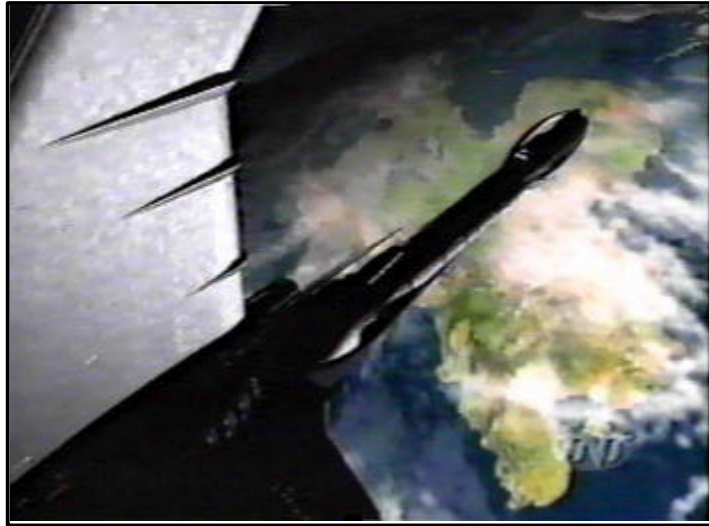


The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four K - Part 2: Shadows of the Past

by [The Space Witches](#)



The Excalibur's crew awaits things to come.

Chapter 3 - Star Wars

Gideon was going over the last of the terms of membership that they'd thrashed out with the Stryvsteptixi, when the comm unit in his office signaled. Turning to look up at the screen, he saw Jackson, his second officer, calling from the Bridge. "Yes?"

"Captain, could you come to the map room for a moment? There's something happening down on the planet that's... odd."

He raised his eyebrows. "Odd? Define odd."

Jackson smiled, her dark eyes glinting with humor. "I'd rather show you than try to define it."

Gideon smiled and shook his head. "On my way. If it's *that* odd, maybe Commander Matheson should join us. He likes odd. He must do, he recommended you for second officer didn't he?"

Jackson was laughing as he signed off and left his office.

Jackson, Gideon and Matheson stood around the map table, looking at the image of the planet below as Jackson talked.

"The Stryvsteptixi told us that this landmass," she pointed to a continent sized island on the far side of the planet from the planetary capital above which they orbited, "is uninhabited and uninhabitable. It's

tectonically unstable, very volcanic and is the main source of the atmospheric sulfur that gives this planet its unique aroma."

Gideon snorted. "Unique is right." He nodded for her to continue.

"For the last hour or so, we've been detecting movements at ground level. It's hard to figure out because the whole region is constantly shifting, erupting, changing, but it's almost as if dozens of new volcanoes are opening up at once. All over the continent, these openings are appearing in the ground. I'd have just put it down to an unusually high period of volcanic activity but..." Jackson trailed off and chewed her lip.

Gideon looked at her curiously. "But what? Something made you call us, what is it?"

Jackson pointed back at the holographic projection in front of them. "Maybe it's my imagination, but to me it looks almost as if there's a pattern to the openings. See? This group here? Then this group? The same pattern, here and here..." she pointed to the separate groupings, and Gideon finally saw what she was indicating.

"You're right! Damn it, I'd never have spotted that. Good work, Jackson." He was staring at the projection but caught Jackson's flush of pleasure at the praise, visible even on her dark skin. "But what the hell does it mean?"

Matheson leaned forward and looked at the image more closely, then reached to manipulate a control, bringing one of the groups into sharper focus. He cocked his head to one side and frowned. "They remind me... no, they can't be."

Gideon turned to look at his XO. "What?"

Matheson frowned and looked at his Captain. "Silos. They look like the groups of silos they used to keep nuclear weapons in on Earth, before the planetary defense grid was moved into orbit."

They both turned back to the map in time to see objects emerging from the group of openings they'd focused on. Gideon groaned, "Oh hell," then turned and ran for his chair, calling for battle stations.

"Viewer to front, I want to see those ships as soon as they come round the curve of the planet. Fighters, ready to launch. Man all guns and ready to fire. Bring the main gun to ready then hold for my command. Start moving us away from the planet, so we can open a jump point."

