

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

by [The Space Witches](#)



Ranger Trulann has become a regular visitor on the Excalibur.

## Chapter 1 - Close Encounters

December 2271

Gideon sat in the main conference room studying the report that the Ranger had brought to him. Matheson sat opposite and perused the copy he'd been given, while the Minbari Ranger waited patiently for them to finish. Gideon pursed his lips and nodded as he reached the end at almost the same moment as Matheson. He looked up at the Ranger.

"Looks like these people would make ideal candidates for the ISA. Humanoid, civilized, a reasonably high level of technology, but not so high that they won't benefit from membership, and as far as we can tell, their warlike period is well in their past. What's the catch?" There was always a catch. Gideon had been traveling too long and too far not to know that the universe wasn't a friendly place. Something bad *always* happened.

The Minbari, Trulann, smiled gently. He had become a regular visitor to the Excalibur, first bringing leads in their search for a cure to the Drakh plague, more recently contact details for potential new races. He'd learned to relax a little around the senior crew of the starship, allowing some humor to creep into their conversations. OK, so it was Minbari humor, which could be a little esoteric, but Gideon had learned when to laugh.

"Small inconveniences, rather than catches. Firstly, this race does not match the human standard of aesthetics."

Gideon narrowed his eyes. "You mean they're ugly? Well, I've dealt with ugly before. If you'd seen my son, when he was born..." He shook his head and smiled, causing Trulann to break into a rare laugh.

"Is that all?"

Trulann shook his head. "They have rather a distinctive odor. Not exactly offensive, but it does become rather pungent after a while. I believe they find Minbari pheromones rather attractive, but we have no idea as yet how they'll react to Humans."

Gideon sighed. "So they're pug ugly, and they stink. Just what we need for new members of the ISA. Oh well, the Drazi and the Pak'ma'ra aren't the prettiest things in creation by our standards either, but we learned to live with them. I guess we can learn to love the... how do you pronounce that again?"

"The Stryvsteptixi." Trulann looked at Gideon's pained face and spoke again slowly, carefully enunciating every syllable. "Stryv-step-tix-i. Try not to expectorate when you say it. That could cause offense." Trulann kept his face straight, and Gideon decided not to ask the Minbari to sit in on a game of poker any time soon. He'd be too damned good at it.

He practiced the name several times, eventually getting it right. It was about the only word of the language he'd have to learn. The Rangers had done a thorough research job, and the language files were being loaded onto the main computer as they spoke. Before they arrived at the planet, they would have full translation facilities available. It wouldn't be the same as having a live translator, but it was nearly as good. Gideon sighed gently to himself. He'd never expected the day to come when he actually missed Max Eilerson. Of course it was only Max's skills he missed. The attitude he was more than happy to do without.

"OK, Commander, can you get us underway? Helm should have the coordinates by now." He looked over at Trulann, who nodded. "Then we can start working out what we want to offer them, and what we want in return."

As Matheson stood and left the conference room, Gideon turned back to Trulann. "When will the White Star be back to collect you? Can you at least join Deborah and me for dinner? Marcus has grown like a weed since we last saw you, and we had a supply of fresh flarn delivered last week..."

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Gideon leaned back in his chair, feeling pleasantly full. Trulann sat across the dining table that he and Deborah had installed in her living area, replacing the desk that was the standard for crew quarters. The table was small but would comfortably seat four, even six or seven at a squeeze, which gave them the facility to have small dinner parties in their quarters when they wanted. Seats at that table were highly prized among the crew, as Deborah had the reputation of being a first class cook, and being invited to the Captain's private quarters was an honor that few received. Gideon was aware that some Captains socialized more with their crew than he did, but he wasn't very gregarious by nature and he guarded his privacy and that of his family, but he enjoyed the company of a few select people, those he could relax with. These normally included only his senior team, but visitors like Trulann had become friends over the years, and he enjoyed the Minbari's dry sense of humor.

Deborah had prepared them a wonderful dinner, seeking Gideon's help with the flarn, as she hadn't cooked that before. Very few of Gideon's crew knew that he could cook when he chose to, particularly dishes involving alien foodstuffs, which he couldn't get anyone else to cook properly for him.

