

The Witches of Eriadne:

Interlude Four N - Part 1: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardroom

by *The Space Witches*



The Lion

Chapter 2

July 2272

Gideon leaned back on the conference room table and a lazy smile played around his lips. He still wasn't convinced Fillion was on the straight and narrow, although everything he'd told them had checked out so far. But Fillion's request gave Gideon the opportunity to test the Captain of the Lion a little further. It also gave Gideon an idea. A very sneaky idea. An idea with the added advantage that it would probably frighten the shit out of Fillion.

The thought of doing that was very appealing to Gideon. He didn't know exactly what Fillion and Angel had got up to the previous night, but he had his suspicions, and he didn't like them one little bit. The Captain had promised his wife he wouldn't ask No'Kar to be indiscrete about whatever she had seen or heard while tailing Angel and Fillion, but it was damned tempting. He had no doubt that No'Kar would tell him if he asked. The trouble was, if she told him what he expected to hear, what good would it do? It would just make Gideon angrier than ever.

[Angry, Matt? Or jealous? Be honest, at least with yourself, if with no one else.]

Gideon told his conscience to shut up, but he decided not to quiz No'Kar. Not because his conscience told him it was wrong, of course. He and his conscience had come to an accommodation over that sort of thing long ago. No, it was because if Deborah found out, she wouldn't be happy at all, and that was a prospect Gideon found he didn't want to live through.

So if he couldn't find out exactly what had gone on between Angel and Fillion, he might as well enjoy himself with a little malicious pleasure at the other Captain's expense. Gideon's smile turned evil as he walked out of the conference room and called Christina Jackson over to the map table.

As she joined him, he keyed the controls which brought a holographic projection of the Aris system into being above the table. Pointing at the symbol indicating the Aris Jumpgate, Gideon asked, "Is that big enough to take us?"



Jackson looked surprised, which was only natural. The Excalibur had her own jump engines and rarely used Jumpgates. She quickly keyed an enquiry into her datapad, and waited a second before nodding. "Barely. But why would we want to use it?"

Gideon smiled. "I'll tell you in a minute. If we go through the Jumpgate, can you mask our emissions? So that anyone scanning the system later would think that a small merchant ship, maybe something the size of the Lion, had come through, and gone onto the space station above the planet." He pointed at the projection of Aris, where it hung in mid-air, slowly circling the white dwarf sun at the center of the system.

Aris was an unusual planet, in that it had both an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, and rings. A small moon must have fragmented at some time in the distant past, possibly after a collision with one of the numerous asteroids that littered the outer system. The resulting debris had formed a thin ring around Aris. It wasn't a gaudy ring like Saturn had back in the Sol system. It was slender and dusty, but with a large number of rocks that measured kilometers across. One of these had been hollowed out, and turned into a space station, which had then been moved into a geo-synchronous orbit above Aris. Gideon smiled to himself at the terminology. Strictly speaking, the word 'geo' should only be used in relation to Earth, but calling it an 'Ariseo-synchronous' orbit was cumbersome.

Christina frowned, then nodded slowly. "I think we can do that. But why? If we're worried about the Raiders scanning our emissions, we could just jump straight in, closer to the planet."

Gideon shook his head. "Not in this system. Those damned rings make it too risky. We'd blast a hole in that dust big enough for anyone to see."

Jackson looked confused, then asked, "Permission to speak freely, Captain?" Gideon nodded and she went on, "But wouldn't that be a good thing? If the Raiders know we're here, they won't attack, will they?"

Gideon nodded. "That's right, they won't. They'll drop in, see we're around, and scoot out of this system as fast as they can, knowing we can't follow and leave Aris unprotected. Then they'll hit some other unsuspecting colony. I want to end this here, if I can. I want to blow that ship out of my sky."

He went on to explain his plan. "Captain Fillion has just asked for a lift to Aris. I agreed that we'd keep him on board until we get there, although I'm still not convinced that he's on our side. He could still be working with the Raiders. Anyway, we'll come through the Jumpgate, making ourselves look like a merchant ship, then go straight to the space station. We'll let the Lion off, and they'll head down to the planet, while we go play hide and seek in the debris ring. Anyone scanning the system will see a merchant ship's trail going from the Jumpgate to the station, then down to Aris. They'll never know we're there, and we can jump them when they come in on their raid."

Gideon was pleased with the plan. It gave him the edge he'd been looking for, and a way to surprise the Raiders. It gave him something else, too. Sweet revenge.

Jackson nodded, but still looked puzzled as she asked, "But Captain, how do we get from the station into hiding in the rings, without leaving an emission trail?"

Gideon grinned wolfishly. "That's the fun part."

Angel winced at the noise of her door buzzer. Usually it gave a soft chirp, but this morning it sounded as if all of hell's bells were ringing in her ears. She groaned and hoped whoever it was would go away. She felt like death warmed up and she was in no mood for a visitor.

She didn't know what was wrong with her. She'd felt fine in the early hours of the morning when she and Mal had woken up and made love again. And she'd been feeling great when they'd jumped into the vibe shower, where they'd enjoyed each other again. The memory brought a smile to Angel's face. Mal Fillion was very athletic and very inventive and she'd enjoyed being with him very much indeed. However, soon after their shower they'd had to say goodbye, as Mal wanted to be back in his quarters before his ship was ordered off the Excalibur.

Angel sighed and hoped that she'd see the good Captain Fillion again one day. [Maybe he'll ride pillion with me again,] thought Angel, with a naughty grin. The sound of the door buzzer chiming for a second time brought Angel's attention back from Mal and she muttered under her breath, "Go away."

She really didn't want to see anyone unless it was Luke, because she suspected she'd somehow had a relapse, and was suffering from another dose of the Ionian flu.

[/Angel, are you awake?/] The sound of Demon's soft voice felt like a yell in Angel's mind, causing her to wince in pain. [/Angel?/]

[/Yes, I'm awake!/] Angel's mental voice through their link sounded as if her teeth were well and truly gritted.

[/Can I come in, please?/]

[/Demon, I'm not really feeling well right now, do you think you can come back later?/]

There was silence for a moment, then Demon's soft, deep mental voice came through again, [/Not really, Angel. I want to talk to you about Captain Fillion.]/

That got Angel's attention and piqued her curiosity. What did Demon want to talk to her about? [She can't possibly know about the bike ride. Can she?]

[/Angel, please let me in. I feel rather silly standing out here in the hallway staring at your door./] Angel could hear the irritation in her sister's voice. She pulled a face at the door before reluctantly ordering it to open.

She watched as Demon walked in, looking cool, collected and neat, making Angel all the more aware of her own disheveled state. She couldn't tell if her sister was angry or not. To her relief, Demon smiled. "Good

morning, Angel."

"Morning," grunted Angel.

Demon looked around her sister's quarters, particularly in the direction of the bedroom, causing Angel to shift nervously and wonder again if Demon knew about last night.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" asked Demon, turning to face Angel again.

"No, of course not. Why would you ask that?" asked Angel, too quickly.

She felt like kicking herself when Demon began to smile. "Matthew and I saw you leaving the wardroom with Captain Fillion last night."

[Shit!] Of course, she was stupid for thinking that no one would have noticed her and Mal leaving, most especially Demon and Gideon. Angel moved over to the sofa and fell onto it, swallowing a wave of nausea. "Right. I just showed him around the Excalibur, is all," she mumbled.

"Hmm, must have been a long tour. You look dead tired this morning," stated Demon as she sat in the chair opposite.

It suddenly hit Angel that her sister was teasing her. If Demon was teasing her, it could only mean that she wasn't angry and therefore didn't know about the unauthorized bike ride. [Phew!] Angel smiled, "We were up late last night." She knew there was no point in denying she'd spent the night with Mal.

Demon chuckled, "I imagine something was ~~up~~ last night."

Angel laughed, regretting it instantly as a sharp pain shot through her head. She groaned and sat back on the sofa with her eyes shut.

"Angel, are you OK?" questioned Demon softly.

Angel opened her eyes, "No, I feel terrible. I think I've had a relapse and the Ionian flu is back."



"Or maybe you had too much to drink last night?" questioned Demon.

"Don't be ridiculous, Demon. I only had half a glass of..." Angel's voice trailed off as she suddenly remembered Luke's warning. "Oh crap," she whispered.

"What? What is it, Angel?" asked Demon, leaning forward in her chair and looking at her sister with concern.

Angel explained Luke's warning about not touching any alcohol whilst on the medication. The response from Demon wasn't sympathy, but laughter. "Well, if you're hung over, then you only have yourself to blame."

[Such sympathy!] Angel scowled at her sister and shot back, "Oh, like you've never drunk too much, when you shouldn't have?" The dark haired witch was rewarded with the sheepish look on Demon's face. [Yeah,

gotcha.] thought Angel, pleased with herself.

"I'm going to kill Matthew for telling you about that," muttered Demon.

"Oh, don't blame Matt. He never said a word about the Brevari incident. It was obvious to everyone that you were hung over. Lily and I couldn't link with you for days afterwards because your brain was so pickled," grinned Angel wickedly.

Demon gave Angel a dark look. "I didn't know what I was drinking!" she said belligerently.

"Well, I forgot that I shouldn't have been drinking at all," retorted Angel. She began to smile, remembering why she'd forgotten. "I was distracted by the rather tasty Captain Fillion, OK? Can you blame me?"

Demon laughed and shook her head, "You are completely hopeless!"

Angel grinned at her sister. "Thank you," she paused recalling Demon's earlier words. "Speaking of Mal, you said you wanted to speak to me about him?"

"Ah, yes, I do," answered Demon. Angel waited for her sister to explain. After a moment Demon went on, "Angel, I know you're quite taken with Captain Fillion, and I can't blame you. He is rather attractive and exciting. But just be careful, OK? There's something about him that's not right."