Gideon watched as his crew scrambled to battle positions, sirens now sounding throughout the ship to warn everyone to go to their assigned positions. He thought briefly of Deborah, but didn't have time to call her. He knew that she'd stay in their quarters with Marcus, as they'd agreed, until he told her to move to the life pods. He shook his head free of distractions and concentrated on the information coming onto his personal screen.

Matheson stood to one side ready to take control of the fighter wings if they were launched. Jackson had moved to the front of the Bridge, taking over the Helm, ready to move the ship into the best defensive position. She'd already started to move them away from the planet, trying to get them far enough away to safely open up a jump point, making sure they didn't get trapped between the incoming ships and the atmosphere. Gideon gave silent thanks for her intelligence and watchfulness. Without the few minutes warning that her vigilance had given them, they'd have been in a far worse position.

Not that their current position wasn't bad enough. His screen was showing over one hundred ships heading for them, varying in size from fighter to cruiser. None of them approached the size of the Excalibur, but their sheer numbers could overwhelm the larger ship, and they were coming so fast that he didn't think they were going to make it to a safe jump position. A White Star may be able to open a jump point even within the atmosphere, but a ship the size of the Excalibur needed to a good distance from any gravity well before it could do so safely.

"Get me the planetary leader on Channel 1. I want to know what the fuck is going on here." He called across to the Communications Officer then turned to Matheson as he waited for the call. "I think we'd better get the fighter wings out there, Commander. I don't think we're going to be able to jump. If this turns out to be a misunderstanding, we can always bring them back in, if it's not..."

Matheson nodded and spoke quietly into his headset, paused, then turned back to Gideon. "Fighters away. Taking up defensive positions around the ship."

Gideon sat back and waited for his call to the Stryvsteptixi leader to go through. They were as ready as they could be, he just hoped they wouldn't have to fight. He watched as the fleet emerged from round the curve of the planet, then turned back to his Communications station. "Well?"

The officer turned and shook his head. "Nothing. No response of any kind, they're just feeding me static."

The Captain turned to Jackson asking, "How long to a safe jump distance?"

She turned and shook her head. "Too long."

Gideon grimaced. "So we fight."

They were losing. Slowly, meter by meter, they were being pushed back toward the atmosphere, surrounded by the smaller ships. They had been firing continuously for an hour, knocking them out of the sky, but as fast as they knocked them down, they were replaced from the planet below. Just when Gideon didn't think things could get worse, a huge destroyer had appeared from behind the second moon. Alone it still wouldn't have been a match for the Excalibur, but with a fleet of smaller ships that still exceeded one hundred, it could do a lot of damage.

Gideon was focused on coordinating the gun batteries with Matheson's maneuverings of the fighters, but he couldn't help noticing the mounting casualty list that appeared on one side of his screen. He'd lost eleven fighters so far, and he knew that the Excalibur was starting to take severe damage. He had hull breaches on five decks, and the destroyer was adding to them. He decided that he had to take the risk, he had to get rid of the destroyer in front of them. It was doing them too much damage.

"Main gun on line, ready to fire." It was a desperate gamble that the fighters would be able to stop the smaller ships from doing too much damage, while the Excalibur lay dead in space after firing the main gun, but it was all he had left. He took a couple of seconds to lift his commlink to his mouth and keyed Deborah's call sign.

"Deborah, get yourself and Marcus to the life pods now. I love you." Gideon didn't wait for her answer, but cut the line, desperate to hear her voice one last time, but knowing that if he did, it would distract

him from what had to be done. He looked up to see Jackson staring at him, her face a picture of dismay.

"The main gun is down. I can't get it on line. I think it's been sabotaged."

Demon gathered Marcus into her arms as soon as the alarms sounded, rocking him gently, projecting calm and love as strongly as she could, outwards and through her link to him. She managed to quiet his fears at the noise, and slowly soothed him until he slept. Keeping all her own fears firmly locked down, she moved to the view screen and called up the situation summary displayed on the main computer's battle screen. Strictly speaking, she shouldn't have had access to that data, but she and Gideon had agreed that if she were to stay with Marcus in their shielded quarters, she needed to be able to see the progress of the battle, to help her know if and when she should leave for the life pods. Demon couldn't place total reliance on her husband calling her, he might be injured in a fight and be unable to call.