So between them, he and Deborah had made a dinner that satisfied the varying tastes of all concerned. Trulann said he'd enjoyed the flarn, while Marcus had eaten his portion with a somewhat distressing degree of gusto. The Captain's not yet three year old son wasn't exactly a picky eater, and his mother

was still working on the issue of table manners. Gideon suspected that their Minbari guest had found Marcus' habit of trying to pick everything up with his fingers less than endearing. The Minbari had strict protocols around meals and Marcus had probably busted every one of them, but Trulann was far too well mannered to comment, and he'd managed not to wince too visibly at the noises coming from the small child sitting opposite him. Nevertheless, Gideon could see the relief in Trulann's eyes when Deborah took Marcus through to the bathroom to clean him up after dinner, leaving the two men to talk over synthetic coffee.

With no warning, the room rocked violently, nearly tipping Gideon out of his chair. The movement was accompanied by a resounding 'thud' that Gideon recognized instantly. Sirens started wailing loudly. His ship was under attack.

He lurched to his feet, hanging onto the table as the ship shifted under him again. "What the fuck?" Grabbing his jacket from the sofa, Gideon started to stagger toward the door of the cabin, as Deborah emerged from the bathroom, holding Marcus tightly in her arms. Her face was a mask, but Gideon knew she was hiding her anxiety, trying to prevent their son feeling it. The child was already screaming and didn't need his mother's fear leaking through their link. Running out of the door, Gideon yelled at her, "You know the drill. Get to the life pods." Every part of him hated leaving his wife and son to fend for themselves, but he had no choice. His duty was on the Bridge.

As Gideon ran toward it, he quietly thanked whatever deity might be in the vicinity that John Matheson was still on duty. He'd considered asking John to swap shifts so that he, Luke, and Lily could join them for dinner, but had eventually decided that it would be too cramped around the small table.

Entering the Bridge, Gideon was nearly thrown off his feet by the violence of the assault. A quick glance at the map table showed that there was only a single vessel attacking them, but it must be one hell of a ship to be rocking the Excalibur with such ferocity. The Captain staggered through to the main Bridge and into the melee.

John had launched their fighters and was firing all gun batteries at the attacker. Gideon checked the readouts and could see that the fighter wing was maneuvering into position beyond the attacking vessel, making sure they allowed the Excalibur a clear field of fire. He reached his chair just as Matheson noticed his arrival and vacated it. Gideon slid into it, wordlessly taking in the situation summary appearing on his personal screen.

He glanced up at his XO and said quickly, "Take over coordination of the fighter wings, I'll take the guns." They'd practiced this on many occasions, each able to follow the other's moves closely, coordinating their defenses as effectively as possible.

For the first time, Gideon looked up at the main view screen. Instead of the red of hyperspace, the screen showed normal space. John had obviously ordered the jump back as soon as the fight started, which was the standard approach to an attack in hyperspace. No battle fought there had ever ended well for anyone involved.

The area they'd jumped into had few stars, but a large nebula lit up the blackness of space. Gideon looked back down at his monitor, picking up the icon showing the attacking ship, and giving instructions to the rear guns to fire as it came in from behind. [Damn, that thing is fast!] The icon indicated that the attacker was unknown. The main computer didn't recognize the configuration or profile, and had not therefore assigned a planetary source identifier. [Great! Someone new who hates us.] Gideon glanced up at the main screen as the vessel shot out from under them. He froze in place at

the sight that met his eyes.

"Forward guns fire! Bring the main gun on line! I want that bastard dead! I want him out of my sky! Kill him! Kill him now!" Even to himself, Gideon sounded almost hysterical. He became aware that he was standing at the front of the Bridge, clutching the back of the Helmsman's chair, as he screamed out instructions. He had no memory of leaving his seat, but the image on the screen had been enough to yank him out of his chair like a puppet on strings.

Gideon watched as the streams of energy emitted by his forward array swept across the enemy vessel, knocking it off course, but doing no other apparent damage. The fighter wing was now converging on the vessel, and he watched as it turned in an impossibly tight arc and sped away. A jump point formed in front of it.

"Helm, follow it! Open a jump point and stay on its tail! I want that thing destroyed!"

He felt a presence at his elbow and turned his head slightly to see Matheson out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't take his gaze from the image on the view screen. The enemy ship was surging through the jump point, and the Excalibur wasn't following. Why the hell not?