"What do you mean 'not right'?" questioned Angel, suddenly feel annoyed. She didn't know if it was because of the headache, or because her sister was talking about Mal that way. She decided it was both.

"Please don't get upset. I like Captain Fillion. But he's not telling us the whole truth about himself. He's hiding something, Angel, and until we know what that is, I just want you to be careful, OK?" asked Demon softly.

Angel's initial reaction of annoyance evaporated. She could tell her sister was just warning her out of concern, but she couldn't help wondering why it was that her family always seemed to suspect that her lovers were up to no good. She had no idea why. She'd had kind, considerate lovers. There had been Dylan Hunt, but then again, her family didn't know about him. Then there had been... and... and...

*The litany of names that ran through Angel's head led her to a rather unsatisfactory conclusion. [Lucas Buck, Cole Turner... OK, maybe she has a point. Usually, you pick the bad boys, who really *are* up to no good!]*

She ignored her inner voice and stood, giving her sister a warm smile, "I appreciate the warning, Demon. But there's nothing to worry about. After all, Mal and his ship will be leaving today, and I'll probably never see him again. Secondly, even if he were staying, I still don't think there's anything to worry about. He's one of the good guys."

"What makes you so sure about that? You only spent one night with him, Angel," asked Demon, realistically.

Her sister was right, but Angel had a good feeling about Mal. "I just know, but if it makes you happy, I promise if I'm going to see him again, I'll be careful. OK?" Demon nodded, seemingly satisfied. Angel smiled, "Now if you don't mind, my head is going to fall off my shoulders at any second, so I'm going to go lie down for a bit."

"You need anything?" asked Demon gently. "Do you want me to call Luke?"

"No thanks, I just need to sleep this off."

"OK, well feel better and I'll see you later. Join Matthew and me for dinner tonight, if you're feeling up to it." Demon gave Angel a hug before heading to the door.

Angel called out to her sister, "Demon, just one thing. Please don't tell Luke about the wine. You know how he can look at a person and make you feel so guilty that you just want to curl up in a little ball and disappear?"

Demon laughed, "I know. Don't worry, I won't say a word." She waved and walked out as the door opened.

Angel watched the door close and sighed in relief. She walked through to her bedroom and crawled onto the bed, then turned and lay on her back, trying hard not to pay any attention to her pounding headache, but thinking of the night before. Angel knew the only reason Demon suspected Mal was hiding something was because her sister was an empath. Demon's ability could be damned annoying sometimes, especially since Angel knew that she was usually right. Angel didn't want her sister to be right, and she told herself that sometimes even Demon's senses could be wrong. [And that's what I'm going to believe this time!]

Angel sighed and turned over onto her side, telling herself it didn't matter much now. After all, Mal and The Lion were leaving and it was doubtful if she would ever see her cowboy again.

Fillion sat waiting impatiently for the signal that they could depart the Excalibur. If his ship was making the Excalibur's flight-deck look untidy, he'd just as soon be on his way out of there. His memories of his time on board were of intense pleasure mixed with some very uncomfortable moments, but on the whole, he was glad to leave. He was just sorry there hadn't been a chance to say another goodbye to Angel. He smiled as he thought how Angel might have been willing to celebrate his departure. Again. She was one very creative young lady!

Suddenly, Teri looked across and broke the silence, saying with a sly smile, "You slid away quietly last night, Mal. Did you have fun? We waited for you, but it seems you were up late last night."



Fillion could hardly miss her double meaning and grinned back. "Have you been tested for the telepathy gene, Teri? I swear at times you read my mind."

The Engineer laughed and said, "I can read your face, Mal, not your mind. You look like a tom cat that's been out all night, cattin' around. Did you enjoy your little taste of pussy?"

The Captain roared with laughter. "That's for me to know and you to speculate about endlessly until your liver curls up and dies, eaten away by the intolerable frustration of your insatiable curiosity. This tom cat doesn't kiss and tell."

Teri pouted in disappointment then grinned again as she said, "Something makes me think you had

Angel-cake for breakfast." Fillion chuckled but said nothing, so Teri went on, "There sure are some fine looking women on the Excalibur. That blonde piece the Captain's married to is quite something when she quits the ice queen act. I don't normally go for blondes, but I wouldn't kick her out of my bed for eating crackers."

Fillion laughed again, saying, "I doubt if you'll get the chance. I think she prefers boys. She certainly has a way of looking at a man as if he's the most important person in the galaxy..." He ran out of words as his memory took him back to his encounter with Deborah Gideon. Had he really told her so much about himself? He wasn't normally so garrulous, but something about the Captain's wife had made him want to tell her the story of his life. Odd.

Before Teri could continue teasing him about Angel, the viewscreen came alive, and Fillion was surprised to see Gideon's face displayed there. He'd have expected one of the Excalibur's minions to tell them to get going. Perhaps this Captain liked giving his marching orders in person.

"You're cleared for departure, Lion, but don't turn on your engines just yet. We've a little surprise to help you on your way." Gideon's eyes narrowed and his smile made him look just like the wolf before it ate Little Red Riding Hood. "You might like to fasten your seatbelts."

Fillion looked across at Teri, and saw that she was scrabbling for her safety harness. She obviously took Gideon seriously.

The Captain of the Excalibur looked across at Teri, and his smile became a little less malicious. "Ah, Ms. Stewart. You should probably get ready to throw your engines into full reverse. Just a suggestion."

The viewscreen went dead, and Fillion felt the Lion being lifted. "What the hell?" He quickly passed on the seatbelt warning to Atkins and Gagarin, both of whom were seated in the rear cabin, then he turned to look at Teri, and he saw she'd gone pale.

"Gravimetric fields, Mal. Remember? That's how they stopped us getting plastered across their back wall on the way in. And unless I'm much mistaken, they're going to use them again now."

Fillion watched in surprise as Teri lifted her feet and braced them against the control console, waving at him to do the same. He quickly fastened his safety harness and imitated her position, as he asked, "Why? What are they going to do?"



Teri grimaced as they both heard the Excalibur's engines building power around them. The Lion started to quiver and shake, but she didn't move. Straight ahead was the tunnel of the flight deck, and the narrow gap of the exit into the black of space. Teri shook her head as she whispered, "Oh shit! You're right, Mal. He is a fucking lunatic. He's gonna turn us into a--"

The incredible pressure of acceleration cut off Teri's last word. Fillion felt as if a herd of elephants had just sat on his chest, as the walls of the Excalibur's flight deck flew past with increasing speed. The gap between the Lion's engines and those walls could be measured in centimeters, and Fillion couldn't imagine how they were going to emerge in one piece, but then suddenly they did.

Catapulted out into space, Fillion saw Teri's hand twitch on the controls, and the Lion's engines roared. The Captain flew forward in his seat, only the restraints of the safety harness and his braced feet keeping

him in place. For a few seconds, he hung there, knowing that if the harness broke he'd pitch forward with enough force to smash through the bridge's front view-port and out into space.

A few seconds later the appalling pressure relented and Fillion fell back into his seat. The blessed relief of weightlessness buoyed him up, and he sent silent thanks to all fifty-one Centauri gods, including the much maligned Zoog. He turned to Teri, who was floating half a centimeter above her chair, with an insane grin on her face.

"What the fuck did he just do to us, Teri?"

Teri started to laugh hysterically, then quickly controlled herself. "He turned us into a fucking cannonball, Mal. That's what he did."

"For every action, there's an equal and opposite reaction, Lieutenant. Basic Newtonian physics." Gideon grinned up at his Second Officer.

Jackson laughed. "Yes, Sir. I see that. Somehow I doubt if the crew of the Lion think much of old Sir Isaac at the moment."

Gideon laughed out loud, then stood and moved to stand behind the Helm station. He saw the Excalibur was on the exact course he'd plotted. He waited a moment, then gave the order to bring them to rest, and grinned again as he thought about what they'd just done.

Arriving nearby the Aris space station, Gideon had ordered the Helm officer to align them carefully, before expelling the Lion with the maximum force and speed the little ship could withstand. When the Lion had shot out of the Excalibur's flight deck like a cannonball, the Excalibur had reacted just like a cannon. She had recoiled. Although the Excalibur was by far the bigger ship, in space there was no friction to slow her down. There was still inertia to overcome, but once moving, the Excalibur had carried on in a straight line, albeit slowly, until she'd arrived directly behind an asteroid plenty large enough to conceal her. The asteroid Gideon had chosen when the plan had first occurred to him.

The plan had been executed perfectly, and it had only taken a momentary firing of the Excalibur's thrusters to bring her to a halt. That burst had been so small that after a few minutes it would be undetectable to any other ship scanning the area.

"Uh, Captain? One more question?" Jackson looked around at Gideon and smiled quizzically.

Gideon nodded his permission, and the Lieutenant went on, "If you think the Lion may be in league with the Raiders in some way, what's to stop them calling their friends and telling them where we're hiding?"

The Captain grinned. "When we repaired their engines, we somehow managed to accidentally remove their hyperspace and long-range transmitters. We'll give them back before they leave the Aris system, but for now, the only people they can talk to are the crew of the space-station. I doubt if any of them are helping the Raiders, as it's their homes and families on the planet that are getting hit. And we'll monitor all transmissions coming from the station anyway, to make damned sure they're not talking to anyone outside the system."

Gideon strode back to his chair, still grinning, as he thought about what Captain Fillion must be doing at that moment. Probably changing his tight pants.

Mal Fillion checked the controls of his ship, looking for damage caused by their abrupt exit from the Excalibur's landing bay. The Lion was now coasting, engines turned off, toward the Aris space station. [If that bastard has so much as scratched my ship's paint job, I'll...I'll...] The Captain couldn't think of anything sufficiently painful at that moment, so decided to shelve the issue and come back to it later. Maybe he'd consult Teri. She could be creative about that sort of thing. He still had nightmares about the time she'd threatened to cut a station manager's foot off when he'd refused to give her what she'd been demanding.