For half an hour, she watched the progress of the battle before calling her sisters through her link. *[[Lily? Angel? Where are you?]]*

Lily responded promptly. *[[In the Medbay crèche with the children. We're close to the life pods if we need to get to them. Demon, where are you? Why aren't you here?]]*

Demon quickly explained why she was staying with Marcus in her shielded rooms as long as she could. *[[But I think I need to leave soon. Lily, Angel, they're losing, I mean we're losing. There are too many other ships. Matthew and John are fighting for us, but I don't think they can win. If they don't get help then I think...]]* her thoughts threatened to become incoherent with distress, but she quickly pulled herself back under control. *[[I think the Excalibur will be destroyed, and Matthew and John will die with her.]]*

[[NO!]] Angel's mental voice screamed the word through the link. *[[We won't let that happen, we can't! We must help them!]]*

Demon's fears were now escaping her control, and her mental voice started to crack. *[[But we don't have Ilas! We need our fourth to... to help.]]*

Angel's tone was firm through the link. *[[We can do it with the three of us. I don't need Ilas to help me. She makes it easier, but I can do it without her. How much time do we have?]]*

Demon glanced back at the screen, seeing the gradual retreat towards the planet, knowing what that meant. *[[Not long. If we're going to do this, we have to do it now. Are you sure, Angel? This could damage you, and it's not your men who will...]]* she couldn't bring herself to say the word again.

She felt Angel's mental caress through their link. *[[What life would I have without my sisters? I know that losing your men would kill you both. Demon, bring Marcus to the crèche. We'll find someone to take care of him and the other children, then we'll do what we must. Now move!]]*

Demon smiled as she heard the command in her sister's voice. It wasn't often that Angel got the chance to boss her older sister around, and she was making the most of it. The tall blonde swept Marcus into her arms, still projecting waves of sleep through her link to him, and ran for Medbay.

She arrived to find that Lily and Angel had cornered Trace Miller, and he was now holding Lily's baby daughter in one arm, while Dasha and Faylinn held his free hand, looking anxiously at their mother who was kneeling in front of them.

"Darlings, go with Trace and do as he says. He's going to take care of you for a little while, but your Mummy and Daddies will soon be with you again. Be good and take care of your baby sister." She kissed both children on their foreheads then turned quickly, before they could see the tears in her eyes.

Demon laid Marcus on the bed next to Trace. The little boy was still fast asleep and she bent to kiss him. "Goodbye, darling. If this doesn't work, I hope that one day you'll forgive me." Her guilt at leaving him was almost overwhelming her. She remembered being abandoned by her own parents when not much older than Marcus, and she'd still not forgiven them. How could her son ever understand why she would rather die with Matthew than live without him?

She felt Angel and Lily move to stand either side of her, their arms around her. She straightened and drew strength from the love flowing through their link, then turned to Trace. "Whatever happens, save our children." Demon left Medbay at a run, her sisters close behind, trying not to see and feel the wounded and dying all around her.

They were in the bullet car on their way to the Bridge, when Matthew's call came through on Demon's commlink. She was already struggling with the emotions that were bombarding her from every direction, and the pain and love in his voice as he told her that he loved her nearly ripped apart the final shreds of her control. Demon knew that Matthew was telling her goodbye, and that he never expected to see her again. She wanted to scream at him that she wasn't going to let that happen, that she would never let him die, but she held herself back, not wanting to distract him. Again, her sisters gave her the strength to go on.

The three witches burst through the doors of the Conference room and out the other side, taking up position around the map table. With one last look at each other, they held hands around the table and merged into the entity the Vorlon had created them to be, the entity they'd sworn never to become again.

Gideon became aware that the pressure on his forces seemed to be easing on one side of the ship. He glanced at his screen, puzzled when one of icons indicating an enemy ship turned red. He had no fighters in that area, and his guns on that side were out of action. So who was taking out the enemy?

"Captain." John's word was a whisper. "The map room."