Gideon started to open his mouth, ready to scream his order again, when an indicator on the Helm controls caught his eye. It was flashing red and told him that the jump engines were off line. At some time during the firefight, they'd been hit and damaged. The Excalibur was too far away from the enemy vessel to take advantage of its jump point. If Gideon tried to take his own ship through that point now, the vortex could well collapse when they were only half way through, destroying them all, and he couldn't get power to the main gun quickly enough to fire into the jump point and collapse the field.

Gideon took a deep breath and straightened as the hole in space closed behind the enemy, and they disappeared from view. "Scanners, keep sweeping the area and stay on alert for further attacks. I want damage reports routed to the Conference room. Five minutes." He turned to his XO who stood beside him, looking at him with some concern. "Any casualties among the fighters?" Matheson shook his head. Gideon closed his eyes briefly and exhaled his relief. "Call them back in, and get the repairs on the jump engines started. I'll see you in the Conference room in five."

He turned toward the back of the Bridge to see Trulann standing there, watching silently. The Captain swept past the Ranger, entered the Conference room and called up the reports from the Damage Control Teams as they started to come in. It could have been worse. Numerous small fires at various locations around the ship. A small breach in deck 27, but the area had been evacuated without loss of life, and the hole sealed. A lot of bumps and bruises among the crew but nothing serious. The worst injuries came from deck 27, where the rapid decompression had caused a few burst blood vessels and a couple of cases of damaged eardrums. Overall, it looked like they'd got away fairly lightly. Gideon sighed with relief as he noticed a single line meant only for him at the end of a report from Raven in Medbay. Deborah and Marcus were safe. He continued to stare at the reports scrolling in front of him, well aware of the Minbari standing behind him.

"You recognized that ship." Trulann's words were a statement, not a question.

Gideon turned and looked at the Ranger, nodding. Matheson slipped through the doorway in time to hear his response. "Yes. That's the ship that destroyed the Cerberus and every man and woman on her. Except me. I have a score to settle with that ship, and one day I'm going to hunt it down and destroy it."

An hour later, things were back under control. Repairs were underway on all damaged systems that were not self-repairing. The fighter wing was back on board, checked and refueled. All injured crew had been treated and discharged from Medbay, with the exception of one case of decompression that Raven wanted to monitor for a while. The latest estimate they had for repair of the jump engines was four hours. More than enough time for their attacker to disappear into the depths of hyperspace, well beyond their ability to detect.

Trulann had waited patiently in the Conference room with Gideon and Matheson, while they took reports and gave orders. Not that he had a lot of choice. The *White Star* that had delivered him was not due to meet up with them again for several hours. They had contacted the Ranger ship and advised them of their situation and the revised co-ordinates for the rendezvous.

When the last report had been gone through and the last orders were given, Gideon leaned back in his chair and looked at the Ranger.

"I wasn't the only person here who recognized that ship was I? Who are they?"

Trulann shook his head. "I have never seen a ship exactly like that, but I've seen things that looked... similar."

Gideon smiled bitterly. "So who has 'similar' ships to that one?"

Trulann stood and drew a data crystal from his robes. He dropped it into the data port and keyed a control. A series of images flashed across the view screen, until he finally froze the picture. The screen showed a vessel of the same general design as their attacker. Spiky, symmetrical, black as space itself. But he was right. It wasn't identical, just similar.

Gideon took a deep breath and exhaled. "Who are they? And how come you have a picture handy?"

Trulann rejoined them at the table and clasped his hands together on the tabletop. Composing himself first, he launched into his story. The Minbari explained that the crystal was a Ranger training manual, which included a section on all vessels the Minbari classed as potentially hostile. "This image is one of many. The race that built these vessels used many different designs for different circumstances, just as we do. I have never seen a ship exactly like the one that just attacked us, but the similarities are obvious." He looked seriously across at where Gideon sat, trying his best to be patient. "That," the Ranger pointed at the screen, "is a Shadow slave transport. The ship we saw today could have a similar function. I think it likely that it was built by the Shadows or one of their Slave races."