"Damage report?" Fillion glanced across at Stewart as she ran through her own tests on the bank of controls in front of her.

She turned and grinned. "All clear. No damage to the Lion, although I think I just got ten years scared off my life. What do you want to do now?"

Fillion sighed, not sure if he was pleased by Teri's report or not. It would have been good to have a reason to go after Gideon's blood, but he was glad his ship was intact. "We go on with the original plan, I guess. Call the station and get landing permission for the colony. Then we go down."

Teri nodded and reached out to activate the comm. unit, just as a voice came over the intercom. It was a plaintive plea from Gagarin who said in a shaky voice, "Have you finished rocking the boat now? Is it safe for us to move around?"

Fillion smiled and flicked the switch for the intercom. "Yeah, we'll be on our way to the Aris space station in a few minutes. The Excalibur kicked us out with a little more force than we'd expected, that's all. I guess the Captain *really* didn't like us making his flight deck look untidy. We'll let you know if you need to strap down again."

Teri's frantic waving caught Fillion's eye, and he flicked the switch back down, closing the channel. "What? Is there a problem?" The engineer had pried off the cover to one section of her control panel, and she was now pointing at it, burbling incoherently.

Fillion reached over and patted her arm, saying, "Calm down! Just take a deep breath and speak slowly. What's the issue?"

Teri waved her arm at the space behind the control panel. "Do you know what should be in there, Mal? Do you know what those bastards stole while they were fixing us up?" Fillion shook his head and waved at the engineer, indicating that she should explain. "Our long-range and hyperspace transmitters are gone. We only have short-range radio. Just enough to contact the station, not enough to send a signal any further. That tricky bastard has gagged us, Captain! He doesn't want us telling anyone outside this system that we're here!"

The engineer spluttered to a halt as Fillion raised his hand. He thought for a moment, then started to smile. "I don't think he's worried about us telling anyone *we're* here, Teri. I think he just doesn't want us telling anyone that *he's* here. Once he's done whatever he's here to do, Gideon will probably give us our transmitters back. That's what I'd do in his position."

Fillion was learning real respect for the Captain of the Excalibur. The sneaky bastard thought of everything, from having a Marine watch out for his wayward sister-in-law to preventing the Lion talking

to anyone Gideon didn't approve of. Fillion decided that he never wanted to play poker with Gideon. The Captain of the Excalibur would be sure to have about a dozen aces up his sleeve and anywhere else he could conceal a card. Gideon cheated. Fillion liked that.

The sound of magnetic boots thudding on the metal deck outside the door to the bridge warned Mal that the other members of his crew were making their way to join them. He turned to Teri and whispered hurriedly, "Don't say a word. Just contact the station and get us a landing slot."

Teri nodded, and activated the comm. Fillion leaned forward and switched on the engines, then settled back in his seat to pilot his ship to their destination. Gideon might think he had all the aces in his hand, [or concealed somewhere else about his person!] but Fillion had a few trumps of his own to play.



Gideon sat waiting, impatiently as always. He'd sent the agreed coded message to the leaders of the Aris colony, and they had responded. Now all they could do was wait until the bad guys arrived. In the hours since the Lion had left, [OK, since I kicked her off my flight deck,] the Captain of the Excalibur had reviewed all the data sent to them by the Rangers, trying to find some clue as to what they might be up against.

The only intelligence of significance that the Rangers had been able to gather was the fact that the Raiders' new ship was big. [Big as in destroyer size, Excalibur size, or Babylon 5 size?] Gideon wondered as he reread the data, trying to make the hours pass more quickly.

This was the time he hated most. The calm before the storm, the period when he knew he was going to have to fight, but he didn't know when, and he didn't know what. It was a time when it was easy for everyone to let their fears grow until they became almost overwhelming. It was a time to keep the crew busy; too busy to have much time to think.

*The Captain had ordered his Second Officer to run drills for the Starfury pilots, reducing their fastest time from alert to flight readiness with every drill. They'd shaved nanoseconds off their previous best, but that wasn't really the point. The main goal was to stop them thinking about what lay ahead for them. To stop each pilot wondering if this could quite possibly be the last day of his or her life. Gideon saved the privilege of that particular worry for himself. He may have allowed himself to agonize over which of his crews' faces he might never see again, but he didn't want *them* thinking about it.*

So they ran battle drills and simulations, and remained on full alert, waiting for the enemy to arrive. Gideon only hoped it would be sooner rather than later. [Let it be over quickly, with as few lives lost as possible,] was his fervent prayer.

Lieutenant Jackson turned and gave him the latest statistics on the drills. Gideon nodded and told her to pass his congratulations to team Delta, who had achieved a new record in bringing the rear guns on line. Holding her earpiece close to her head, Jackson then said, "The Lion has arrived at the colony and has made contact with some of the locals. Do you want us to keep a record, Captain?"

Gideon looked up. That would be much more fun than drills. "Oh sure. But we may as well join in the fun. Route visual and sound through to the conference room, will you? And ask G'Tan to join me there. I suspect I may have a little job for him, soon enough."

Moving into the conference room, Gideon sat on the edge of the table as the viewscreen came alive. He folded his arms and watched in silence for a few moments, until the doors swished open and the Narn Marine Sergeant, who also covered the role of Chief of Security for the Excalibur, walked in.

The Captain waved him to a chair, and said, "Take a seat. The show should be starting any time now. You haven't missed a thing."

G'Tan lowered himself into a chair and looked quizzically at the screen, asking, "Have you sent out for popcorn? If it's going to be a long show, I must have a big box of popcorn. Buttered, of course." Gideon snorted his amusement as the Narn went on, "What's showing today? I suppose there's no chance of seeing one of Mr. Eilerson's famous corrupt data crystals, is there? I've heard 'Who's My Little Pak'ma'ra' is a good one."

The Captain grinned over his shoulder at the Narn and shook his head. "Those are for very private viewings. No, we have a special feature today. It's called 'I Spy', and I'm the one doing the spying."

G'Tan chuckled, asking, "And who's today's victim? Let me guess. You bugged Fillion's ship while it was being repaired, didn't you?"

Gideon grinned again and nodded. "You know me so well. I don't trust Captain Fillion and I don't trust his crew. They could be traders, they could be smugglers, or they could be Raiders. I'm hoping we're about to find out which." He turned back to the viewscreen, which so far had been filled with nothing more interesting than a view of the Lion's cargo hold, which was also the main entrance to the small ship.

As they watched, the ramp descended and a number of people boarded, led by Mal Fillion. He was followed by Scott Atkins and two strangers. Before Gideon could ask, G'Tan rose and started working on the control panel below the viewscreen. A few seconds later, the picture on the screen split, still showing the activity in the Lion's cargo hold in the largest part of the screen, but with smaller windows showing freeze frame pictures of the two unknown men.

The Narn Chief of Security read out the details he'd summoned from the database. "Elliot Shaw and Nate Abijola. They're traders visiting Aris, both with dubious pasts and even more doubtful connections. This should be interesting."

The Captain and the Sergeant settled down to watch and listen to the show.

Gideon's lip curled into a smile the big bad wolf would have been proud of. "Got him." His voice was full of malicious satisfaction, which confirmed G'Tan's previous opinion. His Captain didn't like Captain Malcolm Fillion very much. The Narn Marine waited for instructions, but he had a pretty good idea of what they would be. He wasn't disappointed.

"Take a squad down there. Get Trace to pilot the shuttle and tell him not to leave any emissions that can be tracked back to us. Arrest Fillion and haul his ass back up here, while your squad keeps the rest of the crew, as well as Shaw and Abijola, in confinement and stops the Lion going anywhere."

G'Tan nodded tersely, then asked his Captain, "How did you know? Does Fillion have a criminal record?"

Gideon shook his head. "Not that I can find, and I didn't know for sure. But I know Fillion's type, and I knew that if we gave him enough rope, he'd hang himself. Now I've got the evidence, I can turn up the heat

and see what other information I can get out of him. If Captain Fillion doesn't want to spend the next twenty years of his life inside an Earth Alliance prison, he'd better be prepared to talk."

G'Tan gave a wicked smile. "From what I've heard, Fillion wouldn't like being in an EA jail. He's too pretty. Those long eyelashes of his will attract unwelcome attentions."

Gideon chuckled and waved the large Narn on his way.

As he walked toward the landing bay, calling his squad to assemble there, G'Tan wondered just how Fillion would react when he saw the recordings they'd made of his transactions.

It didn't come as any great surprise to Fillion to find Gideon sitting waiting for him as he was frog-marched back into the Excalibur's brig. The only surprise was how abruptly the large, black gloved hand on his shoulder brought him to a halt, causing him to let out a yelp of protest. Fillion only hoped that his shoulder would be the worst place he would feel G'Tan's heavy hand. He hadn't forgotten the search he'd been subjected to the first time he'd entered this room. He wasn't likely to forget that for the rest of his life!

Even in the face of Gideon's glare it was hard for Fillion not to smile as he thought that Angel had carried out an even more thorough search of the nooks and crannies of his body later on, but it had been much more fun when she had done it. Maybe he should suggest that Gideon put Angel in charge of all future searches of male prisoners. She'd get a hell of a lot more co-operation than the Narns did. Then Fillion looked at Gideon's frowning face again and thought, [Maybe not.]

Forcing an innocent smile to his face, Fillion said, "I hadn't realized you found my company so irresistible, Captain. What can I do for you this time?" He knew it was stupid. He knew exactly what Gideon wanted. When the Marines had burst into the Lion, they had caught Mal red-handed in the middle of his trade with the smugglers, and the evidence was lying on the table in front of Gideon. Still, may as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb, as the farmers on Fillion's home-world used to say. Trouble was, back there they actually used to hang anyone caught stealing a lamb. One of the many reasons Fillion had got out.