Gideon turned in his seat to see his wife and her two sisters standing around the map table. They held hands and above their heads an... opening was the only word he could think of, had formed, pouring white light that split three ways to touch the foreheads of the three women. He had no idea what the light was, but he knew that it was somehow pouring power into them. That power surged through them, emerging from where Deborah and Angel held hands. Those hands moved across and around the map table, and every time they touched the symbol for an enemy ship, that symbol flared and died.

The Captain swung back to the front viewscreen in time to see one of the ships outside flare in the same way as the symbol on the table had done. Somehow, the sisters had turned the map into the territory. Somehow, they were channeling power from somewhere, and using it to destroy the enemy. Gideon had no idea how they were doing it, but the odds had just swung back in his favor.

"John, can you link with Lily and direct them? They're powerful but inexperienced. They're hitting the wrong targets. I'll take over the fighters, you go help them. If they can do it, get them to take out that destroyer."

He swung back to focus on the main battlefield. He'd talk to Deborah later about exactly what she was supposed to do when she got an order from him. For the moment, Gideon just thanked God that she'd ignored him.

He had engineering crews working flat out on repairing the damage done to the main gun. He knew that they wouldn't have it fixed in time to help with this battle, but maybe he'd been given something just as good. Gideon ordered his fighters to form a close ring around the Excalibur and focused their efforts on keeping the smaller ships at bay. He kept firing all the guns that still functioned at the destroyer, knowing that they weren't powerful enough to take it out, but hoping that he could buy the time for John to get the sisters to destroy it.

Matheson approached the trio with apprehension. He understood what Gideon needed him to do, he just wasn't sure it was possible. Lily was throwing out a full mental block again. It seemed to be more or less automatic, when the sisters linked. It meant that he couldn't read anything from her or the others, and his only hope of getting through to them was by direct physical contact.

He approached Lily from behind, standing so his chest touched her shoulders. Still nothing. John slowly lifted his hands and touched the sides of Lily's face. It took all his control not to jerk his hands free again, as a surge of energy shot through him. It felt like a mild electric shock, almost more like static, making his nerve ends tingle.

[[Lily? Lily, can you hear me?]] He sent the thought directly into her mind.

[[We hear.]] The mental voice that answered him wasn't Lily's. Again, John had to force himself not to let go at the shock of that voice. It was female, but it wasn't familiar. It wasn't Lily, or Demon, or Angel, but somehow it was all of them, and more. That voice held all of Demon's icy control, Angel's fiery passion and Lily's rock like stability. For a moment, he wondered what it would have sounded like if their fourth sister had been present in the merge, but he shook the thought from his mind.

[[We need your help, but we need you to focus on a different target. Can you do that?]] He sent a mental picture of the destroyer as hard as he could, fighting his way past the telepathic block that the entity maintained. It was only the skin-to-skin contact, and his total familiarity with the Lily part of the entity, which allowed him to make contact at all.

[[That will be difficult. We are three, but we should be four. When we are four we are one. We are one, but we are only three. But we will try.]]

John felt the focus shift to the image of the destroyer on the map table. He watched as Demon and Angel moved their linked hands to hover over it, then felt a surge of power. Their minds somehow carried his as they launched their attack at the destroyer. He felt himself riding on Demon's empathy as she sensed the occupiers of the vessel, felt their fears and anxieties and used them to focus on the weakest points of the ship. He could feel Lily's foresight picking up the moves of other ships before they'd happened, somehow staying seconds ahead of everything going on around them, and her mental block shielding them from telepathic attack. Finally, he felt a surge of power as Angel swung all of her telekinesis as one massive punch into the vulnerable heart of the destroyer's engine core.

Matheson saw the destruction on three levels. Externally, he saw the image of the ship disappear from the map table, then he saw a flare of light from the view screen and looked up to see the explosion of the real ship in space. The worst part was what he saw and felt with his mind. He saw the ship peeling apart from within and spilling the crew into space. Then he felt them die. Hundreds of deaths, each one somehow felt individually. He felt the last choking gasps of those who died from lack of air, he felt the ripping pain of those dying from explosive decompression, but most horrific was the screaming agony of those who burned alive in the engine room, as the fuel core was breached and exploded. John felt as if he were dying a hundred deaths, every one of them agonizing.