Gideon leaned forward in his chair. "So the ship that destroyed the *Cerberus* was a Shadow ship? Is that what you're saying? I admit that there are similarities in the configuration, but it doesn't look as... alien, somehow as the standard Shadow vessels we know about."

Trulann nodded. "I agree. I think the ship we saw today is a hybrid. You know that Earth created a fleet of hybrid Shadow Tech vessels?" Gideon nodded. It was not one of the finer moments in Earthforce history. The fleet of ships that the then Earth Alliance President had ordered built had all been destroyed in the fight with Sheridan. Gideon shook his head free of the memories of that time, glad that he'd been lucky enough to be assigned to the *Agamemnon* after the destruction of the *Cerberus*, and had therefore been on Sheridan's side in the ensuing confrontation. He listened as

Trulann continued.

"I am sure that Earth was not the only planet to cooperate with the Shadows and use their technology." Gideon knew that he was right. The Technomages had a long history of cooperation with the Shadows but that fact was still a closely guarded secret. The Ranger went on, "I think the vessel that attacked us today was the result of another such collaboration. What I do not know is the identity of that other race, or why they would have attacked us here today. I was not aware that the Cerberus had been attacked, the Minbari were told that it was a jump engine accident."

Gideon leaned forward across the table, shaking his head. "It was no accident. We were attacked by a ship identical to the one we saw today. I'm going to find out who the hell they are, and I'm going to blow them out of space. That's a promise I made three hundred and forty seven times over, nearly thirteen years ago. I still haven't kept that promise, but I will. One day, I will."

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Gideon took a deep breath as Trulann left the Conference room, taking his data crystal with him. He turned to his XO who had sat silently taking in the discussion between the other two men. "John, you may as well go off duty now. I can clear up everything that needs doing here, and your shift ended a while back. I'll stay here until the jump engines are fixed, and we're on our way again."

Matheson shook his head and gave a small smile. "Not quite yet. There's something you should do first. Go and see that Demon and Marcus are OK, and I'll go off duty when you get back."

Gideon stood and smiled at his XO. "Deal. I'll be back in half an hour."

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Gideon found his wife and son in the bedroom of their quarters. Deborah was holding Marcus in her arms, rocking him gently. The child was asleep, and for a moment, Gideon wondered why she hadn't put him to bed. Then he realized that she was drawing comfort from the small, warm body she held in her arms. Her face was blank, as it always was when she was controlling herself rigidly, but tears escaped her and trickled down her face.

He bent over them silently, kissing her forehead as she looked up at him. "Let me put him to bed," he whispered and took Marcus from her gently, then carried him through the connecting door to his old quarters, where they now used Gideon's old bedroom for their son. When he returned, he found Deborah curled up on their bed, crying quietly. Gideon pulled his wife into his arms and kissed her again, then just sat holding her and stroking her hair while she wept. After a few moments, he said, "Maybe having you and Marcus on board wasn't such a good idea after all."

Deborah pushed him away and stared at him in shock. "Never say that! Look, I'm not upset because of the attack, OK? It was frightening, but I can handle that. What I couldn't handle were the emotions of everyone around me. Once I'd left these shielded rooms, I was drowning in them. Everyone on board was throwing out anger, fear, anxiety, in some cases panic, and it was overwhelming. Then Marcus was directing all his fear straight through our link. I think he was picking up on the emotions too, which made him even more frightened. When we got down to the life pods in Medbay..."

She paused and dropped her head back to his shoulder again, allowing him to take her back into his arms. "It was completely different to all the drills we've done. The people there were scared and hurting. When they started bringing in the casualties, all I could feel was their pain and I couldn't block it."

Marcus was screaming at me, through our link and out loud and I couldn't calm him. Matthew, I felt so helpless, and for me that's the worst feeling in the world."

Gideon held her tightly and cursed himself for not thinking about this before. It didn't matter how many drills they'd done, only in a real attack would his crew be throwing out the raw emotions that would get to her. While John had helped Deborah a lot, and she could block one person at a time quite successfully, she was still unable to block en masse as well as he did. John had told Gideon that it was probably because she was an empath not a telepath, and therefore had much less conscious control over her power. And as Marcus was growing, they were becoming more convinced that he'd inherited some of his mother's empathic abilities. So his son, still under three years old, would have been bombarded by all the negative emotions flying around during the attack and would have fed all his fear and panic straight through his mental link to his mother. Gideon was amazed that she'd maintained any control at all in the face of that assault.

