believe that I can take care of myself?]]*

John was mortified. He knew she was right but had only one excuse. He spoke aloud and thought to her at the same time, "Because I love my Fire-Lily, and I can't bear the thought that she should ever be hurt. I'm sorry."

He watched as Lily's eyes filled with tears and she lowered her head to kiss him gently. He pulled her tight against him and let his hands rove her body, his fingers running through her hair, touching, stroking, caressing every part of her. Their kiss deepened, and John could feel himself becoming aroused when the sound of a throat being cleared broke them apart abruptly.

John looked up to see Gideon leaning against the side of the door, his arms crossed and a smile on his face.

"I thought I'd drop by and see how you were recovering. I can see that I needn't have worried." Gideon grinned, but John could see the shadows under his eyes and feel the deep weariness, sadness and guilt that emanated from his friend. Knowing that there was only one person who could ease Gideon's distress, John gently smiled back as he pulled the sheet up to cover himself and Lily, who now lay next to him, giggling quietly.

"We're fine, thank you. I can be back on the Bridge any..." John trailed off as Gideon shook his head.

"Not a chance. Raven tells me that he's signing you off for another twenty-four hours, minimum. And in case you forgot, he's Chief of Medicine on this ship and he's the only person other than me who can give you an order. So this one comes from both of us. Take Lily back to your quarters and stay there

for the next day. Oh, and if you're feeling generous, you might collect your kids from Trace before he has a total breakdown. Faylinn and Dasha keep demanding more stories and he's just about run out of ideas. I think one more of Naima's diapers will finish him off completely. Have fun." Gideon raised his hand in a mock salute and left the room.

As the door closed behind him, John sighed and kissed Lily's forehead, saying, "I hope Demon can help him. Underneath the banter, he's tearing himself apart with guilt."

Lily looked up into his eyes and smiled. "Demon will give him whatever he needs. Now let me take you back to our rooms and give you what you need. Trace will just have to cope with the children for a while longer."

"...Mrs. Jablonski, your daughter gave her life to save her ship and the lives of her fellow crew members, who will all hold her memory dear, as I do. Please accept my sincere condolences and if there is anything I can do to ease this difficult time, or if you feel it would help to talk to me, please do not hesitate to contact me."

Demon sat on the sofa in her quarters, pretending to read, but actually listening to Matthew, as he sat at his desk in the room next door, dictating letters of condolence to the families of the people who'd died in the recent battle. Each letter had been different, each containing a small mention of something personal, showing that he had known them as individuals, not just as names on a crew roster.

He'd worked through every one of the forty-two letters he had to write, refusing to put off that part of his job, until he'd slept. That was the final toll of the dead on board the Excalibur. Of the six people so badly injured that they had not been expected to survive, five had died during the previous night. One was still hanging on and Raven now seemed more optimistic that Ensign Kayali would live.

Demon was working hard to keep herself from showing how much of Matthew's pain and guilt she was feeling. She knew that he was trying to suppress and hide his feelings from her. He did that a lot and she generally allowed him to believe that he'd succeeded, but this time he was losing the battle with himself. The loss of his people, but even worse the death and destruction on the planet they'd left a few hours earlier, were causing Matthew more grief than she'd ever sensed from him before. He was drowning in it, and dictating the letters had deepened his sense of loss and responsibility.

Losing her own battle, Demon put down the book she hadn't been reading and rose, walking rapidly to the door that connected Matthew's old quarters to hers. He looked up as she entered and the pain in his eyes almost broke her heart.

Gideon looked up, as his wife stood in the doorway and he turned towards her, holding out his arms. She rushed to him and stood between his legs, holding his head to her breast, gently stroking his hair as he leaned against her, his arms holding her as tightly as he knew how. He knew that he'd lost control of his feelings and that Deborah was picking up all his grief and guilt, but he couldn't stop himself. He just wanted to hold her and feel her warmth and softness, an antidote to all the pain and loss. She didn't try to suppress his feelings as she could have done. She just projected warmth, love and sadness in equal parts. Her very presence was a comfort to his weary and troubled soul.

After standing silently for a few moments, Gideon felt her kiss the top of his head and gently push

him back. He looked up into her warm, hazel eyes and felt as if he could drown in the love he could see there. Deborah smiled sadly at him, as she ran her fingers through his hair and spoke softly.

"Enough. You need to rest. It's nearly eleven, you haven't slept for over forty hours, and I doubt if you've eaten for nearly that long." She moved her hand and ran it along his jaw. "And you haven't shaved today, have you?" She stooped and kissed his forehead as he gazed up at her. "I wish we had a proper tub with hot water. I'd throw you in it and climb in with you."

Gideon buried his head between her breasts and groaned. "Don't make me want something I can't have." He felt her kiss the top of his head again and caress his neck.

Deborah whispered, "Go take a shower, and I'll get you something to eat, then we're going to bed."