The large, black-gloved hand pushed Fillion down into a chair, and he turned and smiled at the Narn Marine. "It's kind of you to help me, Sergeant, but I learned how to walk and sit all by myself some time ago. But thanks for the assistance."



*G'Tan's spotted face didn't even flicker, so Fillion turned back to look at the Captain of the Excalibur, schooling his face into an expression of polite enquiry. When he saw Gideon pick up the item on the table and turn it back and forth, Fillion wished he'd kept looking at the Narn. G'Tan might not be the prettiest thing in the universe, but he was a damned sight more attractive than the artifact Gideon held. Particularly when he was holding it like *that*.*

"Uh, Captain. You might like to..." Fillion trailed off as Gideon twisted the artifact suddenly, breaking it in two, and effectively disarming it.

"You were going to say something, Captain Fillion?" Gideon was the one wearing the expression of polite

enquiry now, and Fillion was sure that his own face was a picture of guilt. Talk about busted.

Gideon went on, "Perhaps something along the lines of 'You might like to be careful how you handle that item, Captain. You really should know that it's a dangerous alien weapon, designed to blow up in the hands of anyone investigating it.' Something like that? And of course you were about to warn me solely because of your good natured concern for my well-being. Nothing to do with the fact that this thing holds enough explosive to kill everyone in the room, including you, and to take out this whole section of the ship. Absolutely nothing at all."

Fillion decided he had nothing to lose by playing dumb. "Uh, actually, no. It was more along the lines of 'You might like to be careful how you handle that delicate and expensive artifact, Captain, because I have a policy that says, 'you break it, you own it.' That was what I was going to say."

Gideon gave one of his wolfish grins. The one that said, 'I just ate Little Red Riding Hood and her grandma, and you look good for dessert.' [Fuck, I'm in trouble now.] The Captain of the Excalibur picked up the two pieces of the artifact and started to play with them, saying, "So you had no idea that this was a weapon?"

Fillion shook his head, watching nervously as Gideon started to reassemble the device, while trying to maintain his innocent expression.

Gideon went on, "So you won't know what's likely to happen if I do this..." The Captain started to twist the two pieces in a specific way, and Fillion could no longer restrain himself. His right hand lashed out and he slapped the artifact away, preventing Gideon sliding the last part of the mechanism into place. The wolfish grin came back on Gideon's face as he looked up at Fillion. "No, I can see that you have no idea at all."

To Fillion's horror, Gideon picked up the device again and clicked the last pieces into place. Mal closed his eyes and prepared to kiss his ass goodbye, as he threw himself off the chair and rolled beneath the table, knowing that it wasn't enough to save his life, but unable to prevent the instinctive reaction.

After a few seconds, he heard Gideon's voice. "You can come out now, Captain. It's not going to explode. I disarmed it before you arrived."

Fillion lifted himself up to look over the edge of the table and saw that this time both Gideon and G'Tan were grinning at him. [Great. Just great.] He glared at Gideon and said, "I was right when I told Teri you're a fucking lunatic. Do you know what would have happened if that thing had blown?"

Gideon nodded. "Yes, I do, but what's more interesting is that you know. Maybe you'd like to tell me how you came across that piece of knowledge?"

He leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowed as he stared across the table at Fillion. The silence lengthened for a while then Gideon went on, "I know about it, because the Excalibur found a whole shipment of these vicious little devices when we were searching for the cure to the Drakh plague. We dug them up on a dead planet, where no one had been for a thousand years, and we placed an embargo on anyone going there again. That planet, and everything on it, is strictly off limits. It's supposed to be patrolled by Whitestars, so no grave-robbers can loot the place. Yet you have one of the weapons that got left there after the war that killed every living being on that planet, and you seem to know how it works. Would you care to explain that? Because I can assure you, I'll find your explanation absolutely fascinating."

Fillion knew he had a choice. He could lie, and he'd stay here in the Excalibur's brig until they arrived somewhere Gideon could turn him over to the EA law enforcement authorities. Then he'd no doubt be charged with theft, breaching an ISA embargo, smuggling, endangering the life of an Earthforce Officer, endangering an ISA ship and any other charge Gideon could think of, up to and including buggery of farmyard animals. Fillion had absolutely no doubt that Gideon would find a way to produce graphic visual evidence of the last offense if he felt so inclined.

The alternative was to tell the truth. Doing that was generally against Fillion's principles, but as he didn't really want to spend the rest of his life in an EA prison--especially if he'd been charged with sexual offenses against non-sentient species--he decided that on this occasion, he had no option.

Gideon looked skeptically at Fillion and shook his head. "OK, let me get this straight. You want me to put a call through to this mystery contact on Minbar, talk to the person who answers, and that's going to explain why I caught you selling illegal arms to black market smugglers? Is that it?"

*He watched as Fillion winced at his tone of complete disbelief, then the Lion's Captain shook his head, saying, "It's not going to explain why you *caught* me. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to think of an answer to that one myself, and my superiors are probably going to be even more incredulous than you are, Captain. What it *will* clarify is what I was doing selling those weapons. Just make the call, please. You won't believe me if I tell you what I'm doing here. Maybe you'll believe my boss."*

Gideon chewed the inside of his lip, considering, watching Fillion carefully, wishing he had Deborah sitting by his side. Eventually he decided it couldn't do any harm, so he turned and activated the viewscreen. When Jackson appeared on the screen, Gideon gave her the details and the screen went blank. Gideon span back in his chair and stared across at Fillion.

"Would you care to tell me the name of the person who's going to answer this call?"

Fillion shook his head. "You'd never believe that either, Captain."

Gideon leaned back in his chair, chewing at his lip again. It was a bad habit that dealing with Malcolm Fillion seemed to be making worse. At this rate he'd have mouth ulcers. And stomach ulcers. And more grey hairs than he could count. Deborah wasn't going to be happy about any of the above.

The viewscreen beeped, and when Gideon keyed the control, Jackson put the call through. Gideon stood quickly, so that Fillion could not be seen by the person at the other end. He was astonished to find himself facing Ranger Durhan. The Minbari Warrior raised an enquiring eyebrow--[Not an eyebrow. Minbari don't have eyebrows. An eye-ridge.]--and asked Gideon what he could do to help.

Gideon explained that they had caught someone smuggling illegal arms on Aris, and that person had given Durhan's contact details and asked them to call. The Minbari sighed deeply, apparently exasperated. "Please don't tell me that Captain Fillion has been giving out my name again."

The Captain of the Excalibur stood to one side, allowing Durhan to see Fillion seated at the table in the cell. At least Fillion had the grace to look sheepish as he waved at the Minbari Ranger and explained what had happened.

At the end of Fillion's explanation, Durhan sighed deeply again, and addressed himself to Gideon. "When we last spoke, Captain, you asked if you might come across one of our agents. Well, it seems you have. This is Ranger Malcolm Fillion, who has been operating undercover for us for some time now, masquerading as a smuggler."

Gideon looked around at the Captain of the Lion and did a double take. "Ranger? You're a Ranger? Why the hell didn't you tell me?"

Fillion looked even more sheepish and asked plaintively, "Would you have believed me?" Gideon shook his head, admitting to himself that he'd have laughed Fillion off the Excalibur if he'd tried that story without proof. Fillion went on, "Anyway, I didn't have the authority to tell you about my mission. It was strictly 'need to know'."

Gideon sighed and riposted, "And of course, I didn't need to know." He raised an enquiring eyebrow at Durhan who nodded.

"You didn't need to know until you arrested one of our best undercover agents and put our whole plan in jeopardy."

The Captain told himself it was obviously going to be one of those days, despite the pleasant way in which it had began. He looked from Fillion to Durhan and back again, and then said, "Well, as I now 'need to know', which one of you is going to fill me in?"

There was a pause as the two other men looked at each other, then Durhan leaned back in his seat and waved at Fillion, saying, "I don't have time for the full story. Please go ahead and brief the Captain, Ranger. Then between you, perhaps you can think of a way of putting this mess straight."



The Minbari cut the connection with a parting growl, and Gideon turned to glare at the other Captain, just as Fillion said, "Tetchy. That's the trouble with the Warrior caste. Short fuses and very tetchy."

Gideon suppressed a smile, thinking that tetchy wasn't the word he'd have used. Snotty, arrogant, egotistical, supercilious, pompous bastards, yes. Tetchy, no. He glared at Fillion again, just for the form of it really. Most of the fun had gone out of it now he knew the other man was a Ranger.

*"So tell me what's going on." Seeing Fillion hesitate, and look around at G'Tan, who had stood motionless at the back of the cell through the whole confrontation, Gideon went on, "G'Tan's my Security Chief. He knows stuff that even *he* thinks I don't need to know. Go ahead."*

The story that emerged was complex, but made sense. Fillion was working on the problem of where the Raiders had got their new ship. By posing as an illegal arms smuggler, he was tracking back through the network of Raider allies, hoping to pick up some clues as to where their other illegal supplies came from.

He explained, "I had to offer them something tempting, and illegal arms technology is perfect. The idea was that I'd give them a couple of live devices as a demonstration, and then sell them the location of the planet where they could get more. The Rangers have transported a whole load of those things out to a dead world, and disarmed them. If I were challenged when they turned out to be duds, my stance would be that the ones I'd found and given them were fine; the problem must be something the bad guys did to

them."

"Once I'd made contact at this local level on Aris, I could start promising bigger and better things to the men higher up the chain. We were hoping to track the contacts right back to..." Fillion broke off then continued quickly, "To wherever it leads."