Deborah pushed herself back upright again and smiled at him, weakly. "But it's better now. Once the attack was over, things started to calm, and I got Marcus to sleep. So I'm OK now. Don't worry about me. If you have things to do, go do them. But Matthew, if this ever happens again, I think that Marcus and I had better stay here, where it's shielded, for as long as possible."

Gideon reached out and caressed her cheek. "OK, now we know what happens when it's for real, we can change our plans. And yes, I have things to do, but I wanted to make sure that the two of you were all right. I'm sorry you had such a rough time of it. I'd love to stay with you, but I have to go back to the Bridge now. I'll be back in a few hours but don't wait up." He kissed her one last time and rose to his feet. As he went to leave the bedroom, she called after him.

"Matthew? Who attacked us?"

He stopped in the doorway, doing his best to suppress the emotions that her question raised, but knowing that he'd probably failed. "We'll talk about it tomorrow. I'll tell you then." He left swiftly, before she could question him again.

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Gideon slid into bed as carefully as he could, not wishing to disturb Deborah as she slept. The jump engines had been repaired. They had jumped back to hyperspace and were now en route to Stryvsteptix. The White Star had collected Trulann just before they'd jumped, and given them the latest information on the potential new ISA members, as well as a personal note from President Sheridan wishing them luck in the mission and emphasizing how suitable the race seemed for membership. [Thank you, Mr. President. No pressure there, no pressure at all.] Everything that could be done had been done, so he'd handed over to his second officer, Jackson, and left the Bridge.

He felt like he could sleep for a week, but as soon as his head hit the pillow he came wide awake, his brain racing with the events of the last few hours. Gideon laid back, hands behind his head and tried to put his thoughts in order. As he did so, Deborah shifted in her sleep and rolled over, reaching out for him. She laid her head on his shoulder and pulled herself close, so he put his arm around her and held her to his side. He wasn't sure if she was asleep or awake, but it didn't matter really, just having the warmth and softness of her body lying alongside his was comforting.

As Gideon thought about their attacker, wondering where the ship had come from and why it had attacked them, he felt Deborah stir. She kissed his shoulder and whispered, "Tell me." So she was awake.

Gideon kissed the top of her head where it lay on his shoulder and whispered back, "Tell you what?"

Deborah lifted her head and smiled up at him. As usual, the door to their bedroom was slightly ajar, and the single light left on in the living area was sufficient for him to make out her features. "Tell me what's making your head buzz and your heart thump." She bent her head back to kiss his chest. "You'll never get to sleep if you don't calm down."

So Gideon told her what they suspected about the attacking vessel, that the same ship had destroyed the Cerberus. She knew all about that event in his life, having helped him get over the nightmares he used to have about hanging in space, slowly suffocating.

"They're still out there, Deborah. Still attacking and destroying whoever crosses their path." He snorted an ironical laugh. "Unless it's personal, of course. Maybe it's just me they're after, but even I'm not *that* paranoid. No, I think they destroy any ship that senses them. I don't think they want anyone to know they exist. But today, they bit off more than they could chew." He smiled in satisfaction at the thought.

Gideon rolled onto his side, turning his wife onto her back as he did so, and looked down at her. Her pale gold hair was spread across the pillow like a cloak, her large hazel eyes gazed up at him, full of love and concern, and her moist, full lips just begged for his kiss. They'd been married for over two years, and he still felt the same passion for her as on the day of their wedding. He couldn't conceive of life without her and wondered how he'd survived the forty odd years of his life before he'd met her. But that life had existed and there were experiences from it that would never leave him.

"I promised myself and all the friends I lost on the Cerberus that one day I'd find that ship and destroy it. I've waited thirteen years to fulfill that promise, and I still haven't kept it. Today, I had a chance, but I failed. I won't fail again. The next time we see that ship, I'm going to blow it out of space. I don't know how, but that's what I'm going to do."

Deborah lifted her hand to push Gideon's hair back from his face, then touched her fingers to his lips. "Whatever I can do to help you, I will. I don't know how either, but I will."

He lowered his head to kiss her deeply, then started to make slow and passionate love to her.

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## The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four K

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