He looked up at her and smiled sadly. "Just don't expect much when we get there? After the last couple of days I don't think..."

She stopped him with her fingers on his lips, then ran the backs of her fingers along the stubble on his cheek. "I just want to hold you. Will you let me do that?"

Gideon dropped his head until it rested against his wife and felt her arms go around him again, pulling him close. His muffled voice emerged, "Let you? I may never let you stop."

Gideon lay on his side, his head resting on Deborah's shoulder, his arm across her, fondling her nipple, enjoying the feel of her skin next to his. Her arms were wrapped tightly around him, one of her hands gently caressing his head and neck. The only difficulty he could see was that he couldn't spend the rest of his life like this, hiding in the refuge of her bed and her arms. [But I wish I could.] The thought of never having to leave this room and face the responsibilities that he carried, the people who depended on him, the reports, the decisions, the guilt, was very appealing. But Gideon knew that it didn't matter where he was, the guilt would still find him. Deborah may be able to give him respite and shelter from the demands of the world outside that room, but even she couldn't make the guilt go away.

Her arms tightened around him, and she whispered, "Don't."

Gideon tilted his head back to look up at her. "It's not something I have a lot of control over, and you know damned well that you're as bad as I am. You feel guilty about everything!"

Deborah smiled sadly and nodded. "OK, that's true, but I'm not beating myself up over what happened at Stryvstextix. My sisters and I did what we had to do, to defend our home and our families. You did what you had to, to defend your ship and your crew. I know what Sivraxtin's partner, Guardian, whatever, said to you, but it wasn't true. It wasn't your fault that they destroyed the planet. The responsibility lies with the Guardians or their Keepers and masters, whoever they are. Not with you, Matthew, never with you."

Gideon dropped his head back to her shoulder and sighed. "I know that intellectually, but emotionally... It's hard to come to terms with the fact that maybe my actions had something, anything, to do with the death of over two billion sentient, intelligent life forms. Anyway, it's not just that, it's something else she said."

Deborah moved her hand to run along his now smooth face, then lifted his chin until he was looking at her. "Tell me."

He shifted back and up the bed until he lay next to her, propped against the pillows with his arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He'd spent most of the day trying to forget the words, but they kept intruding in his mind. *"You may have destroyed much of our fleet and even one of our masters' ships..."*

Gideon felt Deborah move next to him and turned to see that she now lay on her side, her head propped up on one hand, looking at him expectantly. Her hair fell around her shoulders, and she had lifted one leg to hook over his, drawing herself closer. He looked down her body, past the full rounded breasts that he loved so much, to the flat belly and the nest of blonde curls below, along the length of her thigh, to where her knee rested on his thigh. Gideon lifted one hand from behind his head and dropped it to Deborah's knee, running it back and forth along the soft skin of her leg. With his other hand, he pushed her hair back behind her ear, allowing him to see her beautiful face more clearly. He needed that, to see her clearly, this woman who he adored, who he loved more than anything or anyone, who had given his life meaning and who had helped him so much. Through her and with her, he thought that he might just be able to come to terms with what he'd learned that day.

He watched her waiting patiently, waiting for him to find the words to spill out his pain, for some unfathomable reason wanting to share that pain and help him through it.

Gideon finally spoke quietly. "I thought I'd got them, Deborah. I thought I'd finally killed the bastards who destroyed the Cerberus. I thought I'd caught up with them and made good on the promise I've been carrying around for the last thirteen years. I know that Paedrig, that dead..." Gideon paused, chewing on the word than changing his mind. "Paedrig, the ever so slightly transparent Technomage, gave me that message from Captain Ross and the crew, and it helped ease some of the guilt I've carried around, but I still wanted to kill the bastards who destroyed my ship, and for a while, I thought I had. I was wrong."

Deborah lifted her hand to caress his cheek and waited, silently, for him to continue. Gideon took her hand and kissed it gently, then held it tightly against his chest as he carried on. "She said that we'd destroyed one of their masters' ships. *One* of them. There could be a whole fleet of those bastards out there, and how will I ever find out which one destroyed my ship and killed my friends? I could spend the rest of my life searching and shooting down every one of those ships that I come across, and I'll still never know whether I've delivered on that promise."

Gideon rolled onto his side and buried his head in his wife's shoulder, letting her surround him with her arms and her love. He felt her stroking his back and his head as she projected reassurance and confidence.

"I don't know, Matthew, I really don't know how we're going to do that, but we will do it, because as long as we have each other, we can do anything. You told me that over two years ago when we were leaving Mars, and I believed you. So believe me now, somehow we'll find a way."

For some reason he couldn't quite understand, Gideon did believe her. The guilt and depression started to fade as he lifted his head to look at her again. "You know, I may have a lot of shadows in my past, but somehow none of them seem quite so dark when I have you lighting up my present and my future."

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The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four K

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