*Gideon was sure that Fillion had intended to say something else, but had then changed his mind. Nevertheless, the Captain stayed silent as Fillion went on, "It had to look like a genuine black market sale of live weapons for two reasons. First, because I need to keep the lines of communication open with these guys, so I can track the upper echelons of this group, and second because I have to convince Scott Atkins that I'm a *raz/smuggler*. He's a Raider who's been planted in my crew to spy on me."*

Gideon raised an eyebrow then nodded to himself. That would certainly explain what Deborah had picked up from the man. He chewed his lip some more as Fillion's voice took on an exasperated note. "Trouble is, how the hell do we explain why you're going to let me go, when you caught us red-handed?"

The Captain of the Excalibur gave Fillion a wicked grin, saying, "Who says I'm going to let you go? I think I'd rather just shove you straight out of an airlock." Fillion looked a little alarmed, so Gideon held his hands up saying, "Just kidding!" It was a lie of course. Given the chaos Fillion had created since his arrival on the Excalibur, and particularly in the light of what Gideon strongly suspected the other man had got up to with Angel, a fast exit out of an airlock for the Captain of the Lion was an image Gideon enjoyed playing with.

He regretfully put it out of his mind and sighed. There were a few more issues he wanted resolved before he was prepared to discuss releasing Fillion. "So was your hyperspace accident really an accident? Or was it deliberate?"

Fillion shook his head. "That was a genuine accident, Captain. I have no idea what we hit, but we were on our way here when we hit it, which is why you came across us. If you hadn't..." Fillion left the outcome unstated, but Gideon knew what he was thinking. If the Excalibur hadn't shown up when she had Fillion and his crew would all be dead by now.

Gideon nodded and went on, "So tell me, just where do you think this trail leads?" Fillion opened his mouth to speak, but Gideon held his hand up. "And don't give me any crap about not knowing. You nearly said something then changed your mind. Spit it out. This is something I need to know."

Fillion looked long and hard at Gideon, and eventually leaned back in his chair, saying, "I'm taking one hell of a risk with this, Gideon, but I'm going to trust you. I'm gambling that you've pissed off so many people in Earthforce over the years that it's unlikely you're involved in any conspiracies back on Earth. If I'm wrong, I'm dead."

Gideon's eyes opened in surprise. He hadn't expected that answer. "Earthforce? You think someone in Earthforce is providing ships and weapons to the Raiders? What's your evidence?"

The Captain was surprised to hear how defensive his voice sounded. He knew there was corruption in Earthforce; he'd had to deal with General Thomson when he'd tried to kill a group of ex-special ops Gropos, to hide some nasty and completely illegal experiments carried out on them. Even so, Gideon hated to think of his colleagues, and maybe even some of his friends, being involved in that kind of crime. Innocent lives were lost when the Raiders hit outlying colonies. Lives that everyone joining Earthforce had pledged to protect.

Fillion sighed and nodded. "Yes, we think the conspiracy goes right to the highest levels. You know there have been black ops units operating within Earthforce since Clark's time. In theory, they were all disbanded after the civil war. In practice, some went underground. The funding for those operations comes from the illegal sales of ships and weapons. I've made a lot of progress in tracking this down but now..." He shrugged as he trailed off. Gideon knew what the other man was thinking. It was going to take some explaining to get Atkins and the local smugglers to accept that Gideon had released Fillion without charge, which Gideon was now reluctantly concluding he might have to do.

He chewed at his lip again, and said quietly, "I'm going to need some evidence before I'll believe that senior people in Earthforce are involved in a conspiracy with the Raiders, Fillion. Do you have any--?"

Before Gideon could complete his sentence, he was interrupted by Jackson's voice blaring out over the loudspeakers. "Battle stations, battle stations, all hands to battle stations. Captain to the bridge."

Klaxons blared and lights flashed, making it barely possible for Gideon to hear Fillion's words over the racket.

"I think your evidence may have just arrived, Captain. Just one request?" Gideon paused as he rushed toward the door, looking back at Fillion quizzically as the Ranger went on, "It would be much more useful if you could capture that ship intact, rather than just blowing it to pieces. I know blowing things up is your strong point, Captain, but if you could restrain yourself on this occasion, the Rangers would very much appreciate it."

Gideon turned and gave G'Tan orders to hold Fillion in the brig until he returned, then grimaced at the Ranger, saying, "No promises." He left the cell at a run, pondering Fillion's words.

"Captain on the bridge."

Gideon nodded to acknowledge John Matheson's words, sliding into the center seat that his First Officer had just vacated. Matheson could only have arrived on the bridge a few seconds before his Captain, having been off-duty at the time the battle alert was called, but even so, John was in full uniform, crisply pressed and smart as ever. The command console had already been lowered from the ceiling, and a quick glance gave Gideon the information he needed. The tactical display showed an unknown class of ship had just jumped into the Aris system, and it was now rapidly approaching the planet.

The Captain looked up from the display to John, who stood at the side of the chair, holding his earpiece close against his ear, listening and concentrating. "Any indication they know we're here?"

John shook his head. "They came through close to the jump gate, and they're now following the trail we left to the space station. I think we've fooled them. We're running low level scans," he nodded over to where Ankaren, their Brakiri Chief Sensor Operator, was manning the Sensor station, "so they won't detect us that way."

Gideon nodded. As usual, John had everything under control. The First Officer had done everything his Captain would have done, which was why John was so damned good at his job.

"Are we anywhere close to identifying it?" Gideon asked.

John shook his head in response, pausing as he listened to his earpiece again. "It's nothing we've ever come



across before. Ankaren's searching the ISA and Earthforce databases now, to see if we can find anything similar."

Gideon nodded, and turned his attention back to his command console, watching as the intruder progressed rapidly across the system toward the Aris space station. He pursed his lips as he watched how quickly the vessel crossed his screen. "I'll say one thing for these guys...they can move."

Silence descended on the bridge, while everyone attended to their jobs, and waited for their Captain's commands. Gideon didn't want to move too soon. He wanted the intruder close enough to the planet's gravity field so they couldn't safely jump out, while not being so close that they could attack the space station and the surface. It would take split second timing, so he continued to watch his console, where the tactical display showed a bright red, hollow sphere enclosing the planet, indicating the narrow zone in which he could act.

The second before the intruder's image hit the edge of the red area, Gideon called out, "Open a line to that ship." He paused, allowing time for Siddhartha on Communications to respond to his command then said, "This is Captain Matthew Gideon, commanding the ISA starship Excalibur. Identify yourself or be fired upon."

While he had been speaking, John had given the order to move the Excalibur out of the shadow of the asteroid behind which they'd been concealed. The intruder would now know exactly what they were dealing with. Gideon sat, barely aware that he was holding his breath. Would the intruder try to run? A ship of that size wouldn't be very maneuverable. It would take many long minutes for them to get back to a position where they could safely open a jump-point. So would they surrender, or would they fight?

Gideon had his answer when a second later Ankaren called out, "They're bringing their weapons on line and launching fighters."

Gideon's command console displayed the information Sensors were now bringing in. Ankaren was using full power scans now there was no longer a need for concealment. The intruder had six fusion beam cannons, which was half the number the Excalibur carried. Even so, that was a heavy weight of armament for a ship that was only a sixth of the tonnage of the Excalibur. Where the hell had the Raiders gotten hold of a ship so heavily armed?

The power of those cannons made themselves felt a moment later, when the first bolt hit the Excalibur's plasteel and crystalline hull. The hit was sufficient to rock the ship, but didn't do any significant damage to the ten meter thickness of the hull.

"Launch fighters, launch countermeasures, and open fire." Gideon gave the command brusquely. He didn't like people who scratched the Excalibur's nice, shiny surface. The ship rocked again as another cannon bolt found its target. Gideon was glad he'd taken a moment on his way to the bridge to call his wife and warn her that they were getting into a fight. Deborah would be able to make sure their son didn't get too frightened by all the bouncing around.

As the Excalibur opened fire, the ships drew close enough for John to be able to call for a full visual to be brought up onto the viewscreen. Finally, they were going to see what they were up against.

The image that appeared left everyone on the Excalibur's bridge staring at the viewscreen, their mouths

gaping in astonishment. Gideon realized that his mouth was as wide open as the rest, and he snapped it closed, muttering through gritted teeth, "What the fuck is that thing?"

It looked like an Earthforce destroyer in shape, but its hull was a color and texture that defied description. 'Black' somehow didn't seem a dark enough word to describe the ship, which looked as if it had emerged directly from someone's nightmare. Someone who had good reason to never want to sleep again. Its surface rippled and shifted, making it difficult for Gideon's eye to find a hold on any one part of the monstrosity on the screen. Strange spikes seemed to grow out of odd places on the intruder's surface, making it look almost organic.



The picture on the viewscreen sent Gideon's mind reeling back over ten years. This was one of the ships that President Clark had built, using Shadow technology. A ship that shouldn't exist, as all examples of that model were supposed to have been destroyed back in 2261, when Captain--then Commander-- Ivanova had taken her White Star fleet into battle against them, and prevailed, almost losing her own life in the process, but destroying every enemy ship.

[Looks like Ivanova didn't quite get them all.] Gideon shook himself free of the chill of revulsion that had descended over him at the sight of the enemy ship. He noticed that everyone on the bridge seemed frozen in place as they stared at the viewscreen, and he quickly barked out, "Back to work, people. It's just another ship. Let's take her down."

The bridge crew stirred and seemed to come back to life. Gideon watched the screen and noted when a bolt from one of the Excalibur's cannons hit the enemy ship right in the center of one of the engines. If the intruder had been a standard Earthforce destroyer, that shot would have crippled it, cutting its power source in half. On this ship, the bolt seemed to be absorbed by the flowing, almost viscous looking, black surface.

While the Excalibur's shots seemed to have little impact on the enemy, the same could not be said in return. The Excalibur was now rocking violently under the impact of the intruder's bolts. The enemy vessels guns were much more powerful than they should have been for a ship of that size, and Gideon could see that a full scale dog fight was in progress between the fighters from the two ships.