Gideon leaped from his chair as the destroyer exploded in front of him. "Fighter Groups 1 and 2 turn to starboard, take out the ships attacking from space side. Port guns, fire at will. Rear guns, give me your latest repair time estimate." He kept the battle going, resisting the temptation to turn and see what had happened behind him. Within moments, the remaining enemy ships started to withdraw. With their main ship taken out by a force that they couldn't even see, they seemed to have lost their appetite for battle. Gideon allowed his remaining fighters to run them out of the immediate vicinity then called them back, ordering those that remained unharmed to remain on patrol outside, while any with damage or injuries returned to the landing bay.

He could hear Jackson calling for damage reports and couldn't stop himself. He had to see if Deborah was safe. Gideon spun around and looked to the map room, appalled at what he saw. John was lying on the floor, curled around Lily, both unconscious. [They must be unconscious. Oh God, please let them be unconscious.] Deborah was on her stomach, trying to drag herself across the floor to where Angel lay, whimpering with the effort every movement cost her.

Angel was lying crumpled against the wall, her face white, her head slumped on her chest, and as far as Gideon could see, that chest wasn't moving at all.

He screamed for medics and ran from his chair back into the map room. Dropping to his knees at Deborah's side, he swept her into his arms and hugged her. She looked up at him and whispered, "Angel, help Angel. You must... she's dying. Please help her."

Gideon kissed Deborah's cheek then dragged her over to her sister, laying her gently at Angel's side. Then he pulled Angel down, until her back was to the floor, and he started mouth to mouth. He kept on trying to breathe for Angel, until he felt hands pulling him away.

"It's OK, Captain, we'll take over now." He looked up to see Raven standing above him and rolled out of the way of the medical team, crawling back to Deborah's side. Lifting her into his arms again, he leaned back against the wall, holding her tightly as one medical team went to work on Angel, while the other gently pried John and Lily apart and started working on them.

He sat there with Deborah in his arms for the next half hour, giving orders from the floor of the map room as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Not one of his crew queried it or suggested that he move. Jackson did everything that Matheson would normally have done in the aftermath of a battle, and somehow she managed to stay on top of her own job as well. Gideon decided that she was going to get a field promotion for her work that day.

Finally, Raven came over to him and told him that they were ready to move Angel, John and Lily to Medbay and that Deborah should go there as well. Gideon could see the worry etched in Raven's face.

He'd concentrated all his attentions on Angel, leaving Lily and John to his team, too involved on a personal level to be able to treat them professionally.

"How are they, Luke? Will they live?" Gideon had to know the answer to that question. If he had sent John Matheson to his death by asking him to help the sisters, he'd never forgive himself.

Luke forced a smile. "John and Lily should be fine. Deep shock, some neural pathways showing signs of mild trauma, but nothing that a few days rest shouldn't fix. But Angel..." he paused and shook his head, obviously aware of Deborah, lying quietly in Gideon's arms, but quite conscious of everything going on around her. "Angel is very weak. Whatever the three of them did seems to have taken more from her than from the others. But there's hope. We need to get her down to Medbay, where we can treat her properly, and Demon should come too."

Gideon nodded and kissed his wife's cheek again. "Come on, we can't just lie around here all day enjoying ourselves." She looked up at him, and the fear showing in her eyes nearly broke his composure. "It'll be fine, you'll see. Just go down to Medbay with Luke and he'll take care of everything. I'll join you as soon as I can." He kissed her again and helped her to stand. She wobbled at first, so he held her upright until she got her balance, then supported her as she moved to stand beside the stretcher on which Angel lay.

Gideon turned to Luke as the rest of the medical team left the Bridge carrying the three stretchers, with Deborah walking alongside. "How much hope is there really? Or was that just bullshit for Deborah's sake?"

Raven shook his head. "There's some hope, but not much." He pulled himself together and took a deep breath. "We have a lot of casualties to treat, so I need to get back. I'll have an interim report ready for you in half an hour."

Gideon nodded and was turning back to the front of the Bridge, when the warning sirens went off. They were under attack again.