John turned and said quietly, "Hull integrity is down to 55% in places, Captain. They're doing more damage than they should."

Gideon nodded. "I noticed. Let's end it. I'm not willing to spend lives on capturing that thing. We'll just have to take her out. Bring the main gun on line." John nodded in return and gave the order. Within seconds, Gideon's console lit up, indicating that full power was now available to the main gun.

"Fire main gun."

Every system on the bridge died. Again, an eerie silence descended, as the Captain and crew waited for power to be restored. The sixty seconds that passed until systems came back on line seemed to get longer every time they used the main gun, but Gideon somehow got through it. When the viewscreen lit up again, all that was left to be seen was a field of debris, and a number of enemy fighters, fleeing for their lives.

Gideon ordered his own fighters to pursue, and sent out another general broadcast, advising the enemy to

surrender or be hunted down. Within a few minutes, every enemy fighter had been targeted and destroyed. Every one of them had refused to surrender.

Leaning back in his seat, Gideon looked up at John, and asked the question he had to ask, the answer to which he always dreaded. "Casualties?"

John paused for a moment, listening carefully, then he smiled. "No deaths. We have a couple of bad burn cases from the team Beta gun crew, but otherwise, just bumps and bruises." John's smile widened into a full blown grin as he went on, "Cook Hughes from the deck 4 mess hall has a nasty scald, where he didn't get the lid on a pot of soup quickly enough. Soup's off the dinner menu tonight."

Gideon snorted his amusement, not hiding his relief as he went on to order the fighters back to the ship and to call up a damage report. The Excalibur now had more than a few scratches on her hull, but nothing they couldn't fix themselves. In a couple of days, his crew would have his ship looking as shiny as ever.

After a few moments making sure that all repairs were in progress, Gideon stood and told John to order a stand down from battle stations, but to keep the ship on full alert. "I'm going to my quarters for a few minutes. I want to see you and Ankaren in the conference room when I get back. Get recovery teams out collecting debris, and get a complete analysis done on the material of that ship's hull. I want to know exactly what that thing was, and where it came from. It shouldn't exist. We need answers, John."

Matheson nodded curtly, and Gideon heard him start to give the necessary commands as he left the bridge.

"Daddy, Daddy! Make the ship go bouncy again, please, Daddy!" Marcus hurled himself at his father as soon as Gideon walked through the doors to his quarters. The Captain swept his son up into his arms, grinning widely at the excited child, relieved that Marcus seemed entirely unaffected by the battle they had just fought. His reaction was completely different to the last time the Excalibur had been in a fight.

It seemed that the decision Gideon and his wife had reached--for Deborah and Marcus to stay in their quarters during a battle, unless the need for evacuation was imminent--had been the right one. Gideon laughed as he tousled his son's blond curls and asked, "Why do you want the ship to bounce, then?"

*Marcus giggled. "Mummy let me play bouncy ship games on your big bed. It was *fun!* I bounced and bounced and I nearly touched the ceiling! Let me play some more, please, Daddy?" The little boy gave one of his most disarming smiles, the one he'd learned could get most adults to give him whatever he wanted.*

Gideon laughed again. [Manipulative little tyke!] He put Marcus down and shook his head, saying, "The Excalibur is tired of bouncing for the moment. She needs a rest, and so do Mommy and Daddy. Now go play in your room for a bit while I talk to Mommy. Where's Half-Ted?"

Marcus looked around, startled to find that his favorite toy wasn't at his side, then he rushed off to his room to find his bear. As he disappeared through the door into Gideon's old rooms, Deborah slid into the Captain's arms and he held her tightly. He'd seen the slightly strained expression on her face when he'd entered the room, even though she was obviously concealing all her fears and concerns from their son.

After a long, silent hug, Gideon kissed his wife gently on the forehead and asked, "Are you OK?"

Deborah looked up and gave him a slightly wobbly smile. "I am now." The look of love she gave him, accompanied by her sending of a ripple of tenderness and passion, made Gideon feel ten meters tall.

"I do love it when you do that." He grinned at her then went on, "Did our bed survive the bouncing games? Or should I send someone up from engineering to fix it? Just don't tell them how it was broken, OK? Let them draw their own conclusions." Gideon gave his wife a lascivious leer as she laughed and gently thumped his arm.

"The bed is fine. We've given it much harder wear than ever Marcus could." Deborah reflected Gideon's lechery right back at him and he hugged her and laughed again.

They moved over to the couch, and Gideon sat, pulling Deborah down and across him, until they were settled comfortably in their favorite position. Her butt was between his legs, and her shoulders rested against his arm. He kissed her again and said, "I can't stop long. I just wanted to make sure you two were OK."

Deborah snuggled down with her head against Gideon's shoulder and she gave a little sigh. He knew she would have liked him to stay, but she never made demands on his time. After a few seconds, Deborah asked, "So do you know who you were fighting?"

Gideon nodded, and gave her a brief summary of what they'd learned so far. "As soon as we have the debris analyzed, we'll have a clearer idea of where that ship came from, although I'm pretty sure I know. Then I just have to explain to Fillion and the Rangers why I blew up their best lead on this whole mess. Deborah, that ship looked too much like one of the Shadow-tech adapted Earthforce destroyers for comfort. Fillion was right. Something's rotten in the Earth Alliance and Earthforce, and I need to figure out a way to get his investigation back on track. I have an idea, but..."



He shook his head, not willing to say more until he had thought it through. Deborah lifted her head, kissed his cheek, and said quietly, "You'll figure it out. You always do." The look of complete faith and confidence she gave him was enough to convince Gideon. She was right. He could do this.

Giving his wife one last, lingering kiss, the Captain pushed her gently off his knee. As he stood he took her hand and squeezed it gently, saying, "Don't wait for me for dinner. I don't know how long this might take. I'll drop in and give Marcus a goodnight kiss, just in case he's in bed when I get back, and I'll try to explain why he can't play bouncy ships again."

Shaking his head in amusement, Gideon moved into his old quarters to kiss his son goodnight.

"Well, it looks like you were right," Gideon said, swinging a chair out from the table in the brig, turning it around and sitting with his arms leaning against the back. "The ship we just destroyed was definitely Earthforce black ops manufactured. So where do we go from here?" He had returned to the brig alone, leaving Matheson to co-ordinate repairs on the battered Excalibur.

Fillion's expression was pained. "Destroyed? You blew it up? Didn't I ask you not to do that? That ship was the best lead we've had in years and you go and..."

Gideon waved him into silence, "Yeah, I know. I was supposed to capture it, so you and your friends could have fun interrogating the crew and finding out where they got that monstrosity. Tough. Ain't gonna happen. Deal with it."

Glaring at Fillion, who had opened his mouth ready to protest, Gideon over-rode him, saying, "I'm not prepared to sacrifice the life of a single member of my crew to help you achieve your goals. That ship was a damn sight more powerful than it had any right to be. One on one, it gave us a good run for our money. We had only one real advantage over them: our main gun. The only problem is that the Excalibur's main gun isn't a subtle instrument. Anything that gets hit by it disintegrates. That's just the way it is. Now are you going to sit there whining about it, or are we going to work together to figure out a way to get your mission back on track?"

Fillion had opened and closed his mouth several times during Gideon's speech, and he now opened it again, asking, "Finished? Do I get to say my piece now? Or do you have another speech lined up for me?"

Gideon shook his head, chewed his lip to hold back a sarcastic response, and gestured for Fillion to continue.

After he'd left his quarters, Gideon had gone to the conference room, and found Ankaren and Matheson waiting for him. During the next few minutes, the Brakiri Sensor Operator had briefed the Captain on their findings. The analysis of the debris had confirmed that the ship was of Earth Alliance manufacture. The molecular structure of the hull pieces recovered by the salvage crew was identical to that of Earthforce ships. The metal had then been overlaid with a material that bore a close resemblance to the few samples of Shadow hull material recovered after battles with their ships. The Raider's ship had definitely been one of the Earth/Shadow hybrids that were all supposed to have been destroyed over ten years before.

All this information flowed through Gideon's mind as he listened to Fillion speak.

"If the Raider's ship is destroyed, there isn't much I can do about it, but it makes my mission to track the suppliers of that ship and other arms even more important. The two men down on the planet may now be the only lead we have back to that source. I'm going to need your help getting my investigation back on track, and I'd welcome any suggestions you may have as to how I'm going to do that."

Gideon's respect for Fillion raised a couple of notches. The Captain of the Lion hadn't wasted time bemoaning the loss of the Raider's ship. He'd gotten straight to the key point. How were they going to get Fillion's mission back on the rails?

"Let's come back to that. Just now, you'd better know what we've found out about the ship. See if there's anything new in this lot."

Gideon rose and activated the viewscreen on the wall of the cell, using his personal codes to call up the data on Ankaren's debris analysis. He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, watching Fillion as the younger man studied the data. He was somewhat disturbed to find that he was actually starting to like the other Captain, which given what Fillion had done with Angel was totally unacceptable.

[Don't worry, Matt. He'll do or say something soon enough to make you hate him again. He's too much like you not to.] Gideon's inner voice was loaded with sarcasm.

Fillion finished his studies and nodded sharply, before turning back to Gideon. "This confirms what we've suspected, and that's useful. That was definitely a hybrid destroyer, and the only place it can have come

from is a subversive group within Earthforce. No one else could have hidden one of those things successfully for so long. The question is, was it the only one? How many more of those monsters are out there?"

Gideon shook his head then moved back to the table, again sitting backwards on the chair, resting his arms along the chair's back. "I've sent a message back to President Sheridan's office, advising that I plan to track the ship's emissions back through hyperspace. To do that, we need to leave here within the next couple of hours, so we'd better come up with a plan for releasing you, and those smugglers down on the planet, as soon as possible. Thoughts?"

Fillion frowned, looking reluctant as he said, "I did have one idea, but I don't think you'll like it."

"Why not?"

"Because it involves Angel."

"Absolutely not. There is no way in hell I'll go along with that plan. What sort of bastard are you anyway? You took advantage of her then you want to use that fact to further your mission? I should just throw you out of an airlock right now. I won't even bother to strip you first! I'll--"

Fillion held his hands up, trying to stem the flow of fury being spat at him across the table. When he'd suggested that he tell the smugglers he'd blackmailed Gideon by threatening to make public the 'ride' he'd taken with Angel the night before, he'd been pretty sure that Gideon wouldn't go for it. He hadn't expected the strength of reaction he'd got. What feelings did Gideon have for Angel to make him react so strongly?

"OK, OK! It was just an idea. Do you have a better one? One that doesn't involve throwing me out of an airlock?" The Captain of the Lion tried to calm the atmosphere with a little humor, but it wasn't working. Gideon was furious, and his flashing eyes and flaring nostrils made that fury evident. [Stupid, Mal. Really stupid!]

He watched as Gideon pulled himself back under control, admitting to himself that he was a little apprehensive about what the Captain of the Excalibur might do next. Gideon had the reputation of a maverick. He might just decide to throw Fillion out of an airlock after all.

Fillion hadn't enjoyed making his proposal to Gideon. It wasn't an idea he'd relished in the slightest. He'd enjoyed his time with Angel enormously, and he liked the raven-haired beauty a lot. It was only his commitment to his mission and to his duty as a Ranger that had made him even think of abusing her generosity so badly. The idea had sickened him from the start, but it was the only thing he could think of that might explain to Shaw and Abijola why they had all been set free. They would believe a lie like that, and respect the man who pulled off such a treacherous act. Fillion found that a big part of him was glad Gideon had reacted so strongly. Now he didn't have to betray the wonderful woman he'd met the night before.

Gideon's voice shook with the effort he was making to control himself as he said, "The blackmail idea is sound, but you don't bring anyone else into it. This is between you and me. Deborah told me you'd spent a while at Earthforce academy, is that right?"

Fillion nodded, wondering where Gideon was going with this.

"Then you tell your contacts that while you were there you got some information about me. Something I wouldn't want spread around. Maybe the fact that I ran rigged card games back then. That might do it. You can say you threatened to expose my seedy past, threatened to damage my reputation, so I agreed to let you go."

Fillion nodded. It might work. He was impressed that Gideon was willing to have his own reputation besmirched rather than risk Angel's name becoming involved in any way. There was one point he needed clarified. "So why didn't you arrange an accident for me? Easy enough to fix up when you're Captain of a ship like this." The Captain of the Lion waved his hand, indicating the Excalibur, trying not to admit to himself how much he would have loved to command such a ship.

Gideon glared at him. "Because you're not stupid. You have the evidence of my youthful crimes stashed somewhere I can't get at it, but where it would become public if anything suspicious happened to you while you're on board."

Fillion mulled it over and nodded. It could work. He could sell that story to the smugglers. He looked up as Gideon interrupted his thoughts.



"And I'll send down an engineer with G'Tan and his men to fix your long-range and hyperspace communicators. You might need them." Fillion nodded his acknowledgement.

"Just one more thing, Captain." Gideon rose from his seat and gestured for Fillion to do the same. "I don't think I'd like a man who blackmailed me like that. In fact, I think I'd dislike such a man very much indeed. So I think I might order my Marines to teach that man a lesson, don't you? We can't make it appear you got off too lightly. I think I'd better order G'Tan to have his men rough you up a little, before you see your co-conspirators again, don't you?"

Fillion gritted his teeth. He should have seen this coming. He stood and faced Gideon, who was now grinning like a shark again.

"Yes, I think you're probably right, Captain. Thanks for showing such consideration for my cover story. A few bumps and bruises will add veracity, I'm sure. Just make sure your Marines don't do any permanent damage, OK?" The Captain of the Lion knew he had this coming, and a part of him felt he deserved it for his suggestion about Angel.

"Well, nothing too permanent, anyway." Gideon's words were hardly reassuring, and Fillion decided he couldn't let Gideon win too easily.

"I guess I also have a few lumps coming for taking the Captain's property for a ride without his permission."

Gideon somehow kept his temper under control. He was now so angry with this man, if he allowed himself free rein he would probably have killed Fillion. How could Deborah say he had anything in common with this bastard? How could he have even considered the prospect of liking this devious con-man, just a few moments before?

The Captain had been ready to strangle Fillion with his bare hands when the younger man had come out with the plan involving Angel. Gideon was more protective of his sister-in-law than he knew he should be, and he tried to avoid examining his feelings toward her too closely. He'd come close to admitting his love for her the previous year, when she'd been badly hurt during the fight above Stryvsteptix. He'd been forced to admit, then suppress, his jealousy about her on more than one occasion since, not least on the previous night, when her intentions toward the young, handsome Captain of the Lion had become obvious. Even so, he didn't need to hear that Fillion had taken Angel for a 'ride', in more ways than one.

Gideon told himself he'd tackle Angel later about using Deborah's bike without permission, and under the influence of alcohol. For now, he had to focus on how to handle the bumptious young bastard in front of him.

He took a deep breath and said, "I've been told that you and I have a lot in common. If that's true, I think I now understand why so many people in Earthforce can't stand the sight of me." The words came out in a snarl, and Gideon twisted his mouth into a malicious grin as he went on, "You're right, of course. This is one Captain who's pretty damned possessive about his property. You mess with it at your peril."

Gideon paused and activated his commlink, ordering the guard outside to release the door. It opened and he waved Fillion toward it, following the younger man out into the outer brig. He was startled, and not exactly pleased, to see Angel waiting outside. If she knew what Fillion had proposed... The Captain decided he'd never tell her. She didn't deserve to be hurt like that. But Fillion did.

"Oh, Captain?" Fillion had taken a stride toward Angel, but stopped and turned at the sound of Gideon's voice. "There's one other thing you should know about me."

Fillion cocked his head to one side, waiting for Gideon to explain.

Gideon's malicious grin returned as he said, "I never ask my crew to do anything that I'm not willing to do myself."

Before Fillion could do anything more than look slightly puzzled, Gideon swung his right fist and connected with the point of the younger man's jaw. Fillion's mouth snapped shut, his head jerked back and he went down in a heap at Angel's feet. Ignoring Angel's protests and the throbbing pain in his right hand, Gideon stepped over Fillion's unconscious body and strode out of the brig, heading for Medbay.

[I just hope Luke can fix my hand without one of those damned gloves of his.]

The crunching sound as he gently stretched his fingers, and the accompanying searing pain, made Gideon doubtful, but he didn't care. It was worth it.

"Mal? Wake up, Mal. Please, wake up." The words pierced the fog in which Fillion drifted lazily, and he began to feel annoyed with this Mal character. Why didn't he wake up and answer the girl who was calling him? Then she'd shut up and Fillion could carry on with his nice, peaceful nap.

*Life was never so kind to the Captain of the Lion, so his lethargic floating was interrupted again by the increasingly annoyed sounding voice. "If I find out you're faking this, I'm going to be *really* cross! You don't want to find out what I'm like when I'm angry, I promise you."*

Fillion pried open one heavy eyelid, feeling as if someone had weighted it down. The face looming above him swam into focus as he muttered, "Stop shouting," and closed his eye again.

The response wasn't the blessed silence he was seeking but a shaking that rattled his already loosened teeth.

"Malcolm Fillion, you open your eyes right now and tell me what that was all about!"

*The use of his full name made Fillion realize that it was *him* the woman was talking to. The edge to her voice made him realize he'd better respond, and sharpish, or she might just shake him again. The way he was feeling at that moment, he's probably vomit if she did and he didn't want to be around to find out the consequences of being sick all over this woman. She'd make him pay for that mistake, of that he was certain. Pay and pay and pay.*

He forced his eyelids apart again, and looked up at the woman, only then really recognizing her. Angel. It was Angel, and she was sitting on the floor, with his head resting against her breasts, and what a wonderfully comfortable pillow those breasts made. Fillion decided he'd better answer her, or she might just move him, and he was very happy right where he was: with those beautiful bosoms supporting his head, while he looked up into the prettiest face and the most stunning blue eyes in the galaxy. The only downside to Fillion's current position was the throbbing pain in his jaw and the fact that Angel seemed somewhat irritated with him.

Fillion sighed to himself. It was just his luck. Other men got ministering angels to look after them when they were hurt. He got a feisty, demanding, exasperated Angel.

"Angel?" Fillion gave a low, theatrical groan, hoping it would make her feel more sorry for him and that she would let him keep resting his head in his favorite spot. Now if he could just turn his face slightly, he could probably get his nose and mouth touching her skin, and then he could suffocate in the softly scented silkiness of her swelling breasts and die a happy man.

No such luck.

"So you're awake, are you? Good." Fillion found himself being moved, and a few seconds later Angel had propped him against a wall, and she squatted in front of him, peering into his eyes. The only positive was that this gave him a wonderful view of her cleavage, stunningly displayed by the low cut T-shirt she wore.

"Mal, if you don't shift your eyes up about twenty-five centimeters, I swear I'll give you a bruise on the other side of your chin to match the one the Captain just gave you."

Fillion dragged his eyes upwards to meet Angel's very angry looking glare. He tried to look hurt, innocent and vulnerable all at the same time. He guessed he'd probably only succeeded in looking stupid and nauseated. Maybe it was time to turn on the charm.

Making a huge effort, the Captain of the Lion lifted his hand and went to caress Angel's cheek, whispering, "Angel. My beautiful..."