"Oh, give me a break will you?" Gideon pleaded with an unlistening God, then ran to his chair and screen, to see who wanted to kill him this time. This was starting to feel personal. The icon displayed on his screen made him narrow his eyes and surge forward to the front of the Bridge. "View screen angle on attacker. I want to see this sonofabitch."

He watched as the all too familiar shape of the ship he now thought of as the Shadow hybrid swept in on an attack vector. Ordering the ship turned so that his front guns, the only ones he had left fully functional, were facing the attacker, he ordered them to fire at will. Then he sent the fighters he still had around to the rear of the ship, to act as defense there, where his guns were down.

Gideon looked down at Jackson as she sat in the Helm seat in front of him. "Tell me that they fixed the main gun. Please, tell me they did."

She glanced up and smiled in deep satisfaction. "Main gun ready any time you want it, Captain. We got it back on line five minutes ago."

"Lieutenant, you'll get a medal for today if I have to mint it myself. I'd hug you, but my wife gets jealous and she's bigger than you are."

Jackson laughed out loud. "Then restrain yourself. The last thing I need is Demon out for my blood."

Gideon grinned and gripped her shoulder in appreciation. They both watched the alien ship sweeping in closer. Gideon whispered as it approached, "Let it get close, we only get one shot at this, and it can turn on a dime." He held his breath as the enemy opened fire and his ship rocked, taking more damage. But he held off as his forward guns opened up in response, letting the attacker slide past them and behind. This was the dangerous bit. He had no guns back there and had to hope that his fighters could keep the damage to a minimum. He gave quiet orders to the fighter squadron and watched as they threw themselves into battle. Gideon closed his eyes on the pain, as he watched fighter after fighter blown up, but they succeeded in keeping the enemy at a distance, as it swept round for a further attack.

Just as it had before, it dived underneath them, firing along the landing bay cowling, rocking the ship so badly that Gideon was nearly thrown from his feet. He clung to the back of Jackson's chair and focused on the tactical display on her readouts. He knew he should do this from his own chair, but he couldn't step back from the screen. He had to see this from as close as he could get.

As the Shadow hybrid surged out from under their belly, Gideon ordered engines to full, thrusting his ship forward after the attacker. He knew he couldn't match their speed but by following the same vector as them, he reduced the relative difference in speed and direction to a minimum. Now if the enemy would just stay on course...

"Fire main gun!"

The lights dimmed and all the readouts around the Bridge faded, as the main gun drew energy from every source on the ship except gravity and life support. They were dead in space for the minute it took for the ship to recover. Gideon watched the view in front as the three spears of light from the tips of the Excalibur's fins converged into one line of destructive energy. That line shot straight out in front of the ship and speared the enemy vessel. The skin of the Shadow hybrid glowed with the power surging through it, turning from black to white in a second. The spiky, symmetrical outline hung in space, impaled by the bolt, then shriveled in on itself, the spines collapsing as the ship was destroyed.

Gideon stood frozen in front of the screen, only vaguely aware of the cheers of his Bridge crew as their enemy was killed in front of them. For thirteen years, he'd hauled his promise around with him like a turtle carrying its shell, and now he'd done what he'd always vowed to do. He'd destroyed the bastards who had killed his ship and the three hundred and forty seven people on board, with virtually every friend he'd had among them. He'd killed the monsters that had left him to die slowly in space.

Gideon felt numb. There was no sense of triumph, no feeling of victory or vindication, just a hollow in his stomach where for thirteen years he'd carried around a lump of guilt, pain and loss.

The Captain took a deep breath and quietly gave orders for the necessary repair work to be started. Turning to the comm station, he asked the officer there to try to get him a channel through to the planet again. Last of all, he looked down at Jackson, as she stared up at him, her concern evident on her face. He forced a smile.

"It's OK, carry on tidying up and route all reports and queries down to Medbay. I'm going to see just how high a price we paid for this. When... if you make contact with the Stryvstextixi leader, route him through to Medbay, too." Gideon turned and left the Bridge.

{[Chapter 1](#)} {[Chapter 2](#)} {Chapter 3} {[Chapter 4](#)}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four K

{[Part 1: The Mage, the Thief, the Linguist and Their Lover](#)} {[Part 2: Shadows of the Past](#)}