Before he could get the words out, Angel slapped his hand away and interrupted, "Don't even try it, Mall I want answers and I want them now! Why did the Captain knock you down like that? What did you do?"

Fillion tried the innocent puppy-dog look again. "Why do you blame me? I'm the victim here, remember?"

I'm the one lying on the floor, concussed, vulnerable, wounded, hurting..." Angel's loud raspberry stopped him before he could continue his pathetic list.

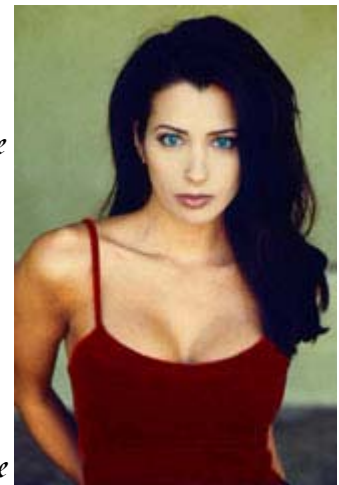
"Don't even try it, Mal. I know Matt Gideon well, and I think I've got you pegged, too. If he hit you, you provoked him. So what did you do? G'Tan says he doesn't know, so you'd better tell me."

The Narn Marine's name made Fillion look up abruptly, something he instantly regretted as a piercing pain shot through his face. He saw G'Tan looming over them, with a look of sardonic amusement spread across his spotted face. G'Tan might not know exactly why Gideon had hit his captive, but the Narn could probably make a damned good guess.

Fillion decided the only way out of the mess was to use the cover story. If Angel ever found out what he'd proposed to Gideon, she would probably kill Mal. Slowly. Painfully.

"It's part of my cover. I have to go back down and persuade the smugglers I'm dealing with that I'm blackmailing Gideon, which is why he let me go."

Angel rocked back on her heels and looked carefully at Fillion. He tried very hard to keep looking into her eyes, but her wonderful cleavage was like a magnet, drawing his eyeballs inexorably downwards. After a few seconds she cleared her throat and Fillion snapped his eyes back up to her face. Fortunately, this time she looked more amused than angry.



"Why do all the men I meet seem to have a breast fixation?"

Fillion bit his tongue and didn't tell her that if she didn't want men to stare at her breasts she should cover them up. Not that it would have helped. You could put Angel in a canvas tent, and her breasts and nipples would still have stood out, begging for attention. Just like they were now, the hardened nipples like two marbles, pressing out the material of her thin, red T-shirt, begging for his hand to caress them, for his lips to...Angel cleared her throat again, and Fillion flicked his eyes upward, feeling a blush spreading across his face. He felt like an adolescent idiot, caught staring at a woman's tits.

Angel shook her head and smiled, then lifted herself to her feet, holding out a hand to help Fillion stand. He took it, pulled himself up, then without letting go, pulled Angel hard against him, covering her mouth with his, kissing her hard, pressing her lips apart, plundering her mouth with his tongue. She responded instantly, and Fillion could feel her nipples hardening even more against his chest, as her tongue dueled with his.

The ache in his groin and the need for air eventually forced Fillion to break away. He and Angel stared at each other for a moment, both panting for breath. Then they fell on each other again, their mouths almost trying to devour each other in the passionate energy of their kiss. Angel's hand slid down to Fillion's groin and started to caress his arousal, and he lifted one hand to run through her raven hair and the other to slide under her shirt and play with her nipple.

The clearing of a throat--this time a large, deep-toned, Narn throat--reminded Fillion and Angel that they had an audience. They broke for air again, and Fillion looked up into an amused pair of red eyes.

"I'm not sure this was what Captain Gideon had in mind when he said you were to receive a 'going over' before you left the ship, Captain Fillion. In fact, I'm absolutely certain that he wouldn't approve of this

activity at all." The Narn's tone was as amused as his eyes, but the underlying warning was clear. Fillion had invaded Gideon's territory once, and he was going to pay the price for that transgression. He shouldn't push his luck by a further trespass.

With a sigh of regret, Fillion stepped back, lifting his hand to caress Angel's face one last time. Her lips were red and swollen, her eyes flashing with desire, and her hair tousled. In other words, everything about her just begged to be fucked.

Summoning up the discipline taught to him in the Rangers, Fillion gritted his teeth and said, "He's right, Angel, and I have to go. G'Tan here can tell you who I really am, and the mission I'm on, which will explain a lot. It was fun, and I'll always remember last night, but..."

Fillion ran out of words, but he was relieved when Angel took his hand, kissed his palm lightly and said, "But you have to go. I understand, or at least I'm sure I will when G'Tan explains."

She turned and gave G'Tan a fiery glance, saying, "Don't break anything I might want to play with if Mal and I meet again!" Then after a lingering kiss, she turned on her heels and stalked out of the brig, giving Fillion a last, amazing view of her pert buttocks, encased in skin-tight leather, swinging erotically as she left the room.

Fillion shook his head, told himself to think of icicles, then turned to face the Narn Marine Sergeant. "You heard her, G'Tan. Don't break anything she might want to play with. And she likes to play with most of me, you know."

G'Tan laughed and waved Fillion toward the door of the brig. "Don't worry, Captain. We'll make it look good for the smugglers, but if you ever come back to the Excalibur, you'll still be pretty enough to play with our Angel."

Gideon looked at Angel over the rim of his wine glass and narrowed his eyes suspiciously. She was staring off into space, a little smile on her lips which Gideon recognized all too well. It was the same smile Deborah wore when she was thinking of how they'd made love the night before. So which lover was Angel dreaming about? Gideon was sure he knew.

It had been a long day, and Gideon had finally left the bridge only an hour before, leaving Jackson in charge of the assignment to track the emissions from the Raiders' ship back to their origin. The Captain wasn't hopeful, as the strength of the emissions was fading rapidly, but they had to try. As soon as G'Tan and his Marines had returned from Aris, the Excalibur had broken orbit and jumped to hyperspace.

Thinking of the report G'Tan had given when he returned brought a small smile to Gideon's lips. Fillion hadn't particularly enjoyed the workout the Marines had given him, but he'd accepted the necessity and dealt with it stoically. Thinking of the Captain of the Lion brought Gideon's attention back to his sister-in-law.

"So are you feeling better now, Angel? All recovered from your flu and from the hangover?" Gideon enquired politely, startling Angel out of her daydream.

*She smiled across the dinner table and said, "Oh yes, Matt. I'm feeling *much* better this evening."*

Deborah returned from the kitchen, carrying a cheese board, which she set down in the center of the table as she said, "I guess all the exercise you got last night helped burn out the last traces of infection."

Gideon bit his lip to stop himself laughing at Deborah's innocent expression and tone of voice. Angel blushed a little, then said, "Yes, I enjoyed the dancing. It was stupid of me to forget Luke's warning about alcohol, because after that, everything is a bit of a blur. Oh well, no harm done." She turned her gaze to Gideon and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

The Captain decided he wasn't going to let her get away with that. "It's good to hear that you're OK now, Angel." He paused, waiting for Angel to lift her glass and take a sip of wine. "It's more than I can say for Deborah's bike."

Angel gave a little cough, then choked, as she inhaled the wine up her nose. Gideon somehow kept a straight face as he and Deborah both tried to help Angel recover, while a part of him rejoiced in her discomfort. When she'd finally recovered her composure, Angel gave him her very best innocent look as she asked, "Did something happen to Demon's bike, Matt?"

Gideon shook his head sadly. "I went up to check on it this morning, and it had been moved off its stand. I don't know exactly what had been done to it, but there was a strange residue on the seat. I got Luke to take samples. He said when you get back to work he'll get you to analyze them for him. It'll be interesting to find out what it is, don't you think, Angel?"

Angel's eyes widened, and her smile became fixed. "Oh yes, Captain. Very interesting, I'm sure."

Gideon picked up a piece of cheese and toyed with it for a moment, before looking across at his wife and smiling. "We'll find out who was messing with your bike, darling. Unless we have a poltergeist on board." Deborah winked and they both turned to look at Angel, whose face had gone scarlet.



"Poltergeist?" She squeaked, "What makes you think it might have been a poltergeist?"

Gideon gave her an innocent look. "I can't think of anything else that would have the nerve to use Deborah's bike without permission. Unless you know differently, Angel?"

Angel dropped her head and concentrated on carefully cutting a piece of cheese while shaking her head slowly. "I don't know anything, Captain. Nothing at all. I was sick, remember? I don't recall a thing about last night, not a thing."

Deborah sighed gently, "Poor Captain Fillion. Obviously not a very memorable performance." She paused then smiled as she added, "Dancing, that is."

Angel opened her mouth to protest, then saw the expressions on Gideon's and Deborah's faces. "Oh you..." Unable to think of anything appropriate, she rose to her feet, threw her napkin on the table and lifted her chin in the air.

"Thank you for a lovely dinner. If anyone needs me, I'll be in my bunk."

Angel stalked out of the Gideon's quarters, while husband and wife collapsed on the table, helpless with

laughter.

Angel swept down the corridor toward her quarters, cursing her sister and brother-in-law under her breath.

[Not very memorable indeed! I'll have you know that Mal Fillion is one of the most memorable lovers I've ever had! And if he ever sets foot on this ship again, I'll spread him across the map table on the bridge and bonk him right there! Then you'll remember both of us, won't you, Captain?]

Treasuring the image of how Gideon would look if she did that, Angel arrived at her quarters, then threw herself into her bedroom and onto her bed. The sheets still smelled of the previous night's activities, and Angel smiled lasciviously to herself. It would be a long time before she forgot the Lion, and she was willing to bet that the Lion's Captain would remember his witch from the wardroom for some time to come.

{Chapter 1} {Chapter 2}

The Witches of Eriadne: Interlude Four N

{Part 1: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardroom} {Part 2: Discovery}